

Developing a Model For Public Green Areas in Istanbul: Handmade Urbanism as a Participatory Activity Which Integrates School Interiors and Outdoor Spaces

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Abstract

The study presented in this paper examines a sample of management models which transform the maintenance of urban public green areas into an urban activity described as "handmade urbanism," which encourages primary school students to carry out activities by means of a shared, planned, scheduled and regionalist method. Based on the example of Razgrad City in Bulgaria, the study investigates the applicability of the model for primary schools and public green areas in Istanbul. The aim of the study is to explore the potential of education regarding the sustainability of urban public green areas and the appropriation of urban green spaces to generate environmental consciousness. Besiktas, a central county in Istanbul, was chosen as the area in which to test the model. An organization model was formed for the schools' distribution of 120 parks for 23 schools. As a result, a "Green Area Management (GAM) Model" is presented to connect the two major elements of society – primary schools and urban governance.

Keywords: Primary Schools, Participation, Sense of Belonging, Public Green Areas, Handmade Urbanism.

INTRODUCTION

Big cleanups with small brooms
Small brooms, big ideas.

The story of this study began when we realized that girls were walking down the street with brooms on their backs, and we searched for a reason. Later, we saw a group of children aged 10-12 years old who were carrying brooms in their backpacks and walking down the street. We ran into the same children in a park the next day at 8:00am. The children were using their brooms to sweep up the park. They were also sometimes swinging and talking amongst themselves, and they were supervised by their teacher. We noticed that they brought the garbage to a particular spot. This explained why we saw children carrying brooms the day before. We observed both the park and the group. After the children left the park, garbage men collected the garbage that the children had swept. This was an organized division of labor - an agreement between children and adults or between small brooms and big garbage trucks. Could this be a type of public green area management model? How can an urban Green Area Management (GAM) Model organized by schools in cooperation with city administration, be created, and how can it be turned into a series of benefits? In answering these questions, this paper takes the following two assumptions as given:

- This type of GAM model can increase user appropriation of green areas. Children who work in them get to know the green areas better and they develop a sense of belonging to the area for which they are responsible. This bond guarantees that green areas will not be abandoned in the future.

- Today, a goal of democracy is to make the relationship between the administration and the public transparent. The GAM model addresses this goal by establishing a cooperative bond between the administration and the public. The relationship between City Hall and schools is a product of the new relationship between City Hall, the National Education Directorate, and the Ministry of Environment and City. Interactions between the different ministries will form a new organization in the administrative sense.

Participatory Activity in the Urban Environment

"When students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other community members talk and listen to each other, they gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing education and how to meet them." [1].

Sanoff encourages us to find alternative methods of social communication in education and environmental design [1]. As almost all participatory approaches suggest, enabling a constructive dialogue is essential to the future of schools and communities. Educational authorities have discussed the components of a successful educational program for decades. The proposed program of this study may have an impact on the curriculum, the school environment and also activities during class time. The present study concentrates on the initiative of a collaboration between primary school children and local municipalities in order to increase social consciousness and appropriation of the urban environment, particularly public green spaces in cities.

Numerous definitions of participation can be found in the literature. In 1955, the United Nations (UN) defined community development, which was then the widely accepted expression of community participation, as “a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation” [2]. Participation is contextual, varying in type, level of intensity, extent, and frequency [3]. Participation is an integral part of the social development process; it creates a sense of community which gives meaning to human existence and fosters social integration [4]. Sanoff defines participation as the collaboration of people pursuing objectives that they themselves have defined [3]. Although the idea of participation in building and planning can be traced to preliterate societies, community participation is of more recent origin, it is commonly associated with the idea of involving local people in social development [3].

Community participation is relevant in every sector of development, whether it is education, health, conservation, agriculture, or water and sanitation. When it is practiced successfully, it transforms programs and provides the critical component that can promote sustainable development [2]. In particular, “participatory design” studies focus on the executive process of designers, planners, corporate clients, users or the wider public in creating a collaborative platform for a better design. Jenkins defines three possible stages for participation: design, construction and the post-completion stage [5]. For instance, regarding the post-completion stage, a large-scale research study was conducted in Nepal on neglected schools [6]. Participants were selected from a wide range of governmental institutions and other sectors. Participation was put into practice by the institutions, and this could impact the public. Additionally, participatory processes are also a means of enhancing the role of youths in society. Young people’s involvement in community activities creates a necessary sense of belonging and an opportunity to become socially productive [3]. If we consider “handmade urbanism” as a participatory process that includes primary school students, it is certain that they will have an important role in community development and environmental quality. Young people need to participate as equal partners in making decisions about their own environmental futures [3]. School isolates youths, deprives them of community participation and socially productive work, and limits their chances to develop personal responsibility, tolerance, cooperation and creativity [3].

Society also derives benefits from youth participation in community activities. The United States depends on volunteers for numerous services, for creative solutions to

community problems, for fund-raising and for political action. Cooperative effort is essential to the survival of a democratic society [3].

Participation not only humanizes bureaucracy, but strengthens the capacity of individuals and communities to mobilize and help themselves [4]. Current community participation theory suggests that politicians and bureaucrats have exploited ordinary people who have been excluded from the community development process [3]. Proponents of participation argue that state social provisions are centralized, bureaucratically administered, and governed by impersonal regulations whose routines are unresponsive to the problems and needs of individuals [4]. A clear understanding of the nature of participation is central in the search for peace, social justice and democracy [2].

There is a parallel between community participation and the term “handmade urbanism.” The expression “handmade urbanism” refers to the process of urban change carried out by residents in their own neighborhoods or communities with their own hands [7]. Alternative models such as handmade urbanism become significant for the sustainability of established urban areas. The method introduced by handmade urbanism suggests alternative ways to approach urbanism and planning [7]. Thus, almost every case study involves participants from different constituencies working together. More importantly, they illustrate the power of “partnerships” and “collaboration” to transform and expand the reach of the groups that participate.

Participation should be understood not only as collecting data for environmental design but also as creating a sustainable environment that is easy to manage. Today, the daily spatial management of megacities is crucial. Hence, alternative approaches are needed for the appropriation of the urban environment by both citizens and the government. The objective should be to adapt governance sources to ease the tension between citizens and officials and encourage more action at the grassroots level [7]. In this way, it can be possible to have a truly sustainable environment in large cities and metropolises.

Currently, political issues, statements and government policy regarding public green areas have made these areas an important issue in Turkey. While the city administration regards green areas as gaps that need to be filled, citizens consider green areas to be relaxing spaces in the city, which should be conserved. The intention of this study of a cooperative project between local government and educational institutions is to increase the bonds and communication between authority and citizens. Appropriation of the green areas in towns, improvement of the sense of belonging and the sustainability of these areas as places for activities (here, the word sustainability refers to the continuing use and maintenance of these urban areas) are significant goals. This study discusses the availability of public green areas as field sites. The participatory model could be transformative to individuals and communities. Sanoff notes that public awareness must be approached through public participation; the reward for participation is power [8]. Participation works if it is active and directed and if a sense of achievement is experienced by those who are involved. Citizen participation can no longer be used as a last resort, but must be seen as a vital resource in implementing a high quality environment [8].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Analyzing Handmade Urbanism in Razgrad City

Razgrad City has a population of 35.932 and is the fourth most populous in Bulgaria. The city reflects its communist history in both its architecture and design. It is a city that has a well-planned city center with mixed use supported by commercial activities, street life and abundant urban green spaces. However, with the transition to capitalism, decreasing incomes of citizens and poor financial situation of the government, public green areas were neglected and the communist-style dwelling blocks were left in disrepair. However, in observing daily urban life - the young mothers with children in the parks, the elderly resolute on staying young and the young people who sit in the cafes - it can be clearly seen that quality of life is not just an economic issue. Even if financial possibilities are limited, a city-citizen bond could be established by means of alternative social models and quality of daily life could be provided in urban places.

An organized study carried out by primary schools in Razgrad City is the reference point of this research. In brief, school executives separated green areas into regions and apportioned these areas to each class/group. Students sweep green park areas with their teachers regularly, and all the garbage is collected in one spot. Once the students finish cleaning a park, municipal workers take the garbage that the students have collected (Figure 1-2-3).



Figure 1. Photographs Showing Collaborative Initiatives in Razgrad



Figure 2. Photographs Showing Collaborative Initiatives in Razgrad

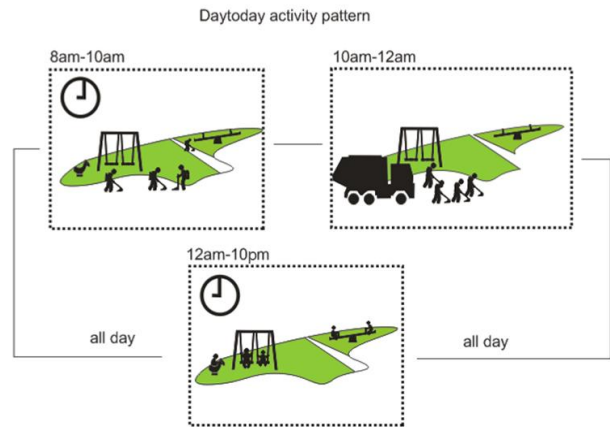


Figure 3. Day-to-day Activity Pattern

During the defined activities, students engage in cooperative study while having the opportunity for playtime at the park (Figure 4). This organized initiative between students and municipal workers begins in different green areas and scales up to the whole city.

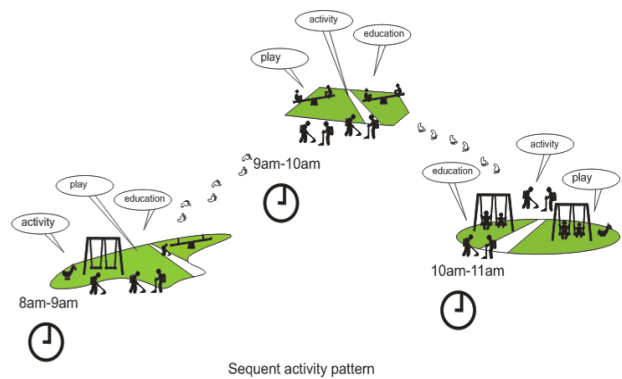


Figure 4. Sequential Activity Pattern

About Efficacy

From the students' perspective, this cooperative study model allowed them to learn about sharing work and duties, it gave them a sense of responsibility in the group and encouraged work discipline. Moreover, this type of outdoor activity in the park is fun as well as healthy. Work consciousness is improved through play, students spend more time in urban green areas and they have a deeper sense of appropriation of those places by taking responsibility. Generations who embrace urban green areas will protect public properties as conscious citizens in the future.

With regard to administration, this study provides a model of communication and cooperation between city management and citizens (Figure 5). It also lightens some of the labor burden of the municipality, because children do some of the work.

As for public green areas, it is expected that these areas will be cleaner and embraced by the public. No one wants to spoil or misuse the area which is used, maintained and cleaned by his/her own children. Children working in the area get to know the green areas and embrace these areas. This established bond between children and green areas ensure that these spaces will not be abandoned.

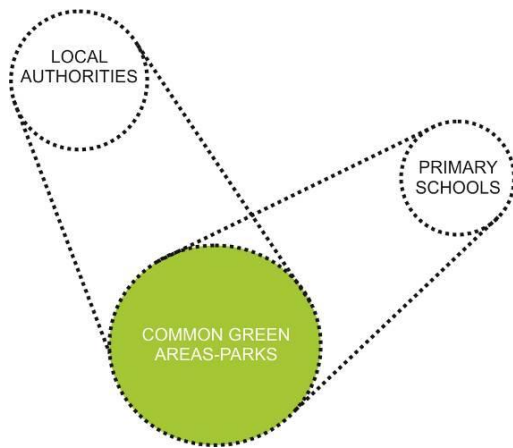


Figure 5. The Concept Of The Collaborative Initiative Activity

Method: Re-Organizing the Activity Model for Istanbul

The feasibility of an organized urban activity such as the Razgrad example is considered here in relation to a mega city such as Istanbul. How a green area management model, which is organized by schools in cooperation with city management, could be developed as handmade urbanism in Istanbul will be discussed. The suggested model involves cooperation between the local authority and schools. Abandoning green areas instead of developing methods for conservation and appropriation is a serious problem for urban planning today.

Istanbul is a multi-centric mega-city with 39 central districts. Therefore, to re-organize the model for a city such as Istanbul, it is necessary to compose the model for each district separately. Besiktas, one of the central counties of Istanbul, was chosen as the study site. It has an area of 11 km² and has 23 neighborhoods (Figure 6).

In the county of Besiktas, there are 120 parks and green areas totaling 358.234 m² [9]. Except for “Yıldız Park,” the largest park in the county, other parks are relatively small (Figure 6). The historic fabric of the city and its topography prevent the extinction of geometrically shaped-, early planned park systems in the city. There are 23 primary schools within Besiktas (Figure7) [9].

As part of the study, an organization scheme was formed for the distribution of 120 parks and green areas among the 23 primary schools in Besiktas (Figure 8). Some criteria were significant for the distribution; first, it was anticipated that each school should be responsible for at least two green areas. Secondly, because of the organization’s transportation, it was important that distributed green areas were not far from the schools more than walking distance. Lastly, larger parks were distributed to a greater number of schools. Figure 8 shows the green areas matched to each school, and the distribution areas for each school are also shown.

In order to provide the efficiency of the model in Istanbul, a preliminary process prior to the application come into prominence. Firstly, it is necessary to inform both the municipality and the schools’ administration in detail about the operation of the model and the expected positive effects of the model on social and physical environment. The conformity of the organization’s schedule with the municipalities’ maintenance schedule is also crucial. Each park should be analysed in terms of their maintenance schedule, spatial arrangements, type of cleaning they require and perviousness/imperviousness ratio. In Istanbul context, as a megapolis, application process of the model might face some limitations in socio-cultural and psychological terms together with the physical complexity of the city. Particularly approach of the parents to the organization and their consciousness might be effective on the process. Depth conversations and explanations of the process are necessary for permission and support of the families. At the first stage of application, participation of the parents in different levels might also be effective on their countenance.

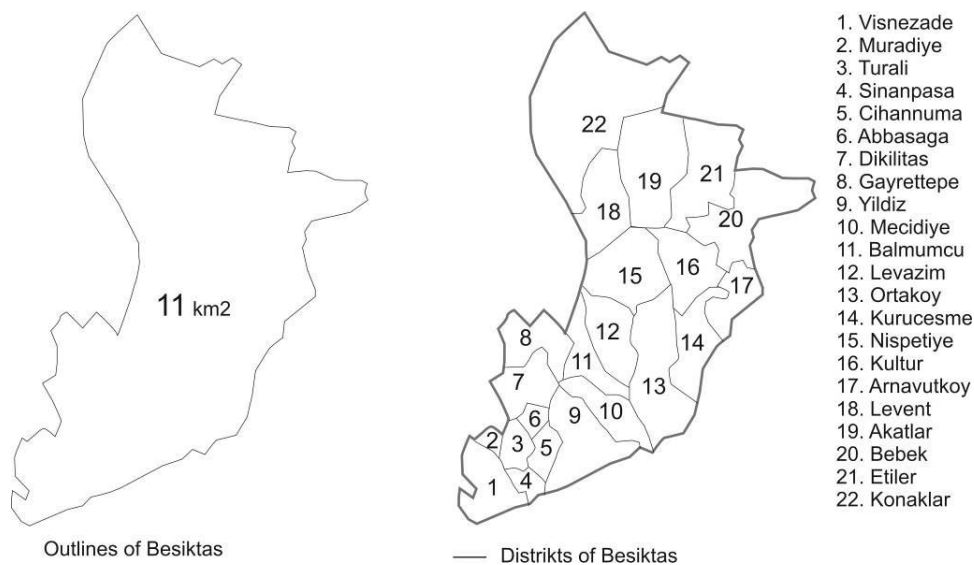


Figure 6. The Outlines Of Besiktas And Its Neighborhoods

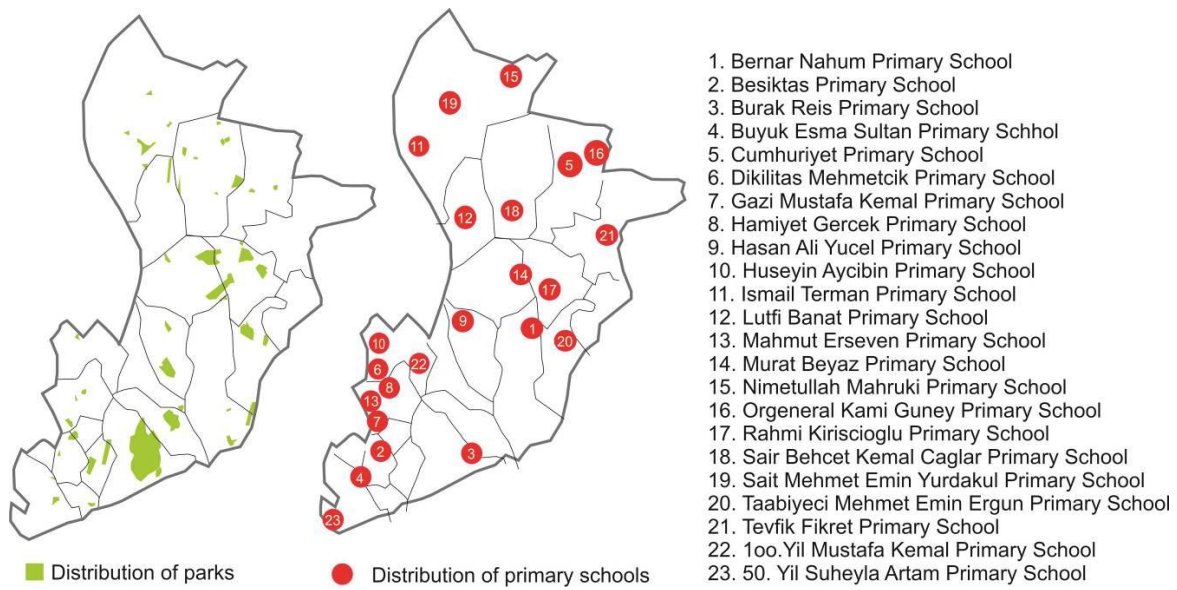


Figure 7. Distribution of Parks and Primary Schools

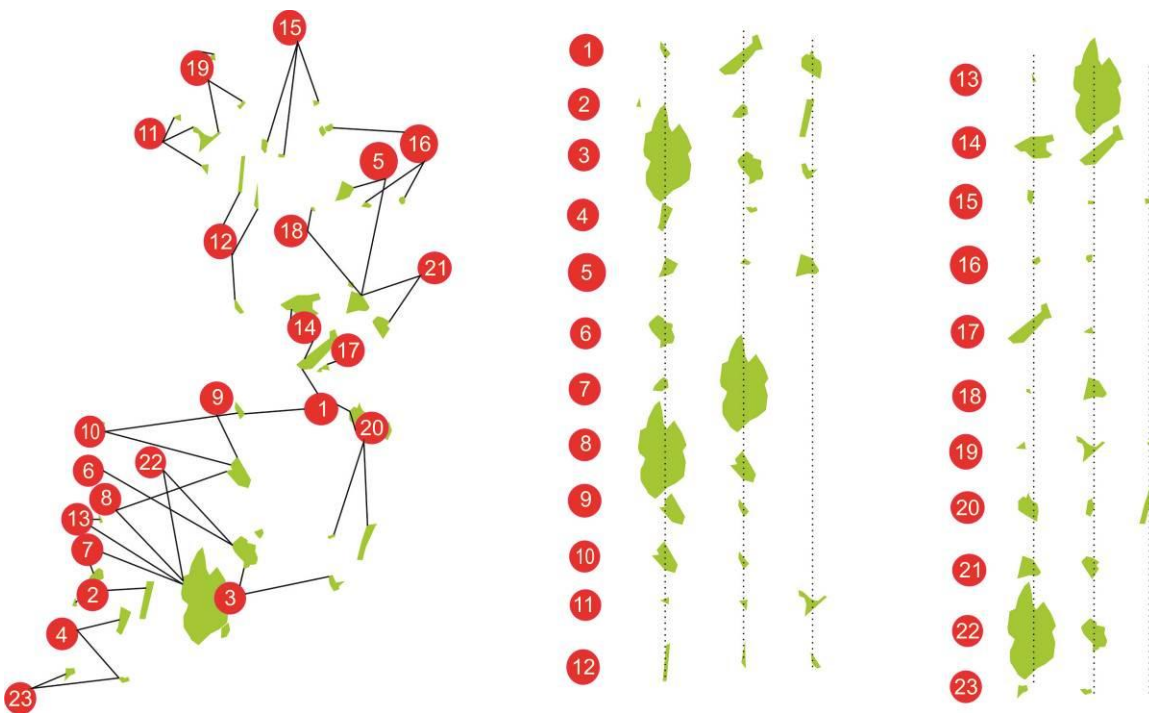


Figure 8. GAM Model for Sharing the Field Area

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainability in terms of usage, appropriation and embedding of green areas in the consciousness of the society are among today's biggest problems in metropolises. The proposed mutual sharing and the participative cooperation model (GAM Model) aim to address these problems. The proposed GAM model could be characterized as cooperative sharing between local authorities and primary education. From a wide perspective, on one hand, it could be described as a participatory approach; on the other hand, it could be characterized as an activity of handmade urbanism. The Razgrad city model has been examined as an example. The applicability of the model was tested in the Besiktas study area with a view to its use in all other districts of Istanbul at a later stage.

Briefly, it is possible to talk about the public benefits of such model. These benefits can be summarized under three categories:

Benefits in Terms of Institutions

Today, one of the biggest goals of democracy is the transparency of the relationship between authority and citizens. The proposed GAM will establish a cooperative bond between authority and the public. This cooperative model strengthens relationships between educational institutions and local municipalities. This type of initiative leads to a variety of studies conducted between different institutions. Relationships among institutions increase. Moreover, defined relationships increase the importance of components such as transparency and distribution, which are the basis of democracy.

Benefits in Terms of Education

This type of approach could contribute to student education in important ways. Gathering around a cooperative study and act of production, students learn how to share and work towards common goals. Programs such as these could thus increase their sense of responsibility.

Benefits in Terms of the Sustainability of Green Areas

The initiative presented here could increase the appropriation of green areas by their regular visitors. Children who work in these areas get to know the green areas better and embrace the areas for which they are responsible. This established bond between children and green areas ensures that these green areas will not be abandoned. Citizens will be more careful and responsive regarding the parks which their own children maintain.

Applying this type of program can raise some issues. For İstanbul, with its multi-centric structure, large scale and features of a metropolis, the importance of sensibility in terms of organization is increased. Transportation should be regarded as an important factor in the large and complex city. In the suggested distribution area, shortening distances and selecting summer-holidays for working times could help in solving such a problem. Alternatively, it is suggested that there should be pilot schools that can educate and advise. After a pilot study, the basic problems encountered and experience gained should be studied. Re-working the proposed model will be an important step in order for organizations to apply the model properly.

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