

Evaluating User-Oriented Park Design

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Introduction

Our society is aging and with it, the need for more space for the elderly is rising. According to Lawton's model an optimal adaptation to an environment can only occur when the environment matches the users' abilities and competences (Lawton, 1974). Hence, for creating suitable environments, the focus must be on the user. Therefore, design concepts for public spaces must be analyzed before and after construction.

Aim

This study aims to compare landscape architectural guidelines for public spaces for the elderly with findings in psychology. The overall objective is to complete the circle in the design process by incorporating design guidelines and examining usage after the space is constructed.

Method

First, habitat-related needs as well as space-related design criteria were identified and the relation between them established. In a second step, two parks in Vienna, equal in size but varying in their concepts a calm - park and an active-park, were mapped and evaluated relative to design guidelines. In a last step, field observations provided insight into the types of visitors, frequency of visits, and general use of the selected parks and their elements.

Results

The results suggest that Maderthaner's (1995) habitat-related needs (regeneration, privacy, safety, participation, etc.) can be realized by Schmidt's (2005) space-related design guidelines (experience of space, security, orientation, active/passive use, etc.). Furthermore, affordance, such as self

explanation, expressivity, and usability of park elements, appear to play an important role for the use of parks for the elderly. However, it was found that the calm-park was not used as much by senior citizens (5.6% seniors vs. 70.4% adolescents). According to the affordance criteria, the purpose of the park was not realized. The active-park, on the other hand, was more frequented by seniors (21.6% of total users), fulfilling the space-related design criteria as well as affordance.

Discussion

The results suggest that habitat-related needs can be achieved by using existing space-related design guidelines. These include the incorporation of park elements for specific age groups. Affordance appears to be essential for the acceptance and use of urban parks. Nevertheless, the examined criteria cannot be seen as exhaustive. However, evaluating design-concepts before and after development can improve future designs.

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