



Center for Buildings, Infrastructure and Public Space

Plazas&public spaces

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4/22/2025

Parks and physical activity: Why are some parks used more than others

· Research Topic

This study explores why certain public parks attract more users than others. It focuses on how park characteristics, organized programming, and neighborhood demographics relate to physical activity levels and park visitation.

· Methodology

The researchers collected data from 30 public parks in Southern California between 2006 and 2008. The study involved:

1. Surveys from 51 park directors about park operations,
2. Observations using the SOPARC system to track usage and activity levels,
3. Face-to-face interviews with 2,315 park users and 1,985 nearby residents.

Key variables analyzed included park size, number of supervised activities, population density, poverty rate, perceived safety, and presence of advisory boards.

· Findings

1. Park size and the number of organized activities were the strongest predictors of park usage.
2. Surprisingly, factors such as poverty level, population density, safety perceptions, and advisory boards showed no significant relationship with park use.
3. The most active areas were basketball courts, gymnasiums, and open green fields, mainly used by children and teens.

· Conclusion

Increasing park usage depends less on improving perceived safety and more on offering diverse, structured, and inclusive programming. Simply expanding park size or ensuring safety is not enough; active management and organized activities are essential to attract broader user groups, especially adults and families.

Dimension	Bryant Park	Washington Square Park	Chaoyang Park
Design Philosophy	“Urban living room” layout with defined zones (lawn, café, event spaces). Highly flexible and adaptive to seasons/events.	Open, free-flowing design prioritizing social gatherings. Less structured spatial hierarchy.	Mixed-use park with ecological zones, fitness trails, and plazas. Large-scale green spaces with hardscape integration.
Maintenance Model	Operated by private nonprofit Bryant Park Corporation. High-frequency cleaning, professional management.	Managed by NYC Parks with occasional support from local groups. Limited staff and delayed upkeep in places.	Managed by city-level park authorities with outsourced contracts. Bureaucratic and slow to respond.
Financial Structure	Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Model Diverse funding: retail leases, café operations, markets, donations. Nearly self-sustaining and transparent.	Public budget dependent. Limited event income; lacks consistent revenue channels.	Funded mostly by government budget. Low financial autonomy and innovation.
Community Engagement	Frequent events (yoga, movies, holiday markets). Strong feedback channels and volunteer opportunities.	Some local civic participation (music, protests). Limited structured communication with city agencies	Minimal community involvement. Primarily state-led events; limited grassroots presence.
Resilience Capacity	Rebounded quickly after COVID-19. Strong financial and spatial adaptability.	Struggled with service gaps and variable usage post-crisis.	Recovery from stress (e.g., grass damage) is slow. Relies heavily on government funding cycles.

Bryant Park – The Dilemma of Privatized Publicness

Despite its vibrant atmosphere and success in self-sustaining operations, Bryant Park's heavy commercialization and surveillance subtly exclude marginalized groups and limit informal civic use.

Inspiration:

- Tokyo** – Cooperative governance involving NGOs and volunteers to support coexistence with the unhoused.
- Melbourne** – Safe sleeping zones in parks, balancing dignity and spatial order.

Recommendation:

Introduce inclusive design and usage policies to preserve civic openness alongside curated events.

Washington Square Park – Tension Between Users and Managers

Managed by NYC Parks without sustained public input, decisions like fencing lawns or closing spaces often spark backlash due to lack of transparency.

Inspiration:

- Seoul** – Citizen Participatory Park Committees enable shared decision-making among stakeholders.
- Portland** – Shared Space Agreements co-drafted by artists, residents, and advocacy groups.

Recommendation:

Establish a “Community Forum” and on-site mediators to facilitate inclusive governance and user dialogue.

Chaoyang Park – Financial Rigidity and Innovation Gap

Heavily reliant on municipal funding, with limited autonomy to attract revenue or initiate creative programs.

Inspiration:

- New York's Bryant Park** – Public-private partnership (PPP) model with diversified commercial income.
- London's Olympic Park** – Reinvesting surrounding land value uplift into park operations.

Recommendation:

Pilot mixed-revenue streams through pop-up markets, eco-tours, and local business sponsorships to increase financial sustainability.

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