

Recommendation on urban open space (86/11)

(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 12 September 1986 at the 399th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies)

The Committee of Ministers, under the terms of Article 15.b of the Statute of the Council of Europe,

Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of facilitating their economic and social progress;

Considering that this aim may be pursued by exchanging information and experience amongst member states on topics of common interest;

Considering that the Council of Europe has established, through its European Campaign for Urban Renaissance and subsequent work programme on urban policies, a valid platform facilitating such a discussion between urban administrations of its member states;

Noting that the urban policies work programme concentrates above all on the illustration of strategies and policies that help to afford a broader human dimension in towns;

Considering that part of the quality of the urban environment depends on the type, scale, scope, accessibility and availability of open and public space;

Bearing in mind the reports presented at and the results of the seminars held at Norrköping (1-4 June 1981) as part of the European Campaign for Urban Renaissance and at Durham (20-23 September 1983) devoted to a discussion of the provision and better use of open space in towns;

Considering therefore that it would be opportune to draw up a recommendation to governments on this subject, in the belief that it will pave the way for positive tangible results, of use and value for the inhabitants of European towns;

Considering that what is required above all is a change of attitude on the part of public authorities rather than necessarily an absolute increase in resources;

Wishing in this recommendation to:

1. define open space, assert its values, identify the threats to it arising particularly from unresolved conflict of use;
2. indicate strategies for the provision, development and maintenance of open space;
3. underline the importance of co-operation, particularly at the local level in this respect,

Recommends that the governments of member states:

1. Recognise and take into account the following considerations:

- 1.1. Towns are not only buildings: open space forms a fundamental part of the urban environment and the historic heritage of a town;
- 1.2. Open space covers a wide range of public and private areas both in historic towns and new communities and provides a framework for various activities that may change with time and use;
- 1.3. Open space is an essential part of the urban heritage, a strong element in the architectural and aesthetic form of a town, plays an important educational role, is ecologically significant, is important for social interaction and in fostering community development and is supportive of economic objectives and activities;
- 1.4. The enjoyment of open space contributes to the legitimate aspirations of urban inhabitants for an improvement in their quality of life, as well as to increased social cohesion, feelings of security and supports in this way the protection of the rights of man in his built environment;
- 1.5. The significance of open space is partially reflected in current social patterns and urban planning practice;
- 1.6. Despite this realisation, there are still threats and risks to open space arising from unresolved conflicts in use, errors in planning and lack of co-ordination between and with different authorities;

2. Take steps to ensure that the securing, provision and management of open space are an integral part of urban development and in particular:

- 2.1. To ensure that open space is adequately secured and protected;
- 2.2. To encourage the provision of open space and in so doing to ensure that it reflects the real needs of inhabitants, respects the existing character of the urban “grain”, uses all available resources, promotes social cohesion and results from adequate dialogue and co-ordination between all appropriate professionals, authorities and institutions;
- 2.3. To manage and enhance open space through the identification and resolution of conflicts, the achievement and creation of accessibility and attractiveness and the encouragement of appropriate levels of use;

3. Accept that the securing, provision and management of open space should be based on a number of approaches and in particular:

- 3.1. Close co-ordination of national policies;
- 3.2. The recognition of the specific role of local authorities;
- 3.3. The encouragement as far as possible of community and neighbourhood-based schemes;
- 3.4. The encouragement of initiatives from the private sector and related agencies;
- 3.5. Significant emphasis on education and information;

4. In implementing this recommendation take into account the points, relating to paragraphs 1 to 3 above, set out in the appendix hereto.

Appendix to Recommendation No. R (86) 11

1.1. Towns are not only buildings: open space forms a fundamental part of the urban environment and the historic heritage of a town

Although in the past large areas of open space in towns, such as impressive public

squares and parks, have been created and despite recent attention to other ideas, some stolen from the past, like the agora, forum, shopping malls and pedestrian zones, the significance, value and role of open space, particularly of an informal or small-scale nature, have often been neglected and its contribution to the well-being of a community ignored.

It is all too easy to find places near our homes, work, schools, shops, where too little thought has been given to the commodity of space. Often it is too cramped or too big, uninviting and unfriendly, over-designed or under-designed, unsuitable or too restrictive. Indeed there may not even be any and where it exists it is often seen as a left-over once all other development-housing, environmental, conservation-has taken place. Little skill and money have been invested in open spaces, which receive residual budgets once housing, roads, car-parks, community facilities and services have been dealt with. Yet these spaces when properly planned provide the central “image” of a town.

Even with existing green areas, public parks and squares, they have not always been conceived or their use planned in ways that promote their acceptance by urban residents.

This inattention or inadequate consideration is particularly regrettable since open space forms a fundamental part of the urban environment and the historic heritage of a town.

1.2. Open space covers a wide range of public and private areas both in historic towns and new communities and provides a framework for various activities that may change with time and use

Open space covers a wide range of private and public areas including public squares, parks, pedestrian and traffic-free areas, playgrounds, river banks, sports areas, railway concourses, boulevards and streets.

In addition there is a large stock of unknown or neglected space, for example informal space often on a small scale, and often in between or behind buildings, and, in many industrial towns, under-used derelict land that could be recovered for the community.

Open and public space is part of the network of a town built up gradually or suddenly, either deliberately or unwittingly. It is always, therefore, implicit in our understanding of and concern for the town although it is not always explicit in planning efforts.

1.3. Open space is an essential part of the urban heritage, a strong element in the architectural and aesthetic form of a town, plays an important educational role, is ecologically significant, is important for social interaction and in fostering community development and is supportive of economic objectives and activities

Not only is open space a fundamental part of the urban heritage and a strong element in the architectural and aesthetic form of the built environment of a town but it also has a number of significant functions and values.

It has an important educational role, facilitating through its use an understanding of and identification with the city; it is ecologically significant, not just in maintaining or bringing vegetation into urban areas but also in encouraging wild life and promoting

understanding of nature; it is important for social interaction, the well-being of individuals, and plays a significant role in the development of a community and in the creation of community pride, and so helps reduce the inherent tension and conflict in deprived parts of urban areas in Europe; it has an important role in providing the recreational and leisure needs of a community and has, finally, an economic value in that environmental enhancement, in which the improvement of open space plays a major part, assists the economic revival of cities, not just through creating jobs but in increasing the attractiveness of a town as a place for business investment and sought-after residential areas.

1.4. The enjoyment of open space contributes to the legitimate aspirations of urban inhabitants for an improvement in their quality of life, as well as to increased social cohesion, feelings of security and supports in this way the protection of the rights of man in his built environment

Space, an essential and dominant part of the historic structure and contemporary physical fabric of towns, is important in providing and sustaining a broader human dimension to the built, living and working environment. It is a vital factor in the well-being of individuals and the community.

Cultural activity and human well-being require amongst other things that we have space to linger, to amble, to meet by prior arrangement or by chance. Most of us recognise immediately those places where this purpose is served.

One cannot talk of human rights without speaking of the rights of man in the built environment; the carefully considered provision and use of space is a strong element in sustaining these rights.

1.5. The significance of open space is partially reflected in current social patterns and urban planning practice

There has been recently a revival of interest in communal space. Rehabilitation policies have a major space component and have brought with them a better understanding of the concept and value of open space. People are more concerned with the value and quality of their environment and surroundings; social changes such as increased leisure and sport requirements underline the need for better and more open space. The value of open space in assuring a human dimension to towns is increasingly recognised. The merits of the street, of enclosed spaces not earmarked for specific purposes and therefore capable of being used for a wide variety of activities are being rediscovered. It is appreciated that the character of a town is largely expressed through its open space and that well-defined open spaces attract people and provide a necessary meeting place. Open space expresses the collective life of the city and acts as an element of social cohesion. It is a sort of public living-room for the locality.

Furthermore economic recession, unemployment and consequent reduced opportunity for out-of-town travel have increased the need for the provision and enhancement of space in local neighbourhoods, while at the same time making available additional manpower resources to deal with it.

1.6. Despite this realisation, there are still threats and risks to open space arising from

unresolved conflicts in use, errors in planning and lack of co-ordination between and with different authorities

Despite the increased understanding of the significance of open space there are still threats, risks and deficiencies, for example: public space is often threatened by uncontrolled building and road development and much still remains to be done to limit the invasion of streets and public areas by the motor car; there are often cases of conversion of open space for inappropriate use; in some historic towns there are real problems of excessive tourism usurping available space; in many towns there are problems of pollution, particularly by the dog population, in streets and other open spaces.

There are often conflicts in the use of space between local needs and those of a wider community. The transformation of private areas into public space, in itself often a positive development, does not always ensure adequate public use and accessibility because of subsequent inappropriate or excessive regulation.

Therefore, there is often a large gap between intended use and subsequent reality, mainly because provision of space is often based on false assumptions rather than on observed behaviour.

Finally, as suggested under 1.1, planning for open space is not explicit from the beginning but often considered as a left-over once other requirements have been fulfilled.

2.1. To ensure that existing open space is adequately secured and protected

Urban open space should be a forum for a continuous interplay of individual and commercial activities.

This means that before all other investment, stock should be taken of existing resources and measures devised to protect them.

Awareness of variety of uses

In order to give adequate protection and security to existing urban open space in our European towns, it requires first that everything is done to encourage all those who are associated with the facility of urban space to try to understand more clearly what activities are actually going on in these areas. It is only by recognising the multifunctional demands that are placed upon specific places that those involved in urban development-sustaining, renewing, and new building-will know more confidently whether adequate protection is being given to our existing resources.

Role of surrounding buildings

New developments in towns have in some cases led to the loss of façades. Often single-use, individual buildings, set back in their own surroundings, have tended to replace traditional frontages. In order to remove a possible threat to the existing urban space by changes to its values and character, greater consideration should be given to the retention or replacement of the buildings which help to define the boundaries of the

space-rather than allowing their total loss. As with the provision of new areas of public open space the uses of the surrounding buildings are often crucial to the continued enjoyment of existing areas.

Better understanding of the significance of space

Urban development should seek to enhance existing urban space resources rather than threaten them. A closer understanding of the historic, architectural and social significance of individual urban open spaces and their relationship to each other-and to the wider urban area-will help to avoid “thoughtless destruction” or at best “insensitive

handling” of these important aspects which both bring and harbour life in towns, so helping to ensure that streets, squares and other public spaces are recovered and secured as areas of personal interaction.

2.2. To encourage the provision of open space and in so doing to ensure that it reflects the real needs of inhabitants, respects the existing character of the urban fabric, uses all available resources, promotes social cohesion and results in adequate dialogue and co-ordination between all appropriate professionals and authorities and institutions

Reflection of real needs of inhabitants

Of paramount importance, the design and layout of new urban spaces should closely match the real needs of the community and reflect the patterns of behaviour of its residents.

This therefore requires close, often systematic, observation of the uses which a community makes of its existing urban space resources. It will require recognition and an understanding of their patterns of behaviour, including notions of responsibility, and that the subsequent design and development of those spaces should reflect such observations and hence avoid “overplanning”.

Respect of the existing urban fabric

There should be a much greater awareness of the scale and nature of existing neighbourhoods and their character and urban tradition. This awareness is more likely to lead to a greater understanding of the architectural and social “grain” of an area, and of towns and cities as a whole. It will help to ensure that the integration and provision of new areas of urban open space and their subsequent design and development are such that they respect the architectural character and quality of each location, both in scale and detail.

Use of all available resources, particularly old industrial land

In order to provide adequate and appropriate new areas of urban open space, it will be necessary at the outset to quantify and qualify all those existing areas of urban open space-both large and small-which represent the existing resources (2.1 above). At the same time, it will be important to examine the scope for reclaiming and re-utilising under-used or derelict land. Particularly in older industrial areas-making sure that in recording under-use in regard to the “official” or “intended” land-use, there is not a

failure to observe other, often informal, uses which could be supported or should be accommodated in any future plans for the area.

Promotion of social cohesion

The provision and use of urban space is a vital factor in promoting social cohesion and urban revival. External spaces are living places without ceilings and there is little difference in the fundamental need for and use of urban space between different generations, age-groups or ethnic groups. In trying to secure and sustain a quality of life in our European towns, it is possible to ensure that planning, creating and using open space becomes a joint community exercise and this is an important ingredient in establishing a network of satisfactory community relations. The use of public space can involve a sense of responsibility and through it create a sense of community pride.

2.3. To manage and enhance open space through the identification and resolution of conflicts, the achievement and creation of accessibility and attractiveness. and the encouragement of appropriate levels of use

Urban open space management is concerned with the location, design and organisation of spaces; control and maintenance; and enhancement. These are separate but closely related processes, requiring a variety of skills and disciplines. It is possible through each of these management activities to achieve greater beneficial use of urban open space as a consequence of such intervention. Conversely, less successful management-poor siting, inappropriate design and detailing, over-regulation and casual or ineffective maintenance-can all lead to under-use of urban open space, its abuse and its transformation from safe to dangerous zone.

Managing urban open space is principally to do with managing conflicts. Conflicts are best “resolved” at the design and organising stage, where effort should be made to avoid the occurrence of conflicting demands and interests. Successful designs will enable many activities to take place simultaneously with little hindrance to each other and always with the opportunity for new activities and expression. Planning for space should be conceived in such a way as to anticipate future needs of different user groups to enable them successfully to share the space with each other. The value of open space should not be assessed purely in terms of the current fashions or functions it can fulfil but through its capacity to provide an overall framework for activities that can change with time or use.

Conflict: cars and pedestrians

One major source of conflict can be between motor vehicles and pedestrians. Cars are still the major users of space in many towns and civilised arrangements for the co-existence of people and motor vehicles are urgently

required in many towns, notwithstanding the fact that some already have traffic-free streets. By allowing people to have greater priority in town streets and within most residential areas it will allow greater opportunity for personal encounter and interaction. The manager will need to utilise materials, surfaces and street furniture which help to “personalise” rather than “vehicularise” these urban spaces.

Conflict: historic open space

Conflict can occur in the use of historic urban spaces which form the setting of significant historic buildings-especially if there is little other urban open space or where alternative areas are strictly regulated. Successful management of urban open space will recognise that where regulation of historic sites is necessary, perhaps in order to safeguard a particular function or the appearance of an area, measures should be taken to ensure that the area as a whole fulfils all the urban space requirements of those living and working in it.

Visual conflict

The scale and nature of a neighbourhood, and of the city as a whole, should be reflected in the public space provision. Lack of harmony in scale, character and a disregard for the urban tradition and the “tone” and “grain” of the surrounding neighbourhood can cause visual conflict which is likely to make an area forbidding. Large and bleak areas of open space too are likely to be as under-used as they are expensive. Cluttered or incoherent rather than diverse and detailed design can often cause disorientation and insecurity.

Accessibility: delineation of space

In locating, designing and detailing urban open space, it will be necessary to take into account the physical boundaries of the selected areas so as to ensure that adequate and appropriate access can be afforded and that the physical boundaries do not inhibit the use of the space provided. In the provision of new areas of space, it will be essential to achieve a sense of personal security as this can lead to a feeling of belonging and comfort for those who will use the area, The delineation of the new space may require new landscape and buildings to supplement those which already exist, and here, as with securing existing urban spaces, the particular uses of surrounding buildings and their diversity will often be crucial to the enjoyment of the space enclosed by them.

Accessibility: structured maintenance

Good maintenance is an important part of managing urban open space. Maintenance methods should respect the agreed and recognised purposes of the area. The upkeep of an area should not become a form of prohibition or a regulating control on behaviour, and should not in any way diminish or inhibit the accepted intention of the area.

Attractiveness: designs and materials

The choice of appropriate materials must ensure that in practical terms surfaces meet the specification required-that they drain easily, do not cause a hazard to pedestrians and are stable. Over-design is often a threat to the comfort of an area, making places less attractive rather than more so, and increasing expenditure. Regard should always be given to detail and choice of materials. Casual consideration of such matters can frequently encourage acts of contempt and vandalism. Design materials may be used to set signals: different zones can thus be differently structured, given a different “feel”.

Attractiveness: respect for quality

Enhancement of urban spaces should be undertaken so as to make all places in towns attractive. The quality and not only the quantity of open space is important. Enhancing urban areas may require the introduction of trees and other vegetation as well as introducing colour, light and shade, which promotes “nature” and brings a habitat for wild life in urban areas.

Differentiated use

Where street furniture, parking materials, or planting become outworn and require replacement early attention should be given to this, and an understanding of the function and often multiple uses of these elements should ensure that such conformity is sustained. When managing, maintaining or enhancing urban spaces, it is important to recognise the multifunctional facility that is provided by walls and steps, seats and bollards, and when selecting or designing these components, or locating street lighting, consideration should be given to the varied purposes that street furniture can have.

3. Specific approaches

The provision and management of open space must be the result of a fruitful and credible dialogue on an equal footing between all concerned. This means not only should there be close co-ordination of national policies but also

local authorities should consider it a priority to create and indeed allow others to create and respect public space in towns. Furthermore, success in the provision and maintenance of urban open space depends in the long term on the close involvement of residents in their own neighbourhoods and a healthy relationship between these community groups and local authorities.

In a time of reduced public expenditure, initiatives from the private sector, controlled in a sensitive and flexible way by local authorities, should be encouraged. In this way partnership between the local authority and the private sector can be established and nurtured.

It is very important that a sustained long-term emphasis is placed on educational and information programmes in schools, through publications, radio and television, on the significance of policies for enhancement of the urban environment in general and provision and maintenance of open space in particular. Local authorities too can help to encourage public awareness of these issues.

3.1. Close co-ordination of national policies

In some countries legislation should be reviewed and sectoral policies of different administrations—for example, housing, social, environmental, transport, economic development agencies—should be co-ordinated to ensure the provision of the necessary quantity and quality of public space and its adaptability to future requirements and changes.

3.2. The recognition of the specific role of local authorities

Local authorities should consider it one of their priorities to create and encourage others to create and respect public space in towns.

They also have a responsibility for controlling the use of open space in the interests of the community. Over-regulation should be avoided as it can sometimes become unnecessarily restrictive, and actually impede otherwise intended accessibility and use.

Local authorities have a responsibility for bringing back into use derelict or under-used land and encouraging others to take such action and promote close co-operation between all concerned with provision of space, including politicians, engineers, architects, planners, landscape architects and above all the community or neighbourhood in question.

3.3. The encouragement as far as possible of community and neighbourhood-based schemes

As far as possible, the creation and management of open space should be neighbourhood-based.

Partnership between local authorities and community groups is invaluable in creating and maintaining open spaces so as to promote a better awareness of and respect for the immediate environment of their neighbourhood. The direct involvement of residents has a self-policing effect on public space, helping to promote a sense of individual and collective responsibility and respect. This can be useful in combating vandalism and it can put to valuable use pools of unemployment.

3.4. The encouragement of initiatives from the private sector and related agencies

The traditional role of public, particularly local, authorities in providing all services and facilities has been modified in recent years given reduction in public expenditure and in some countries an increased involvement of alternative provision of such facilities, for example community and the private sector.

Public/private partnerships have become an increasingly used vehicle for urban regeneration and urban environmental improvement including the provision of open space.

Where such initiatives from the private sector and related agencies support similar objectives to those set out in this memorandum they can be encouraged by public authorities, with the latter of course maintaining an overall guidance for such developments.

3.5. Significant emphasis on education and information

One of the most important considerations is the long-term education and information of officials, architects, planners and all those whose decisions affect the quality of the urban environment, on the significance of open space.

Above all programmes of stimulating greater awareness among the public as a whole, including school-children, should be developed using methods such as town trails,

interpretation centres, up-to-date audiovisual methods, attractive publications and the organisation of local meetings.

Local authorities can invite young people to visit their offices. These visitors may be undertaking environmental education or studying for one of the related professional disciplines and practical experience of the day-to-day work of local authorities and other agencies can be mutually beneficial.

Encouragement can also be given by local authorities to schools and other groups to make use of urban open space for a variety of activities including drama, music and dance.

In turn this can lead to a more confident and more assertive and perhaps more expressive use of urban open space.

Educational and practical experience with the support of local authorities and the other agencies can help to focus attention upon the visual damage that litter can bring to urban open space. Awareness of the quality and the importance of these areas and the feeling of personal association can help to overcome this problem.