

USERS' PERCEPTION OF KOWLOON PARK, HONG KONG: VISITING PATTERNS AND SCENIC ASPECTS

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ABSTRACT: Hong Kong is a hyper-dense city with 7×10^6 people living in an area of 1100km². One way to improve the livability of compacted and congested cities like Hong Kong is through the provision of urban parks, an aspect that has largely been under-researched. This study focuses on how users perceive and utilize various facilities in the Kowloon Park. The findings revealed that the Kowloon Park is one of the most preferred parks in Hong Kong for both local residents and tourists. Users were quite satisfied with the park's facilities. Notably, the most important component of an urban park is its greenery. This is followed by water elements, seating places, and facilities for various recreational activities. The improvements users would like to see in urban parks include good design and management, meeting users' needs, overcoming barriers to use, and providing a high quality and varied experience for different groups in the community. The findings of this study provide a good basis to address park management issues from the users' perspective. In particular, parks should provide easy access, encourage optimum usage and enable complimentary improvements to the environment.

KEY WORDS: urban park; visiting pattern; user perception; urban park management

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1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of urban park in a sustainable urban ecosystem is an aspect that, until now, has been well under-researched (BREUSTE *et al.*, 1998). Public demand to improve urban environmental quality, however, has risen. How to improve the livability of compacted and congested cities like Hong Kong, has become the focus of debate for scientists and policy-makers. The study of the complex relationship of human-environment in urban areas, such as the behaviors of park users, falls within the realm of urban ecology. This young scientific discipline has received growing recognition by public policy-makers and the academia as a critical aspect to resolve environmental issues in modern cities. The importance of urban ecology will continue to grow with the increasing urbanization of the human population. United Nations forecasts that about 60% of the world's population will live in cities by 2025, more than double that of the 29% in 1950 (CSIS, 2003).

By introducing environment-friendly components, such as urban parks, into the urban facades, the environmental quality of cities can be improved. However, many urban administrators still view urban park as a mere community amenity, a non-profitable provision that bears heavy single-sided costs to municipality budgets. In Hong Kong, there is growing recognition that urban park can be an asset to the city. The Government stated that the outdoor recreation is now considered as a basic human need for activities, which are essential to the mental and physical well-being of the individual and community as a whole (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2002). Outdoor leisure and recreational activities, such as strolling, jogging and playing *tai-chi* necessitate the provision of different types of open space in town plans. Apart from leisure and recreational uses, urban park also allows the penetration of sunlight and air movement in densely built-up areas, as well as provides planting areas for visual relief. These functions are particularly important in a high density, high-rise built-environment like

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Hong Kong. Undoubtedly, urban parks are the major area where people can enjoy outdoor recreation activities.

2 PARK VISITOR SURVEY

2.1 Kowloon Park

Currently, the Leisure and Cultural Service Department manages urban parks of Hong Kong. There are more than 1300 parks and gardens of various sizes, including 22 major parks. This study focuses on how visitors perceive and utilize various facilities in the Kowloon Park, which is one of the regional comprehensive parks in Hong Kong situated in the city center of Tsimshatsui occupying an area of 13.5ha (Fig. 1). The park encompasses some of the oldest urban fabric, and the site was an encampment during the 1860s. Since its conversion into a park in 1970, the Kowloon Park has become a crucial center of cultural and recreational activities in the Kowloon peninsula. Apart from

greenery, there are many recreational and cultural facilities in the park, such as indoor and outdoor swimming pools, indoor games hall, football pitch, fitness trail, children's playgrounds, bird lakes, aviary, and sculpture gardens (Photo 1, Photo 2, Photo 3). The Kowloon Park is situated in one of the busiest commercial, retail, touristic, religious and cultural districts, and acts as a hub in connecting these different land-uses. It is conveniently located near the Mass Transit Railway station and intersects major bus and ferry routes. Visitors of the Kowloon Park come from different districts in Hong Kong, and it is one of the most well-liked parks in the city by tourists from all over the world. This study addresses the lack of information about park users' visiting habits and their favorite park facilities or scenes.

2.2 Survey Schemes

The main objective of the survey is to elicit how park users perceive and utilize the various facilities provid-

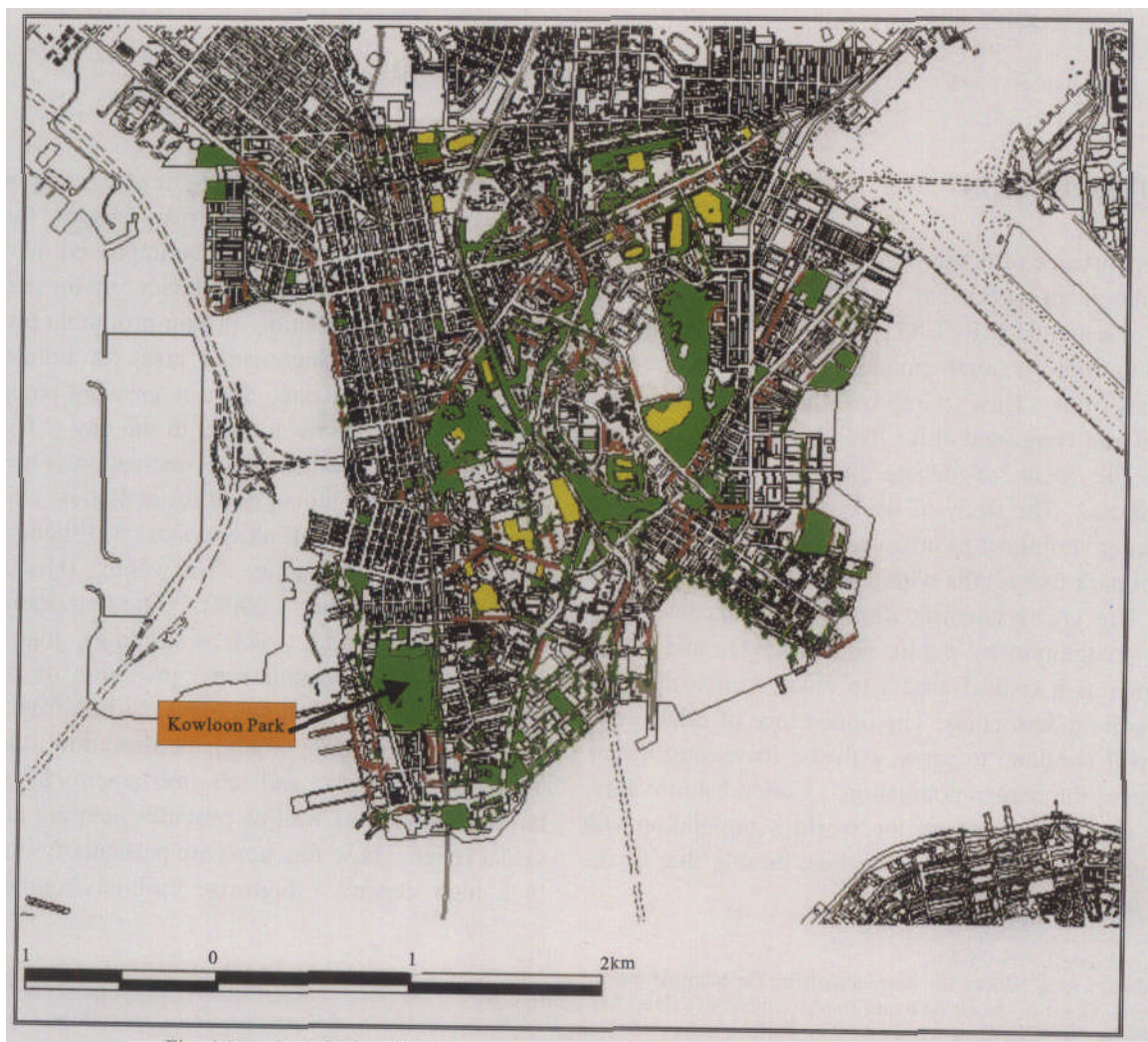


Fig. 1 Kowloon Park and major green spaces in Kowloon peninsula, Hong Kong

ed by the Kowloon Park. The major research questions are: who do actually use the Kowloon Park, and when and why do they use the various park facilities? Do park users hold different environmental images concerning the various park scenes or facilities? How are these images similar or dissimilar across different cultural groups?

All park users during the survey period, from November to December 2001, constituted the target population of this survey. A draft of the questionnaire was pre-tested in October 2001 in the Kowloon Park. The surveys were done during the days (between 10 a.m. and 5 p. m.) and were equally divided into weekday surveys and weekend surveys so as to capture the greatest variety of visitors. The sample consisted of two groups of park users, local citizens and tourists. In order to collect data for cross-cultural analysis, quota-sampling procedures were used to select a representative sample of local residents and tourists. In order to draw a more representative sample, the interviewers conducted the interviews at designated locations in the park where the pedestrian flow was the greatest.

2.3 Profile of Respondent Sample

Overall, 196 users were successfully interviewed. Among them, 160 were Hong Kong residents, and 36 were tourists from other countries around the world. There were slightly more females (55%) in the sample than males (45%). Most respondents received middle school education (58%), about one third (33%) of them attained college/university education, and only 8% received elementary school education or less. On the other hand, most of them (54%) were between 22 and 39 years of age. About one-fifth (20%) of the respondents worked in professional and technical fields, and about a quarter (24%) was in clerical, sales, and other services. About 37%, mostly being local residents, stated that they were not employed, which included job seekers, housewives, students, and retirees. This is by far one of the largest groups of park users.

3 PARK VISITING PATTERNS

3.1 Visiting Patterns

Survey results (Table 1–6) show users' park visiting habits. The largest part of users (42.3%) indicated that they were regular park visitors, and the frequency of visits ranged from daily to at least once per month. About 17.3% of the users were visiting the park for the first time. The remaining 40.4% stated that they visited the Kowloon Park irregularly. About 61% of the tourists

were visiting the Kowloon Park for the first time, while only 7.5% of Hong Kong residents were first time visitors (Table 1). Notably, about a quarter of the tourist visitors said that they had come to the park twice or more. This pattern clearly demonstrates the importance of urban parks to tourists. The majority of the park users, both Hong Kong residents and tourists, spent half-an-hour to two hours in the park (66.2%) in relaxing or enjoying other park facilities (Table 2). Interestingly, most visitors used the Kowloon Park by themselves (37.2%). Of those who had companions, they usually came with their friends (28.6%), children (11.7%), or spouses (11.7%) (Table 3). Most visitors (35.2%) took the Mass Transport Railway to the Kowloon Park, many walked (33.2%), and some came by bus (26%). Over half (55.6%) of the tourists walked to the park from hotels nearby (Table 4). The average time spent traveling was less than 30 minutes (Table 5). Clearly, convenience and proximity to hotels and other tourist attractions (such as shopping centers) account for the popularity of the Kowloon Park to both local residents and tourists. Although autumn appeared to be the most preferred season for visiting the Kowloon Park, many did not indicate any particular preference for the season (Table 6). Since the Hong Kong weather permits outdoor activities throughout the year, about two-thirds (64.8%) of the users did not have any seasonal preference for the day they visited parks.

Table 1 Frequency of visit at the Kowloon Park (%)

Frequency of visit	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
First time visitor	7.5	61.1	17.3
Regular visitor (at least once a month)	47.0	25.1	42.3
Irregular visitor (less than once a month)	45.5	13.8	40.4

Table 2 Time users spent in the Kowloon Park (%)

Time spent	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
< 30min	13.8	13.9	13.8
31–60min	27.4	27.8	27.5
1–2h	38.8	38.9	38.8
> 2h	20.0	19.4	19.9

Table 3 Companion of the user while visiting the Kowloon Park (%)

Companion	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
By oneself	40.0	25.0	37.2
With spouse	6.0	33.3	11.7
With children	14.0	2.8	11.7
With friends	28.0	30.5	28.6
With family	9.0	5.6	8.2
Others	3.0	2.8	2.6

Table 4 Transportation mode users used to get to the Kowloon Park (%)

Transportation mode	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Bus	31.3	2.8	26.0
Mass Transit Railway	35.0	36.1	35.2
On foot	28.1	55.6	33.2
Taxi	0.0	5.6	1.0
Others	5.5	0.0	4.6

Table 5 Time users spent in traveling to the Kowloon Park (%)

Traveling time	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
< 15min	29.4	52.8	33.7
15–29min	35.0	27.8	33.7
30–59min	26.9	16.7	25.0
> 1h	8.7	2.7	7.6

Table 6 Most preferred season to visit the Kowloon Park (%)

Preferred season	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Spring	1.9	5.6	2.6
Summer	5.0	0.0	4.1
Autumn	31.9	5.6	27.0
Winter	1.3	2.8	1.5
Random season	53.7	11.0	46.0
No answer	6.2	75.0	18.8

3.2 Activities in the Kowloon Park

During the interview, users were asked to indicate two activities that they would do in the Kowloon Park. The survey revealed that users engaged in many different activities. Most users enjoy the Kowloon Park passively, such as sitting, relaxing, and reading (65.3%). Many took part in activities such as walking, strolling, jogging and practicing *tai-chi* (51.5%). Quite a large number of users participated in activities and sports, especially swimming and ball games. Some people came for bird watching and others brought children to play. The rest simply enjoyed the Kowloon Park's other facilities (Table 7).

Table 7 Users' activities while in the Kowloon Park (%)

Type of activity	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Sitting, relaxing, reading	60.0	88.9	65.3
Walking, strolling, jogging, and <i>tai-chi</i>	51.9	50.0	51.5
Sport activities (swimming and ball games)	30.0	2.8	25.0
Bird watching	18.8	30.6	20.9
Passing by and accidental visit	11.9	22.2	13.8
Bringing children to playground	11.9	0.0	9.7
Photography and drawing	3.1	0.0	2.6
Others	4.4	11.1	5.6

Note: Users can choose more than one activity in Kowloon Park

users, the major reason for visiting a park was to "come in contact with nature" (40.3%). They came to enjoy the natural environment, including the trees and flowers. These open spaces reminded people of the countryside or nature in the otherwise "concrete jungle" of Hong Kong. Notably, a substantial number of users sought solitude and practiced meditation in the Kowloon Park (28.6%). The tranquility of the environment provided a "green" and sometimes "wild" experience to some park users. Quite a large number of respondents said that they came to the park "to escape from home or workplace." Hence, this psychological reason for visiting an urban park signifies its importance in easing the stresses of urban living. Others simply came to enjoy the various facilities and events that the park provides (Table 8).

Table 8 Users' reasons for visiting the Kowloon Park (%)

Reason	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Contacting with nature	40.0	41.7	40.3
Resting, solitude, meditation	25.6	41.7	28.6
Enjoying leisure activities with others	20.0	16.7	19.4
Jogging/to do exercise	16.9	8.3	15.3
Escaping from home/work	11.9	13.9	12.2
Taking children to playground	10.6	5.6	9.7
No specific reason /killing time	3.8	2.8	3.6
Others	5.0	2.8	4.6

Note: Users can give more than one reason for visiting Kowloon Park

3.3 Favorite Scenes

To anybody, the answers to what is a great park would be numerous and varied. Undoubtedly, parks are places for the enjoyment of the beauties of the landscape (HJELTE and SHIVERS, 1978). Although beauty may be difficult to describe, an individual certainly will be able to tell when he or she is under its influence. Table 9 is a list of the top-five most preferred park scenes in the Kowloon Park. As shown, the Bird Lake bounded by the greenery is the most favorite scene (Photo 1). The second preferred sites included the swimming pool complex (Photo 2), the Aviary and the Chinese Garden (Photo 3). These scenes are favored because they are sites of civic and recreational facilities. People felt good when they were in those settings. The other favorite scenes mentioned by the respondents included fitness trail, maze, sculpture walk, mini-soccer pitch, discovery playground, sitting benches, and fountain. These are the aesthetic components of the park that generate pleasurable responses of its visitors. However, about one-third of the respondent did not indicate any preference, and their motivations of going to the park warrant further scrutiny.

People's reasons for using the park differ. To many

Table 9 Top-five most preferred scenes in Kowloon Park (%)

Facility/setting	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Bird Lake	11.9	22.2	13.8
Greenery	10.0	13.9	10.7
Swimming pool complex	12.5	0.0	10.2
Aviary	9.4	0.0	7.7
Chinese Garden	4.4	8.3	5.1

Note: Other facilities mentioned (< 2%): fitness trail, maze, sculpture walk, mini-soccer pitch, discovery playground, sitting benches, and fountain



Photo 1 The Bird Lake



Photo 2 The swimming pool complex



Photo 3 The Chinese garden

The general appraisal of the Kowloon Park by its visitors is very positive. On the whole, the park is located at the focal point of Tsimshatsui, the major commercial and tourist district of Kowloon peninsula. The majority of visitors (70%) were quite satisfied with the facilities provided by the Kowloon Park. The mean satisfaction score for the park was 3.88 on a four-point scale (Table 10). However, the park manager must note that many park users complained about the rubbish and hygiene problems. Moreover, some users commented that there were "too many people", and was very "noisy" in the park. The intrusion of the homeless also raised the concern by some visitors. Moreover, the park management should also try to find ways to eliminate perceived incompatible features, such as the sculpture walk. Some indicated that they were afraid that the park might eventually be surrounded by high-rise buildings.

Table 10 Overall satisfaction level of the Kowloon Park users (%)

Satisfaction level	Hong Kong resident	Tourist	Total
Unsatisfied	1.30	0.00	1.00
Average	32.50	5.60	27.60
Satisfied	53.10	50.00	52.60
Very satisfied	11.30	44.40	17.30
No response	1.90	0.00	1.50
Mean satisfaction index (1.0–5.0)	3.76	4.38	3.88

3.4 Hong Kong Residents vs. Tourists

The survey found that the majority of tourists visiting the Kowloon Park came to Hong Kong on vacation (47%), and visiting friends and relatives (28%). About 42% of them said they would stay for less than four days in Hong Kong and 47% of them said they would stay for more than eight days. Two of the things they enjoyed most while in Hong Kong were sightseeing (47%) and dining (39%). Notably, 28% of the tourist sample said they enjoyed the urban parks of Hong Kong very much. Open spaces, water, shady places, strolling, and sitting out areas were the most preferred settings for the tourists. In fact, the differences in visiting patterns of users between Hong Kong residents and tourists were small and generally insignificant. However, the survey tends to confirm that the park plays a very important role to tourists. Well-designed parks in strategic locations are assets to city development, especially with regards to tourism. This public space is a critical transit point, free of charge, between various tourist activities, such as sightseeing, shopping, dining, and entertaining.

4 DISCUSSION

A major problem of living in a high-density metropolitan cities such as Hong Kong are the limited opportunities for outdoor recreational activities and areas where one can appreciate nature interact with other people. Previous studies on urban green spaces in Hong Kong have transferred to the studies of urban tree status (JIM, 1987), urban park management (JIM, 1998), roadside tree management (WEBB, 1991; JIM, 1994), and open space planning and landscaping (AU, 1995; LO and LAI, 1986; KIRKBRIDE, 1984). The most comprehensive and systematic study about people's leisure habits and a recreation preference was that commissioned by the Hong Kong Government in 1995. The report, entitled *Study of Leisure Habits and Recreation Preferences*, identified the most popular types of recreation and leisure habits of Hong Kong people, including activities undertaken at home such as watching TV, near home such as going to playgrounds, walking and jogging, and active sports exemplifying swimming and badminton (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2002). This finding is consistent with a previous survey conducted by SIVAN and ROBERTSON (1996), in which watching TV (57%) topped the list of leisure activities participated by Hong Kong people in 1993, and only 16% chose walking in a park. There is a substantial demand for more passive open space near the home as a result of the increasing elderly population, and for an improvement in the quality of recreational facilities.

Urban park design has a firm cultural link that is influenced by the history and traditions of society. Although over 95% of the population of Hong Kong is ethnic Chinese, the impact of over one-and-a-half century colonial rule by the British cannot be overlooked. The design of the Hong Kong Botanical Garden founded in 1871, as the first public park of Hong Kong, was to create idyllic urban green lungs based on similar ideology of the Central Park in New York, the Hyde Park in London, and the Bois du Boulogne in Paris. The park was renamed in 1975 as Botanical and Zoological Gardens to reflect the increased commitments to zoological exhibits. The picturesque western park and garden designs are evident in urban parks developed in the post-war years, such as the Victoria Park (1957), the Kowloon Park (1970) and the Hong Kong Park (1991). These are the most popular parks in the Territory, where many territory-wide and international functions are held regularly.

Moreover, park design in Hong Kong is also influenced by ideas of Chinese garden design, which reflects a distinctive Chinese understanding towards the rela-

tionship between human and nature. The holistic thinking was described by WANG and HU (1998): "For thousands of years Chinese have been striving for a harmonious relationship among *Tian* (heaven or universe), *Di* (earth or resources) and *Ren* (people or society), and advocating that Man and Nature become one". The result is a systematic set of principles for managing the relationships between human and environment, including *Daoli* (physical relationship with the universe), *Shili* (planning and management of human activities), and *Qingli* (ecological ethics). Such principles involve several theories, like *Yin and Yang* (negative and positive forces), *Zhongyong* (moderate way) and *Fengshui* (geomantic omen theory) (WANG and YE, 1991). According to such holistic thinking, the city is regarded by WANG and HU (1998) as "a kind of artificial ecosystem which is dominated by human behavior, sustained by natural life support systems, and vitalized by ecological processes". The concept is therefore known as Social-Economic-Natural Complex Ecosystem (MA and WANG, 1984). The management of this ecosystem, which includes urban green spaces with their distinctive floristic and faunistic set-up, needs "the eco-maturity of policy makers, the eco-awareness of industries and citizens, the sensitivity of information feedback, and the flexibility of institutions" (WANG and HU, 1998). A typical example of a park layout like a classic garden of southern China is the Kowloon Walled City Park. The park seeks to preserve the heritage of Kowloon City's fabled Walled City with pavilion and flowers to line the pathways in the park. Elements of Chinese garden design can also be found in many parks, such as the Chinese garden within the Kowloon Park (Photo 2).

The urban parks of Hong Kong represent a mixture of thinking from both 1) the western design that emphasizes on the utilitarian aspects of providing various leisure and recreational facilities, and 2) the traditional Chinese garden design that emphasizes on the harmony between human and nature. The urban park provides both environmental and social benefits. Evidently, park visiting offers people a temporary escape from the stresses of urban living. Therefore, the importance of urban park, whether from the point of view of its ecological significance or human welfare benefits, is a self-evident truth. This is particularly true for Hong Kong—a city renowned for its hyper-density and overcrowded living environment (ZHANG, 2000).

The scarcity of land for urban development means that the amount of land allocated for urban park development is extremely limited. According to the Hong Kong Planning Standards and Guidelines, the standard provi-

sion of open space in the urban areas is a minimum of 20ha per 100×10^3 persons (i.e. 2m^2 per person) apportioned as 1) a minimum of 10ha per 100×10^3 persons (i.e. 1m^2 per person) for District Open Space and 2) a minimum of 10ha per 100×10^3 persons (i.e. 1m^2 per person) for Local Open Space (Hong Kong Planning Department, 2002). In practice, such standards are concerned with the quantity, rather than the quality, of green space. Visitors' perception of an urban park contributes to the community's collective image of such a space. This image can be as important in reality in deciding whether people will make good use of the park.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the Kowloon Park users' visiting patterns, activities, and scenes or facilities they preferred. The findings revealed that the Kowloon Park is one of the most preferred urban green spaces in Hong Kong for both local residents and tourists. Users were quite satisfied with the park's facilities. Notably, the most frequently mentioned reason for visiting the park was "to come into contact with nature." The most important component of an urban park is its greenery. This is then followed by water elements, seating places, and facilities for various recreational activities. Urban park is an integral part of modern city (ROSELAND, 1998; RAVETZ, 2000). It provides leisure facilities, contributes to public recreation, and beautifies urban landscape. Greening the city means combining the urban and natural environments to create healthy, civilized, and enriching places to live (HOUGH, 1995).

The findings of this study provide a good basis to address park management issues from the users' perspective. It is clear that nature, such as the presence of green plants, water, and other eco-elements helps to make a park likable by its visitors. Secondly, it has become apparent that urban parks of Hong Kong have to serve more diverse users due to economic restructuring, especially with the growing importance of tourism in Hong Kong's economy. Therefore, the park management authorities should be sensitive enough to meet people's needs, overcome barriers to use, and provide high quality and varied experience for the different group of users. Finally, urban parks should provide opportunities for exploration and to foster experiences that are restful and enjoyable. In conclusion, urban park managers should always provide easy access, encourage optimum usage, and enable complimentary improvements to the urban environment.

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