Sage Katwala
GEO 103 Urbanization
Final Research Paper
March 13 2022

Accessibility of Green Space in Chicago

There is no question that the physical environment around us has a tremendous impact on our mental well being. ‘Green space’ is a part of this physical environment within a community or neighborhood, and it can refer to features such as parks, gardens, vegetation, and tree canopy. Unequal distribution of such green spaces, as well as the unequal accessibility and quality, correlate to unequal mental and social health of various neighborhoods and larger communities. Low income and historically marginalized communities are the most impacted by this unequal distribution, and they are also often the first to feel the effects of climate change. The physical landscape impacts social well being by being a provider of places to socialize, find support in others, hold community events or gatherings, and have fun both freely and safely. These correlations aren’t about “ooh green I'm happy now” but rather the consequences access to quality green space can have on social support and mitigating life’s stressors.

The correlation between green space and mental health is that the amount and quality of green space can be an indicator of the structural disadvantages and advantages of the people in a neighborhood. There are many studies linking mental health and green space, but it is not a direct pattern of cause and effect. More vegetation, plants, or existence of the color green doesn’t instantly boost mental health. Being out in nature is a great stress reducer, but who has access to these benefits is limited and contributes to the disparities in mental health that correlate with green space. After all, “the environment is predominantly socio-naturally constructed and because of the ways in which urban environments perpetuate the elitist interests of the sociopolitical groups who built them” (Cronton 2019, 2). This means that the distribution of resources will be reflected in the physical environment as well as controlled by elitist sociopolitical groups. In research conducted in New York City neighborhoods that finds tree canopy to be an indicator of less mental health related ER visits, it also suggests that the extent to which other types of green space has an effect on the community is higher in low income neighborhoods as opposed to high income neighborhoods, and proximity to parks indicates an opposite effect to tree canopy in that proximity to parks correlates with more mental health related ER visits (Yoo et al. 2021). If the space isn’t safe or well maintained then the number of parks and fields of grass in a neighborhood is irrelevant. The existence of green space does not guarantee that the benefits will be shared between communities proportionately. Additionally, this indicates that low income or marginalized communities rely on access to adequate green spaces as a mitigator for mental health problems more than white or wealthy people do. Higher income generally means more choices in where you live such as in a better maintained

neighborhood with the resources to allocate towards things like parks and trees. Higher income also means better access to mental health resources like therapy and medication. In other words, it's not just green = happy, but that it could be seen as an indicator correlating with the underlying socioeconomic issues. Green space in a generalized sense may not be directly what increases mental health, but can serve as an indicator of the well being of a community and of the unequal distribution of resources.

Green spaces like parks and tree canopy can bring direct benefits to the community by strengthening social support and increasing the daily mobility of individuals in a city. Climate change has been exacerbating the consequences of environmental injustice. Tree canopy can bring city residence relief from the worsening effects of climate change, but not all communities are getting these benefits equally. The effects that climate change has on the weather and heat levels in cities and urban areas have been most felt by marginalized communities because of the disproportionate distribution of green space and tree canopy. This affects disadvantaged communities by restricting the mobility of their residents and making it difficult, even dangerous, to go outside. After the heat wave Chicago experienced in 1995, the EPA reported that over 700 people died from this extreme heat. Out of the reported deaths, most were black, elderly, or low income residents (EPA 2022, "Celotex Site"). When the ability to be outside, to be in public space, and to move through the city is restricted by environmental inequity, this has mental health consequences. Mobility is akin to dignity, and is a concept that applies to the various issues discussed by our class authors. In Kafui Attoh's paper "Public transportation and the idiocy of urban life", he describes how disabled people have limited access to being part of the public sphere because they don't have the same access to transportation. Being left without equitable public transportation and consequently restricting their mobility means "losing one's independence, one's dignity, and the ability to be part of the public" (Attoh 2017, 202). As the effects of climate change get worse, and as cities may get hotter, equitable green space means equitable transportation and mobility, and thus equitable right to the city. Shabazz outlines the consequences of a restricted right to the city:

> *Space is one of the most important and significant illustrators of uneven development, access, and social order. Its organization and how people are situated within it reflects social hierarchies. Geography makes social and political inequalities visible by situating them within physical space. It is not a coincidence that poor people, people of color, immigrants, the sick, the disabled, prisoners, women, sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups live in bracketed geographies. The scope of their political power often mirrors their spatial marginalization.(Shabazz 2015, 45)*

In this quote, Shabazz connects how the extremely restricted mobility from living in kitchenettes in the crowded Black Belt has on mental health. The physical environment we live in acts as a “constant reminder of the social conditions expressed by his containment” (Shabazz 2015, 46). Whether the restriction of your mobility is physical or social, it will have consequences on your identity and how you view yourself. Green space is one aspect of this physical environment that can give freedom to a community. In a survey based study on neighborhood satisfaction Sarah Hadavi from the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign says, “Sense of peacefulness and being able to function effectively are central to mental well-being for urban residents who are dealing with numerous distractions and sources of stress in their daily life” (Hadavi, 2016). The proximity to green spaces can make the neighborhood feel more walkable and also can serve as facilitators for social interactions that can deepen the sense of connection within a community. Being made to feel like part of the community and that you have the freedom and ability to walk safely and pleasantly in your neighborhood are two aspects of mobility that green space can help provide. On the other hand, a majority of surveys used in this study’s data collection were mail surveys with a response of about 4%. Additionally, it left out the majority of Spanish speaking populations due to not considering the language barrier. Anyone who didn’t speak enough English or didn’t have the time or energy or care to fill out the survey were excluded. These incongruencies point to the same problem it was intended to study. The unequal distribution of safe and accessible green space is dictated not by the communities most affected, but by the people with more privilege and power. Green space is often treated not as a community space, but as a source of “vacant lands expendable for private development” (Preservation Chicago, 2021). This means that while having green space in an area can bring benefits to an area, it also has its downsides, especially without community input. One of these is that it can contribute to the process of gentrification. Investment in a low-income area can bring resources and amenities and positive changes for the community in theory, but in actuality it raises their property value until they can’t afford to live there anymore. Being constantly displaced from the area that was once affordable means that they won’t have access to the same quality or quantity of resources that people with more money have access to. Gentrification causes displacement in the form of accessibility. An example of the relationship between green space, accessibility, quality, and the overall well being of a community is from the Chicago Reader article “A case of disappearing hoops in gentrifying neighborhoods" (Saldanha, 2020). Katiana, is 15 years old, black, and plays basketball with her friends. She says that it's becoming increasingly hard to find courts to play on. The courts nearby where she lives on the north side are in gentrified and predominantly white neighborhoods. Katiana and her friends are not made to feel safe or welcomed by the white residents. Often they will go to the park just to find that the rims have been removed, making the space unusable. This unequal quality and access to recreational green space leaves the kids with few choices. Their mobility is yet again restricted.

Displacement as a consequence of gentrification can also come in the form of a shift from public to private space. When a space is public, no one person has authority over what can exist in that space. It 'belongs' to the community in the sense that no one is restricted–that everyone has an equal right to the city. Green space is a source for these kinds of public spaces that have the ability to foster the feeling of belonging in a community. Community gardens are a type of green space that is perfect for this, but is complicated by gentrification. The 61st Street community garden bordering Woodlawn and Hyde Park was built by local community members and was in use for about decade until 2009, when the location and relocation of the garden became contested by the University of Chicago. The community gardeners argue that "the garden is a model of the sort of biological and human diversity the institution should be encouraging" instead of falling back into their patterns of urban renewal. They say "they've always known their tomatoes were rooted in borrowed ground—and if the university had reclaimed the lot for some higher purpose, … they would be sad but could move on" (Bayne, 2010). The pattern of a community predominant of people of color and immigrants using vacant, unvalued land to create a meaningful space for their community, only to be displaced when private developments decide the same land is now an asset, has repeated itself in many Chicago neighborhoods. Community led gardens can be a space where despite the challenges and disadvantages of life, these communities can "freely assert their cultural identities and organize" (Dukmasova, 2019). This is hard to do however when the land does not feel free and is constantly under threat of private development, "land grabs", and displacement.

The impact green spaces have on communities can be seen in the effort put in to save, maintain, or create them. The Little Village Environmental Justice Organization or LVEJO has spent 15 years fighting to remedy a decades old problem. This is a great example of how unequally distributed land use leads to disproportionate effects between communities. In the Chicago neighborhood Little Village, the predominantly latino community was disproportionately affected by the health hazards caused by the previous industrial site (U.S. EPA, 2016). This industrial site was occupied by Celotex, which manufactured asphalt products. The waste from this factory bled into the surrounding residential areas, and in 1989 residents of nearby neighborhoods reported they developed skin rashes. Tests conducted concluded that pollution from the Celotex site was carried through the neighborhoods by runoff from heavy rains. In mitigation efforts not backed by the EPA, Celotex did little besides adjust where their pollution is going (EPA 2022, "Celotex Site"). Over the next 15 years, the community advocated for the proper clean up of the land. The EPA conducted extensive studies that involved not only soil testing but also meeting with community members including that of the LVEJO and speaking to neighborhood residents. "Building on years of citizen action focused on addressing contamination concerns," (U.S. EPA 2016, 6) the EPA worked closely with the Park District and members of the Little Village community on a Proposed Plan to ensure the restoration of the contaminated land is continuously maintained. Residents of the Little Village neighborhood and LVEJO began to look at the site as an opportunity to "improve quality of life for residents in a community with limited recreation resources" (6). The land is now home to

multiple sports fields, a playground, a walking trail, a skate park, and a place to hold community events and festivals. This previously toxic 80 acres of land can now safely be used in a way that improves the quality of life and social connection in the community.

When change brought to a community is led by the community members, it is much more effective. In another project by LVEJO, they turned an area that was being used to dump factory oil waste into a community garden. They knew first hand what the needs of the community were. Green space in the form of a community garden does not act only as a means to grow plants, but a facilitator for community participation, socialization, and developing stronger social support systems. Even if an initiative isn't directly led by community members, advocating for the input of community members to be heard is still possible.

Green spaces like parks, gardens, and neighborhood tree canopy can provide ways for communities to strengthen their social support systems, increase and un-restrict mobility and right to the city, and mediate the effects of climate change. Unfortunately, the quality of green space depends on the resources a community has to maintain safe, usable, and accessible spaces. This means that the benefits of green space are not distributed equally, and disadvantaged, vulnerable, or marginalized communities are often left out. Unequal quality and quantity of green spaces are reflective of the political, social, and economic power of the people who live there. Processes of gentrification further contribute to the uneven distribution of urban green spaces by claiming publicly used land for private development and displacing communities. If green space was seen as a public right to space instead of a private asset, the benefits green space can bring to the well-being and mental health of community members could be much stronger and longer lasting.

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