

Urban design and planning features of urban open spaces: An evaluation of three case studies in downtown Richmond, BC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amidst the recent rapid change of a growing population, the community of Richmond has placed importance on open space and amenity in their developing downtown. Public places form an essential part of the urban landscape. This study critically assesses three urban open spaces based on their urban design and planning features.

This report will identify which planning and design characteristics contribute to how well-used a public space is overall as well as the satisfaction of the needs of the users of the space. Three parks from Richmond, BC were examined, two of which were considered to be healthy and well used, while the third was not as well used, or not well planned. The parks chosen for this report were Lang Park, Minoru Plaza, and City Hall Plaza.



METHOD

This report evaluated the case studies using the methodology developed by the City of Toronto Parks and Recreation Department and tested in previous studies of Vancouver parks. Five analytic tools will be employed in this study including: Direct Observation, Ranking on a Point Scale, Activity Mapping, a Park User Questionnaire Survey and, Maps and Photos. The evaluation criteria are grouped into three categories including Contextual Support, Design Framework, and Social Milieu.

Contextual Support	Design Framework	Social Milieu
Surrounding Land Uses Travel Time Microclimate Enclosure	Legibility Identity & Focus Intracacy Vegetation Seating Street Views Accessibility	100% Location Animation, Programming & Amenities Food Facilities Territories & Turf Maintenance & Management Public Accessibility

An evaluation index (see Appendix A) will be used to record many design and planning features in each space which can then be used for analysis.

ANALYSIS

Once the data was collected, the spaces were evaluated based on each individual criteria to determine how well the spaces met the criteria. Evaluation was recorded following a four point scale;



This scale will help to compare the spaces, based on whether it meets, somewhat meets or does not meet the criteria.

CRITERIA	Lang Park	Minoru Plaza	City Hall Plaza
Contextual Support			
Surrounding Land Uses			
Travel Time			N/A
Microclimate			
Enclosure			
Design Framework			
Legibility			
Identity & Focus			
Intricacy			
Vegetation			
Seating			
Street Views			
Accessibility			
Social Milieu			
100% Location			N/A
Animation, Programming & Amenities			
Food Facilities			
Territories & Turf			N/A
Maintenance & Management			
Public Accessibility			

LANG PARK CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Lang Park has complimentary surrounding land uses that provide users to the space. In particular, the Richmond Public Market is a major draw to the area. Users will visit the park after a trip to the market, and the open terrace balcony adjacent the food court of the market is an excellent addition to the park. The park provides excellent legibility, identity and focus, intricacy, vegetation, seating, street views, animation, programming and amenities, access to food facilities, enclosure, and encourages elements that make it a publicly accessible space. The few negative aspects are the occasional noise levels from the cars at the adjacent intersection and the maintenance levels. Finally, while accessibility is good within most of



the park, difficult access to the grassy areas was a drawback for users. Overall, this is a well-designed park that attracts a large number of users on weekends and weekdays. The following recommendations could help enhance a users' experience in the park encouraging them to stay longer rather than using the park as a shortcut and help improve the park to attract even more users.

Recommendations

- Improve park maintenance
- Create a more secluded area
- Provide bike racks
- Improve vegetation near some benches



MINORU PLAZA CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Minoru Plaza is a well-used park that is surrounded by supportive land uses which provide users to the space. The adjacent cultural centre is particularly important

because it provides the space with numerous weekly events that are a major draw to the plaza. Survey respondents commented on how these events encourage them to visit the plaza and create a sense of community because users of all ages attend. The park is well-designed according to most



of the evaluation criteria. Negative aspects are a feeling of being slightly exposed due to the openness of the east end of the plaza, limited food choices, and limited lighting in the plaza after dark. Overall, this is a well planned park that attracts a large number of users on both weekdays and weekends. Although this park has good design elements, the following recommendations are minor changes that could enhance the park further.

Recommendations

- Improve lighting coverage
- Improve signage
- Improve entrance at the east end of the park
- Provide a food vendor



CITY HALL PLAZA CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

City Hall plaza is in an excellent location where many potential users exist. At present however it fails to provide an environment that encourages users to visit and stay in the space. The plaza appears to be designed to provide an appropriate visual setting for the Richmond City Hall building, which won the Governor General's Medal in



Architecture in 2002. Unfortunately, the public space itself lacks an inviting identity and focus, creating an empty and diffuse feeling. It limits accessibility with an awkward pathway leading from the sidewalk to the space, limited parking, and minimal views in and out of the plaza. The inability to see in or out of the space is a major drawback. This lack of street views affects the plaza's legibility for users. In addition, the vegetation provided is lacking in variety, access to food facilities is limited, and the plaza does not encompass many features encouraging use to make it a publicly accessible space.

Positive elements that the plaza provides are plenty of seating for potential users, a well-maintained and quiet space and some planned programming. While the grassy area is only accessible by stairs the diversity of surfaces contributes to the intricacy of the space. The positive elements that currently exist in the plaza provide an excellent base for a well-used space and the negative design aspects leave room for improvements. The recommendations below are changes that could enhance the plaza and begin to attract regular users to the space.

Recommendations

- Improve signage
- Improve entrance off of No. 3 Road
- Addition of design elements to create a more interesting space
- Improve lighting coverage
- Encourage increased animation and programming
- Improve vegetation
- Improve connection between City Hall Plaza and Richmond Centre

