



Urban Landscaping as a Tool for Social Inclusion and Public Safety

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Summary

This scientific article discusses the strategic role of urban landscaping as an instrument of social inclusion and public safety. Based on interdisciplinary studies, the text analyzes how landscape planning can transform public spaces into more accessible, inclusive, and safe environments by fostering community belonging, reducing socio-spatial segregation, and discouraging criminal activity. The research combines empirical data, literature reviews, and practical examples, presenting landscaping as a systemic approach that integrates aesthetics, functionality, sustainability, and urban justice. The results indicate that well-planned landscape interventions, when combined with integrated public policies, can significantly contribute to strengthening social cohesion and preventing urban conflicts.

Keywords: Urban landscaping; Social inclusion; Public safety; Public spaces; Urban planning.

Abstract

This scientific article discusses the strategic role of urban landscaping as an instrument of social inclusion and public safety promotion. Based on interdisciplinary studies, it analyzes how landscape planning can transform public spaces into more accessible, integrative, and safe environments by fostering community belonging, reducing socio-spatial segregation, and discouraging criminal activities. The research articulates empirical data, literature reviews, and practical examples, presenting landscaping as a systemic approach that integrates aesthetics, functionality, sustainability, and urban justice. The results indicate that well-planned landscaping interventions, when associated with integrated public policies, can significantly contribute to strengthening social cohesion and preventing urban conflicts.

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1. Landscaping and the Social Function of Urban Spaces

Urban landscaping has evolved from a practice focused solely on aesthetics to a multidimensional approach that incorporates social, environmental, and functional aspects. This paradigm shift is directly related to the appreciation of public space as a place for democratic coexistence, where urban design must serve diverse audiences, promoting equity, accessibility, and inclusion. In this context, landscaping ceases to be a decorative element and becomes a tool for urban transformation and citizenship.



According to Villaça (2001), the organization of urban space reflects relations of power and inequality. Therefore, landscape design that considers the social use of space acts as a counterbalance to these inequalities by providing environments that invite coexistence, permanence, and collective appropriation. A well-maintained public space, with appropriate street furniture, strategic tree planting, and accessible signage, tends to attract diverse users and strengthen community bonds.

The notion of social function, as established in the City Statute (Law No. 10,257/2001), stipulates that public spaces should serve the common good and meet collective needs. In this sense, landscaping becomes an ally of inclusive urban planning, as it directly impacts quality of life, leisure, and urban mobility. By creating green spaces, accessible squares, and integrating passageways, landscaping contributes to spatial justice and the democratization of urban land use.

Studies by Gehl (2010) indicate that well-designed spaces encourage frequent use, promote social activities, and reduce risky behaviors. The humanization of the urban environment, promoted by landscaping, favors the use of space by families, children, the elderly, and various social groups, contributing to the diversification of audiences and natural environmental surveillance.

Urban landscaping, when aligned with the social function of spaces, also contributes to environmental preservation and sustainability. The implementation of rain gardens, green corridors, and native vegetation, in addition to improving the microclimate and soil permeability, reinforces communities' sense of belonging to their territories. This fosters the creation of networks of care and responsible use of space.

Therefore, by considering landscaping as a social function, we shift from the traditional perspective to a deeper understanding of how space influences social dynamics. It's about recognizing the landscape as an urban language that communicates values of inclusion, respect, and collectivity, creating opportunities for building a more just and safe city.

2. The Influence of Landscaping on the Perception of Public Safety

Urban landscaping plays a fundamental role in creating a sense of safety in public spaces. Well-planned environments with adequate visibility, efficient lighting, and a constant flow of people tend to be perceived as safer, which directly impacts user frequency and behavior. Landscape architecture can therefore act as a deterrent to illegal activities and promote a sense of protection for passersby.

Jane Jacobs (1961) already advocated the importance of "street watching"—the idea that well-used and occupied urban spaces naturally increase informal surveillance. Landscaping, by facilitating the diversified use of space and promoting attractive areas for different age groups and social groups, contributes to this movement toward healthy occupation. Security, in this sense, ceases to be solely a police function and becomes co-produced by the citizens who inhabit and use urban spaces.



The concept of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), developed in the 1970s and 1980s, reinforces this approach by proposing guidelines for crime prevention through environmental design. Landscape elements such as natural enclosures, well-defined entry points, planned lighting, and well-maintained vegetation are examples of strategies that integrate CPTED principles and promote greater visual control of urban space.

Research by Cozens et al. (2005) shows that poorly maintained spaces with dense vegetation, poor lighting, and signs of abandonment are more associated with crime and feelings of fear. By restoring and improving these areas, landscaping changes the symbolism of urban space and communicates values of care, the presence of public authorities, and respect for community life.

Furthermore, the aesthetics and visual identity of spaces play a significant role in the perception of belonging. Environments that reflect local culture, are clean, organized, and inviting, tend to generate greater commitment from the population to their preservation. This creates a symbiotic relationship between landscape and safety: a well-maintained space is more utilized, and the more utilized, the safer it becomes.

It's important to emphasize that landscaping doesn't eliminate structural public safety challenges, but it effectively contributes to reducing urban violence when combined with integrated policies such as public lighting, urban mobility, environmental education, and community participation. It's a supportive tool that, combined with other urban policies, can significantly transform daily life in cities.

Therefore, the integration of landscaping and security must be considered strategically, based on dialogue between urban planners, public administrators, security forces, and the community itself. Only then will it be possible to build truly safe, inclusive, and sustainable spaces.

3. Social Inclusion and Accessibility through Landscaping

Urban landscaping, when well-planned, has the potential to break down physical and symbolic barriers, promoting greater social inclusion in public spaces. By considering the needs of different social groups—such as people with disabilities, the elderly, children, the homeless, and ethnic minorities—landscape design becomes an effective tool for guaranteeing the right to the city for all citizens.

Accessibility should be understood in a broader sense, beyond the installation of ramps or tactile flooring. It also involves creating intuitive, comfortable, and culturally relevant environments that respect human diversity. Applying Universal Design principles to landscaping allows spaces to be enjoyed by all, independently and safely. According to Gonçalves (2014), accessibility should be incorporated from the initial stages of design, ensuring equality in access and permanence in spaces.



Landscaping can also serve as a bridge for social integration in areas marked by exclusion. Squares, parks, and green spaces, when well-distributed, bring communities closer together and create opportunities for intergenerational and intercultural interaction. In these areas, cultural, sporting, and educational activities find a favorable environment, promoting social exchange and reducing feelings of isolation.

Urban experiences in cities like Medellín, Colombia, demonstrate how investment in green infrastructure and inclusive street furniture has resulted in profound transformations in community self-esteem and reduced violence. These interventions demonstrate that spatial design can indeed be an agent of inclusion and urban resilience.

Furthermore, it's important to consider that inclusive public spaces broaden citizen representation in the city. The presence of diverse social groups in these spaces strengthens the sense of belonging and citizenship. The city ceases to be perceived as hostile and becomes collectively appropriated, which also leads to a reduction in social tensions.

Community involvement in the planning and maintenance of green spaces reinforces this logic of inclusion. Shared management of public spaces—through local councils, residents' associations, or community outreach—strengthens social bonds and encourages collective care for the environment.

Therefore, urban landscaping is a powerful tool for building more humane cities, capable of including and respecting differences. It acts as a mediator between physical space and social dynamics, creating more just and democratic environments.

4. The Role of Integrated Urban Planning

For landscaping to fulfill its role in social inclusion and public safety, it is essential that it be part of an integrated and participatory urban planning process. Fragmented public policies and a lack of dialogue between different sectors of government remain significant obstacles to the effectiveness of these interventions.

Integrated urban planning presupposes a systemic view of the territory, considering social, environmental, economic, and cultural variables together. Thus, landscaping ceases to be an isolated or complementary action and becomes an integral part of a city project. According to Maricato (2011), the lack of planning is one of the roots of urban inequality in Brazil, and landscaping can help reverse this situation.

Successful experiences in several cities show that intersectoral public policies are more effective in building safe and inclusive spaces. Coordination between urban planning, environment, culture, security, and social welfare departments allows landscape projects to meet real community needs and promote lasting transformations.



The development of master plans, zoning, and urban revitalization projects must include the landscape component as a structuring axis. The definition of green corridors, leisure areas, community spaces, and public facilities must be anchored in technical assessments and participatory processes with the local population. This ensures greater legitimacy for projects and strengthens their social and environmental sustainability.

The use of tools such as socio-environmental vulnerability maps, quality of life indicators, and geographic information systems (GIS) can support managers in making more assertive decisions. Based on data, it is possible to direct investments to the areas most in need and promote greater territorial equity.

It is also essential to ensure the continuity and maintenance of landscape interventions. Often, spaces are revitalized and then abandoned shortly thereafter due to a lack of proper management. This compromises the effectiveness of the initiatives and can even have the opposite effect to those intended. Therefore, including maintenance criteria, citizen participation, and monitoring in the plans is essential.

In short, integrated urban planning is the foundation for urban landscaping to cease being a privilege and become a right. When considered in an integrated manner, it becomes a powerful instrument of urban justice.

5. Landscaping, Mental Health and Quality of Urban Life

In addition to its social and safety impacts, urban landscaping also significantly influences the population's mental health and quality of life. Contact with green spaces is associated with several physical and psychological benefits, such as reduced stress, increased well-being, and improved cognitive ability.

Studies by Ulrich (1984) and Kaplan & Kaplan (1989) demonstrated that natural or naturalized environments have a restorative effect on psychological functioning. The mere presence of vegetation can improve mood, reduce anxiety symptoms, and promote the recovery of patients in healthcare facilities. These effects make landscaping a tool for promoting public health.

In urban contexts marked by noise, visual, and atmospheric pollution, green spaces serve as havens of tranquility. They offer opportunities for leisure, physical exercise, social interaction, and contemplation, all of which contribute to citizens' emotional balance. Urban parks, community gardens, and tree-lined squares are examples of spaces with therapeutic potential.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that cities ensure at least 9m² of green space per inhabitant. However, many Brazilian metropolises fail to achieve this figure, especially in urban peripheries. Urban landscaping, in this sense, can help reduce inequalities in access to nature and its benefits.



Another important point is the role of public spaces in preventing diseases related to a sedentary lifestyle and loneliness. Encouraging walking, meeting neighbors, and community life strengthens support networks and improves population health indicators. Well-designed spaces can even reduce the demand for health services.

The presence of green spaces is also linked to longer life expectancy. A longitudinal study conducted by James et al. (2016) in the United States revealed that women who lived near natural spaces had lower mortality rates from non-accidental causes. These data reinforce the importance of landscaping as a public health policy.

Therefore, incorporating landscaping strategies into urban health plans and promoting collective well-being is not just an aesthetic choice, but a preventative health measure. Green, accessible, and well-maintained public spaces can become true infrastructures of care and vitality in contemporary cities.

6. Sustainability and Urban Resilience as Foundations of Contemporary Landscaping

In the contemporary context of climate change and increasing urbanization, urban landscaping plays a strategic role in strengthening the resilience of cities. Natural elements, inserted in a planned manner into urban spaces, help mitigate the effects of heat islands, reduce flooding, and improve air quality, in addition to generating aesthetic and social benefits. Thus, urban landscaping becomes a driver of environmental sustainability, connected to public policies that aim for a more balanced city, prepared to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Nature-based solutions (NBS), as defined by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), include the creation of ecological corridors, green roofs, rain gardens, retention basins, and urban reforestation. These strategies, when applied to urban design, strengthen a city's green infrastructure and promote essential ecosystem services. According to Benedict and McMahon (2006), green infrastructure should be considered as vital as traditional infrastructure, being a central component of urban resilience.

Beyond the ecological benefits, sustainable landscaping also influences the local economy. Well-maintained green spaces enhance the surrounding area, encourage tourism, and foster creative economy ventures. This movement generates jobs, fosters local culture, and encourages community maintenance of spaces. The sponge city concept, successfully applied in urban centers in China, is an example of how to integrate landscaping, urban drainage, and social well-being.

It's important to emphasize that urban sustainability must be understood broadly, integrating social, economic, and environmental dimensions. By articulating these aspects, landscaping acts as a link between technical planning and the daily lives of urban populations. The inclusion of sustainable practices in landscape projects, such as the use of native species,



low environmental impact materials and water reuse systems reinforce this integrated approach.

Furthermore, strengthening urban resilience involves decentralizing decision-making and valuing local knowledge. Initiatives such as urban gardens, community gardens, and linear parks foster a closer relationship between citizens and the environment, encouraging more sustainable behaviors. Environmental co-responsibility thus becomes a shared social value.

With technological advancements, the scope of sustainable landscaping also expands. Geoprocessing tools, three-dimensional modeling, and environmental sensors enable more accurate diagnoses and more effective interventions. Technological innovation, when guided by ecological principles, enhances the positive impact of landscaping initiatives.

Therefore, urban sustainability and resilience are not abstract concepts, but practical foundations that should guide urban landscaping. By integrating nature, technology, and citizenship, landscaping contributes decisively to building a fairer, healthier, and more balanced urban future.

Conclusion

The analysis developed throughout this article allows us to understand urban landscaping as a multifaceted tool capable of promoting social inclusion, public safety, well-being, and sustainability in cities. By transcending the merely aesthetic dimension, landscaping begins to occupy a prominent place on urban agendas, recognized as an essential strategy for improving public space and strengthening the social fabric.

The evidence presented demonstrates that landscape planning, when guided by principles of spatial justice, accessibility, community participation, and sustainability, can significantly transform urban living. Well-designed public spaces encourage coexistence, reduce conflict, foster belonging, and act as preventative mechanisms against violence and segregation.

Furthermore, landscaping positively impacts the physical and mental health of the population, improving quality of life indicators and strengthening social support networks. Natural environments integrated into urban life function as therapeutic devices and promote a more balanced and healthy urban experience, especially in contexts of social and environmental vulnerability.

Strengthening the integration between public policies, urban planning, and landscaping is essential for the success of these interventions. Coordinated action between different sectors and public engagement are key elements for the sustainability of projects and the creation of a truly democratic city.



The landscape approach also contributes to building cities that are more resilient to the impacts of climate change and social inequality. The incorporation of nature-based solutions and the use of monitoring technologies expand the reach and effectiveness of actions, making them more adaptable and long-lasting.

Therefore, it is up to public administrators, urban planning professionals, and civil society to recognize landscaping as a strategic field for urban intervention. Its ability to integrate different knowledge and dimensions makes it a powerful platform for reinventing cities in the 21st century.

It follows, therefore, that urban landscaping should be viewed as a structuring public policy, capable of transforming the landscape into an instrument of citizenship, equity, and safety. Its potential to positively impact urban life qualifies it as one of the most promising tools in contemporary urban planning.

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