

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Evaluation of public parks based on users' perceptions: A comparative study between Tirana and Milan

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Abstract

Varied activities in parks and other urban green areas can be a promising instrument to decrease the human stress level. The monotonous modern life style offers not enough possibilities for nature activities. This study analyses the landscape characteristics and visitors preferences in two urban parks of Milan, Italy and Tirana, Albania. The preferences of landscape elements are examined using descriptive analysis for both parks. The study was conducted during July - September 2017 in Milan and December 2017 - January 2018 in Tirana. A total of 303 questionnaires were filled by park users, of which 153 in Milan and 150 in Tirana. The aim of the study is to investigate the recreational needs of urban parks users and assess the landscape components of green spaces that affect more nature visits. The data collected were analyzed through SPSS 23 package. According to the results of this analysis the ages of visitors in both parks range from 20-30 to 40-50 years old. The main reason citizens visit the park in Milan is to meet friends and to play with children, while in Tirana the main reason is for walking and for lunch. The visitors in both parks highly evaluate the presence of green areas in the park. The users in both parks are concerned about the lack of water taps, covered places and hygiene services. The study concludes with recommendations for municipality authorities in cities of Milan and Tirana regarding planning, orientation, design, management and protection of urban green spaces that will result in increased satisfaction and well-being of people.

Keywords: landscape; urban parks; questionnaires.

1. Introduction

Albania was a predominantly rural country until last decades. The dramatic changes in all aspects of life that happened after 1990 were characterized by very rapid demographic changes. As a result after 2007 the majority of Albanian population lives in urban areas. Meanwhile the main Albanian cities that attracted so many new inhabitants in a short period of time were not prepared not just in terms of housing but also in terms of general infrastructure and especially in terms of public spaces and public parks. This situation associated with other changes in population life style [17] have resulted with different public health concerns related to lack of physical activity and environment quality [11]. Varied activities in parks and other urban green areas can be a promising instrument to decrease the human stress level. The monotonous modern life style offers not enough possibilities for nature activities. The capital city of Tirana being the biggest city in the country reflects more clearly all these problems.

Physical inactivity is a growing concern, as it is correlated with many health problems, such as cardiovascular, respiratory diseases, and hormonal disorders (World Health Organization [24]). The characteristics of parks and playgrounds, such as the presence of features, amenities, aesthetics, condition, and cleanliness, have been defined as quality components of parks and playgrounds in several studies [4, 9, 10]. These characteristics can be classified into three groups: (a) features, including basketball, tennis and volleyball courts, soccer fields, play equipment, and swimming pools; (b) amenities, including benches, tables, structures providing shade, lighting,

fountains, and garbage cans; and (c) incivilities, including auditory annoyances, evidence of alcohol and substance abuse, broken glass, graffiti, and litter [1, 6, 7, 10, 13, 25].

There are several studies that have discovered a good association between features, amenities, and incivilities of parks and playgrounds with their use and the physical activity of park visitors of all ages. They show that multiple features of parks and playgrounds increase the number of visitors and the frequency of visits, their use, and related physical activity in children [2, 3, 4, 8, 12]. According to some studies, facilities and amenities such as water features and shaded areas, play equipment such as swings, and cleanliness are among the primary reasons for parents to visit parks and playgrounds [14, 15, 16, 23].

Studies of users' preferences in general and especially related to public spaces and public parks are relatively new to Albania [18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. The aim of this paper is the evaluation of public parks of Tirana based on users' perceptions and preparation of recommendations to park managers, planners and designers of Tirana Municipality on how to improve the actual situation. This is also a comparative study between Tirana and Milan. It analyses the landscape characteristics and visitors preferences in two urban parks of Milan, Italy and Tirana, Albania. This comparison between two different situations can help in better understanding the results taken and the trends in using public parks by different strata of population. The preferences of landscape elements are examined using descriptive analysis for both parks. The study concludes with recommendations for municipality authorities in cities of Milan and Tirana regarding planning, orientation, design, management and protection of urban green spaces that will result in increased satisfaction and well-being of people.

2. Material and Methods

The study was conducted during July - September 2017 in Milan and December 2017 - January 2018 in Tirana. A total of 303 questionnaires were filled by park users, of which 153 in Milan and 150 in Tirana. The questionnaires help to investigate the recreational needs of urban parks users and assess the landscape components of green spaces that affect more nature visits. Two playgrounds were the focus of this study, one of each park; the new play ground of artificial Lake Park in Tirana and Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan. The two playgrounds were selected based on the selection criteria suggested by Bent Flyvbjerg [7]. Both play grounds were in good condition.

A questionnaire survey was applied to visitors of the two parks included in this study. The method used was on-site interview filled by users, visitors of the park. The visitors were chosen randomly in different areas of each park play ground aiming to identify the preferences of participants and how this is reflected in their attitude to the parks. Questionnaires were carried out during weekdays and weekends at different time of day, not on rainy or very windy days. The whole questionnaire took 15-20 min to complete. The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions structured according to three overall themes: (1) times of coming and spent in the park, motive of visits, what is liked in the park and what is missing; (2) safe and security of the park, (3) demographics (the information on participants profile such as gender, age, profession and distance from the park). This paper is focused in first and third theme. For different questions a Likert scale from 1 to 5 is used (1-not at all, 5 - very much). The data collected were analyzed through SPSS 23 package. The preferences of landscape elements are examined using descriptive analysis for both parks.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Participants profile

Table 1 shows the descriptive analysis of the profile of interviewed people. It can be seen that females represent about 60 % of interviewed people in both parks. According to the results of analysis, most of participants belong to age groups from 20 to 50 years old in both parks. There are more respondents belonging to the youngest age group (18-20) in Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan compared to the respondents from the artificial lake park in Tirana, while the oldest group is larger in Tirana. The level of education is relatively high in both parks but it is slightly higher in Milan compared to Tirana. In terms of employment there is a high diversity of participants in both parks, so we have Free Professionals, Craftsmen / Self Employed/ Small Trader, Workers, Students, Executives, Public employees and teachers, Householders, Pensioners, and Unemployed. The results

show that in Milan the highest rates of visitors are free professionals and students, while in Tirana they are from public employees, teachers and students. There is a higher rate of the categories Craftsman / Self Employed / Small Trader, unemployed persons and pensioners in Tirana compared to Milan.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Item		Milan (%)	Tirana (%)
Gender	Female	59.5	60.9
	Male	40.5	38.4
Age	18-20	19	7.2
	30-40	24.8	34.1
	30-40	26.8	24.6
	40-50	21.6	15.9
	50-60	3.9	6.5
	>60	3.9	11.6
Education	Below bachelor level	3.9	29.7
	Bachelor level or more	96.1	70.3
Profession	Free Professional	20.9	11.6
	Craftsman / Self Employed / Small Trader	2.6	9.4
	Worker	5.2	3.6
	Student	29.4	18.8
	Looking for employment.	5.2	7.2
	Executive/functionary	3.9	5.1
	Public Employees / teachers	21.6	21.7
	Household	4.6	5.1
	Pensioner	3.3	10.9
	Other	3.3	6.6

3.2. Frequency of visits and time of visits

The frequency of visit is analyzed by analyzing the answers to the question “How many times a week, do you come here?”. Table 2 shows a summary of these answers. The park in Milan was visited mainly “Sometimes” and “more than 4 times” during the week, while in Tirana the users visit the park more “Sometimes”, “1-2 times” and “during the weekend”. More than 60% of the visitors in Milan come to the park under this study time after time and more than 4 times during the week days and just 2.6% visit the park during weekend. The situation is very different in Tirana where the park during weekend is visited by 22.6% of respondents.

Table 2. Frequency of visits

Frequency of visits	Milan	Tirana
Sometimes	37.3	23.7
1 – 2 times	18.3	23.7
3 – 4 times	15.7	10.8
More 4 times	26.1	19.4
Weekend	2.6	22.6
Total	100.0	100.0

The table 3. shows the results regarding the time of the day which is preferred for the visit. The results present a quite different situation between Milan and Tirana. In Milan the park is visited mainly during afternoon and evening time, while in Tirana the most preferred time of visits is late morning. A significant number of visitors come to the Milan Park during night but there are no night park visitors in Tirana.

Table 3. Time of the visit

Time of visit	Milan	Tirana
Early morning	8%	28%
Late morning	16%	48%
Lunch break	5%	5%
Afternoon	70%	24%
Evening	41%	11%
Night	17%	0%

Table 4. shows how long the visitors stay in park. In both parks most of visitors stay more than one hour. Comparing Milan and Tirana it seems that there is a tendency of Tirana visitors to stay longer in the park. May be this is related to the fact that Tirana visitors are in large numbers during weekends.

Table 4. Length of stay

How long is the visit?	Milan	Tirana
5 minutes	9.2	3.2
5-30 minutes	26.1	17.2
30-60 minutes	28.1	35.5
>60 minutes	36.6	44.1

3.3. Motivation of park visits

Table 5. shows the main reasons citizens visit the parks analyzed in this study. Regarding this issue, the main motives for visiting parks in Milan are to play with children, to meet friends and to stay in touch with nature, while in Tirana the main reasons are for walking, to be alone and for lunch. Just a few people use the park area of Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan to do sport, to be alone, to study and for lunch. None of the respondents use the park the area of artificial lake park in Tirana for sunbathing and just a few of them use it to walk the dog, to meet friends and to stay in contact with nature

Table 5. Motivation of citizens to go to parks

Motives of the visit	Milan	Tirana
To read	12%	8%
To walk	12%	58%
To walk the dog	16%	2%
To do sports	7%	15%
To meet friends	39%	5%
To socialize	14%	6%
To be alone	5%	34%
To play with children	41%	15%
For sunbathing	7%	0%
To study	6%	4%
To eat	7%	32%
To stay in touch with nature	18%	4%

3.4. Park problems

Park problems in this study are analyzed as security problems and as missing park features, components or services. Just the last one is presented in this paper. Table 6 shows that visitors have different opinions to the question “What is missing in the park?”

Visitors in Milan are highly concerned about sport equipments, covered places and toilets. Park users in Tirana are also concerned about the lack of covered places and hygiene services but compared to Milan park users they are more worried about lack of dog area, subdivision of areas for children to play, dogs area water taps, fountains, tables for eating, spaces for outdoor lessons and meetings.

Milan visitors differentiate from Tirana visitors on their concern for activities for citizens connected to the green and maintenance of the green, varied vegetation for colors and flavor sport equipments, organization of events.

It seems that park users in Milan and Tirana have similar opinions regarding the need for more lighting, more trash bins, fencing for night-time closing, maintenance of furniture, need for benches and tables for eating.

Park users in Milan are less concerned about play grounds for children, dog area, subdivision of areas and spaces for outdoor lessons and meetings. This means that these park features are not missing in this park.

Tirana park users are less concerned for playground for children and organization of events. Normally this is related to the fact that the area where the questionnaires were filled is children’s playground.

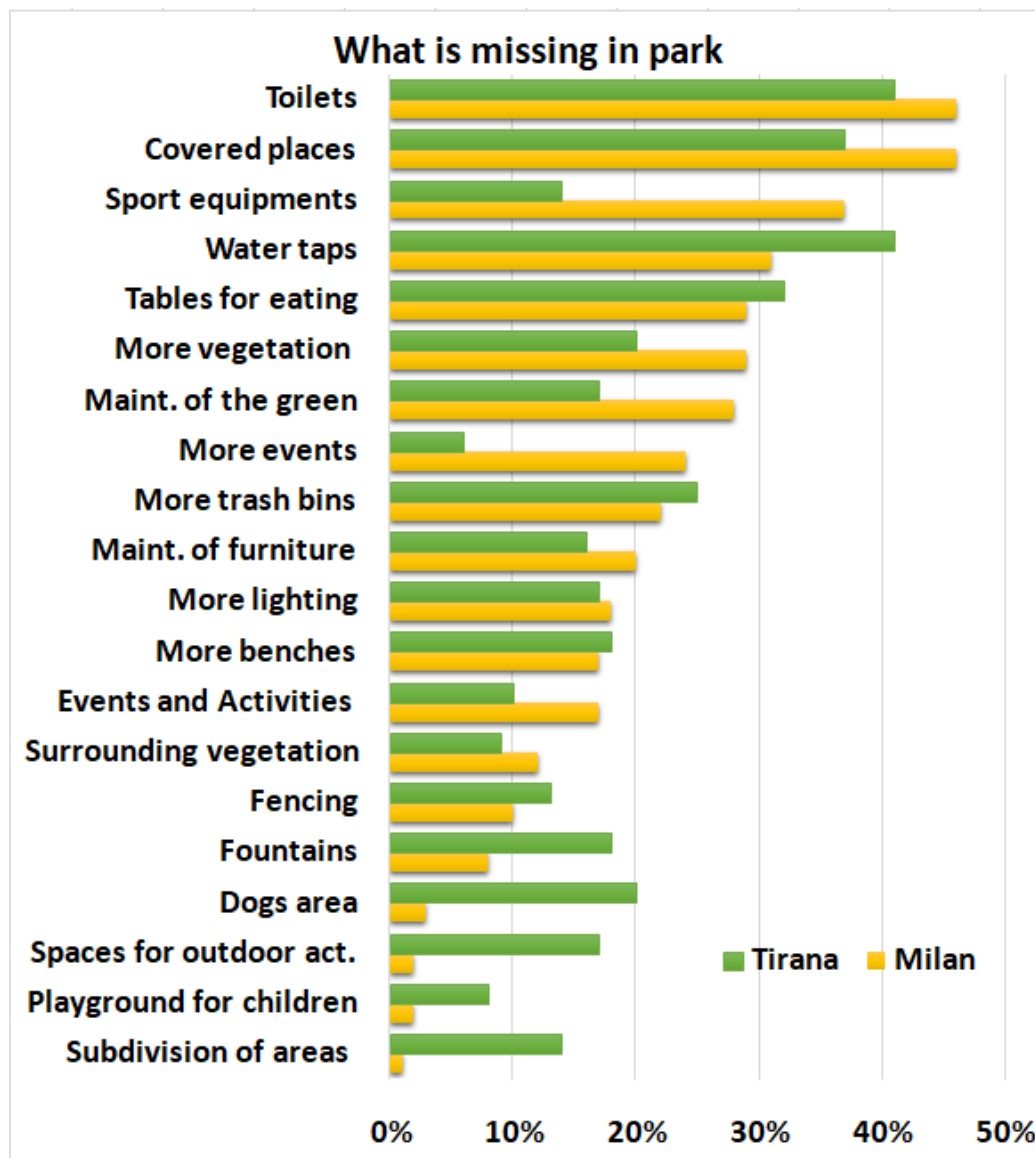


Figure 1. What is missing in Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan and in the Artificial Lake Park in Tirana.

4. Conclusions

Two parks, Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan and the Artificial Lake Park in Tirana are analyzed in this study regarding their evaluation based on users' perceptions. For this purpose more than 300 questionnaires are filled and analyzed. Respondents in both parks are rather well-educated. The age of the interviewed people range from 18 to over 60 but most of them are between 20 and 50 years old. Most of them visit the respective parks more than 4 times in a week and they stay more than 30 – 60 minutes. The main reason citizens visit the park in Milan is to meet friends and to play with children, while in Tirana the main reason is for walking and for lunch.

Visitors of Parco Don Giussani ex Parco Solari in Milan are highly concerned about sport equipments, covered places and toilets. Artificial Lake Park users in Tirana are also concerned about the lack of covered places and hygiene services but compared to Milan park users they are more worried about lack of dog area, subdivision of areas for children to play, dogs area water taps, fountains, tables for eating, spaces for outdoor lessons and meetings. All these aspects should be addressed by the respective municipal agencies in order to improve the situation.

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