

The Impact of Public Spaces on Social Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how the quality, design, and maintenance of public spaces influence social interaction and community life. The study focuses on understanding which spatial and environmental factors motivate people to use public areas and engage with others. Data was collected through an online questionnaire distributed among residents of different European cities, including Sarajevo, Graz, Vienna, Brussels, and others, with a total of 41 participants. The results show that people who live in cities with clean, well-maintained, and accessible public spaces tend to spend more time outdoors and participate more actively in social interactions. On the other hand, in environments that are neglected, poorly lit, or lacking in facilities, people use public spaces mainly for short visits or as transit zones, with limited social contact. The findings align with the theories of Jacobs, Whyte, Gehl, and Carmona, confirming that the physical and managerial quality of public spaces directly shapes human behavior. The research concludes that public spaces act as a foundation for everyday social life, and that investing in their maintenance, comfort, and inclusivity strengthens both social cohesion and the overall quality of urban life.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of public spaces is reflected in the fact that they are studied not only through the field of architecture, but also through sociology and urban studies. Throughout history, the form of public spaces has always been shaped by the needs and lifestyles of people. Over the decades, these spaces began to develop their own characteristics, functions, and design principles to better respond to the needs of their users. Public spaces gradually became an essential part of urban identity and are now defined as open and accessible areas such as parks, squares, and pedestrian streets where people can meet, interact, and participate in community life (Carmona et al., 2010). But what is important here, that they play a vital role not only in architecture and creating image of a city, but also in shaping social behavior.

The way that people experience and use public spaces depends on multiple factors, such as design, accessibility, safety, comfort, etc. As Mehta (2014) points out, the design of streets and urban edges strongly shapes the way people perceive safety, belonging, and opportunities for social interaction. With the growth of the cities and constant changes of lifestyles, the social value of public space is often underestimated. Madanipour (2018) emphasizes that rapid urban transformation often leads to the marginalization of public spaces and a decline in their social function. Many public areas are physically well formed but socially inactive. In areas like this often the lack of design features affects the atmosphere that encourages human interaction. With that we come to a question under what conditions do public spaces encourage social interaction and how can their design strengthen community connections?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban theorist Jane Jacobs (1961) was one of the first to emphasize the connection between street life and community safety in a book “Death and Life of Great American Cities”. The concept of “eyes on the street” illustrated how everyday activity and human presence in public spaces contribute to a safer and more connected urban environment. Author viewed public life as an indicator of a healthy city, in which people participate in collective life. Jacobs focused on how parks, sidewalks, and streets function as places where people gather and interact in everyday life.

Following this, William H. Whyte (1980) conducted detailed observational research on how people behave in public areas. In his work, “The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces”, he wrote about the influence of sunlight, seating and accessibility on social interactions. Whyte’s observations proved that the physical design of a space and its furnishing can determine whether people choose to remain and engage within it or simply pass through.

These ideas were expanded by scholar Jan Gehl (2011) through his categorization of outdoor activities into necessary, optional and social ones. According to Gehl, when environments are clean, inviting, and

comfortable, people are more likely to engage in optional and social activities such as talking, watching, playing or participating in shared experiences. In other words, design directly shapes social life. Similar to it, Mehta (2014) observed that the design of street edges, building facades, and pedestrian environments strongly affects people's perceptions of safety, belonging, and social comfort.

In modern cities, the social value of public spaces is often overlooked due to dynamic urban development and changing lifestyles. Madanipour (2018) says that while physical spaces continue to be built, many have lost their ability to serve as true environments for social interaction. On the other hand, Dines and Vermeulen (2020) state that inclusive and well-designed public spaces can strengthen social unity, promoting interactions among people of different backgrounds and enhancing public participation.

Similarly, recent studies emphasize that public spaces serve as crucial settings for social unity, community interaction, and overall urban well-being. According to *The Role of Public Spaces in Promoting Social Interactions* (2020), the physical design, accessibility, and perceived safety of these areas strongly influence how people communicate, connect, and develop social bonds. Well-designed public environments not only satisfy people's physical needs but also fulfill their psychological and emotional needs by creating opportunities for interaction, relaxation, and participation in community life.

Building on this perspective, Carmona (2019) reconsiders the role of contemporary public spaces in fostering social engagement. He argues that the design, management, and inclusivity of modern urban areas play a big role in promoting interaction and a shared sense of belonging among users. Together, these studies highlight that high quality, inclusive, and human centered design can transform public spaces into environments that strengthen community ties and enhance collective well-being.

In addition to their aesthetic and practical purposes, public spaces play a crucial role as facilitators of social connection and community life. Oldenburg (1999) described these as essential "third places" that hold informal interactions and friendships outside of structured settings. Similarly, Gehl (2011) and Mehta (2014) highlight that when public areas are welcoming, well-maintained, and designed on a human scale, they encourage spontaneous conversations and social bonding. These areas give people a feeling of belonging, which develops a sense of community and a common urban culture. Therefore, a city's general social health is reflected in the quantity and level of social interactions that take place in public areas.

Although previous research provides strong theoretical foundations for understanding how design affects social behavior, most studies have focused on large cities. Less attention has been paid to everyday experiences of people in smaller places. This study aims to investigate how design quality, comfort, accessibility, and social acceptance influence people's use of public spaces across different urban environments

III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Building upon theoretical framework that has been written above, this research aims to explore the relationship between the quality of public spaces and the level of social interaction they encourage. This paper is focused on how the perception of design, comfort and safety directly affects people's willingness to engage and connect with others. We will try to understand how public space characteristics can encourage individuals to spend more time outdoors, engaging in community and building stronger social connections. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate what are the main factors that influence human behavior and social interaction in public spaces. Then, to explore the ways in which perceptions of comfort, accessibility, and safety shape the level of social interaction and the ways in which the design and atmosphere of public spaces motivate people to spend time and engage with others.

This research will adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data collected through an online survey with qualitative insights based on personal observations and experiences.

The study primarily uses a survey strategy to collect data on people's experiences, perceptions, and habits regarding the use of public spaces. An online survey was conducted among people living in different cities to collect diverse perspectives on how they use and experience public spaces. The survey was made online using Google Forms, targeting individuals living in different countries and social environment. This approach enables the collection of diverse perspectives and ensures that responses are not limited to a single geographic or cultural context. Respondents were asked to reflect on how often they use public spaces, what factors motivate them to do so, and what discourages them from spending time in such environments.

In addition to the survey, the research includes qualitative observations collected over an extended period. Through travels and life in different countries observations were made on how different people interact within parks, squares, and pedestrian zones. In some cities, public spaces are used actively and serve as natural meeting points, while in others, they remain largely empty even though they have good qualities. These observations led to a central question: What determines whether people actively use public spaces? Is it the design and layout, the presence of urban furniture, or broader social and cultural factors that make such spaces feel inviting and acceptable for interaction?

Through this question, the study seeks to uncover the key elements that make public spaces not only functional but also socially alive. What factors shape them into environments where people genuinely connect, spend their time and engage with other parts of community. This study is descriptive and explanatory in nature and it does not aim to test a specific hypothesis, but to explore relationships between spatial design and social behavior.

The choice of a mixed-methods approach provides both breadth and depth: the survey offers a quantitative overview of trends and perceptions, while personal observations provide qualitative context that helps explain why people behave the way they do in different environments.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This research aimed to understand how the quality, design, and maintenance of public spaces influence people’s social behaviour and the frequency of social interactions. This research collected data from 41 participants through an online questionnaire distributed among people living in various European cities. The largest number of respondents came from Sarajevo and Graz, while additional participants were located in cities such as Vienna, Brussels, Cluj-Napoca, Rijeka, Travnik, Katowice, Blaj, Moss, Rădăuți, Bârlad, Chania, and others. The sample therefore represents a diverse group of urban environments, ranging from small and developing cities to larger, well-established ones.

4.1 Frequency and Purpose of Use

The results show that most participants use public spaces frequently. A total of 63% stated that they visit public spaces daily or several times a week, while a smaller number reported visiting once a week or rarely. This indicates that public areas such as parks, pedestrian streets, and squares are an important part of everyday routines for most people. When it comes to the duration of stay, the most common categories were “30–60 minutes” and “less than 30 minutes”, while a smaller portion reported spending 1–2 hours or more. These results suggest that public spaces are mostly used for short to medium stays, often connected with daily activities such as walking, relaxing, or socializing, rather than for extended leisure.

How often do you visit public spaces (parks, squares, pedestrian zones)?
41 responses

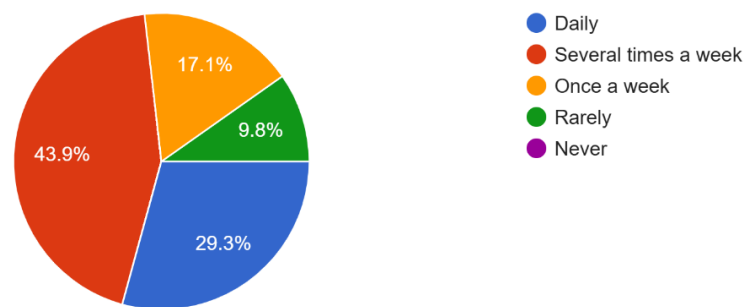


Figure 1: The Results of the questionnaire

4.2 Main Purpose of Use

Respondents most often use public spaces to walk, exercise, enjoy nature, relax alone, or meet and socialize with others. Many participants also reported that they pass through public areas on their way somewhere, while a smaller group mentioned attending community or cultural events. This shows that public spaces are not only used as transit zones, but also as places of recreation and interaction where people rest, connect, or simply observe everyday life.

What is your main reason for visiting public spaces? (Choose up to 2)

41 responses

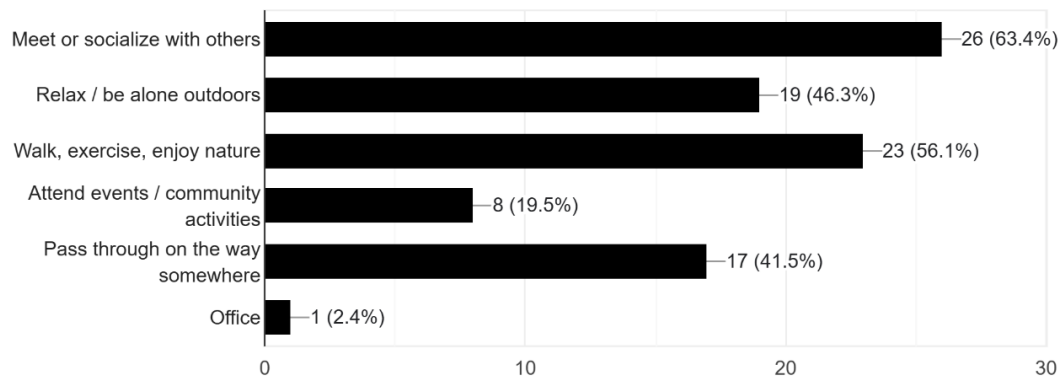


Figure 2: The Results of the questionnaire

4.3 Perception of Quality and Design

In evaluating the physical and environmental aspects, the results show noticeable variation between cities but also reveal consistent patterns. Across the sample, the highest-rated factors were greenery and natural elements (trees, plants, water features), then accessibility and location as well as lighting and safety. Meanwhile, cleanliness, maintenance, and the availability of comfortable seating often received moderate scores, indicating that while these elements exist, they are not always satisfactory. Many respondents mentioned that dirty or poorly maintained spaces discourage longer stays and make public areas less attractive for social interaction.

4.4 Motivators and Improvements

When asked what would motivate them to spend more time outdoors or engage in social activities, respondents most frequently emphasized the importance of comfortable and welcoming environments. Many noted that having more seating areas with benches, shade, or small tables would make public spaces more enjoyable and encourage longer stays. Cleanliness and greenery were also mentioned as essential factors, as people tend to feel more relaxed and willing to interact in spaces that are visually appealing and well maintained. Improved lighting and a stronger sense of safety were frequently highlighted as necessary conditions for feeling comfortable in public areas, especially during the evening hours. In addition, participants expressed a desire for organized community or cultural events, as well as the presence of small cafés or informal gathering spots that naturally bring people together. Overall, these responses suggest that people value both physical comfort and social opportunities, and that well-designed, active, and inclusive public spaces encourage individuals not only to spend more time outdoors but also to engage with others and build meaningful social connections.

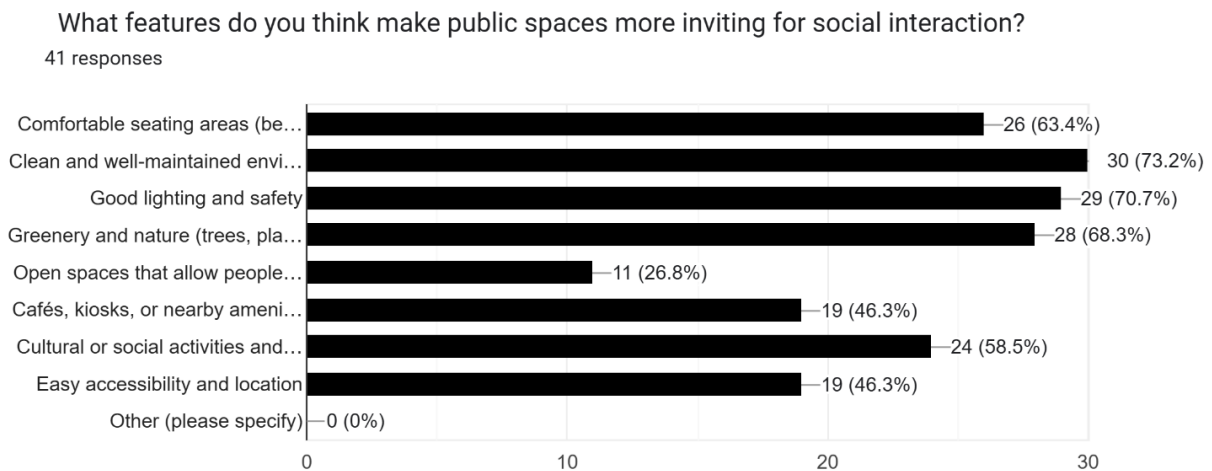


Figure 3: The Results of the questionnaire

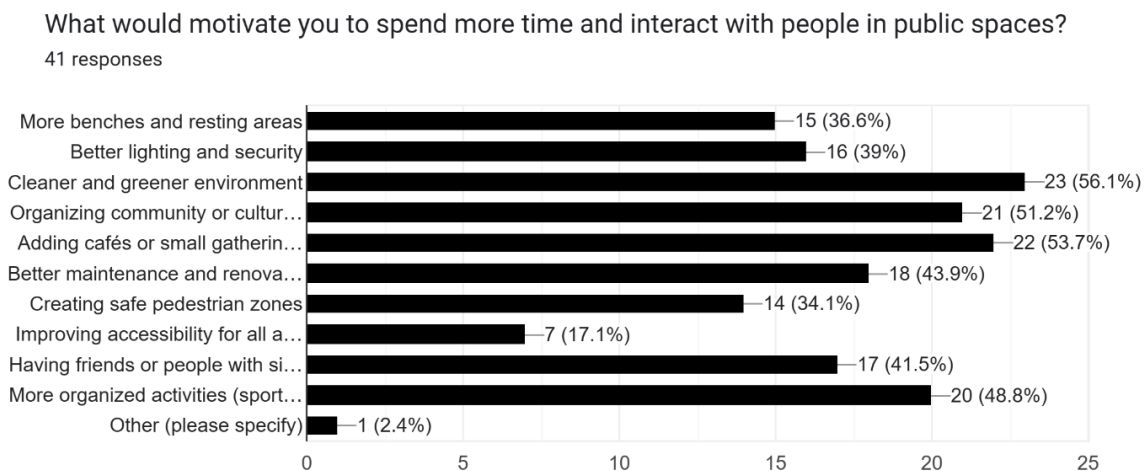


Figure 4: The Results of the questionnaire

4.5 Social Interaction and Sense of Belonging

Most participants agree that the presence of high-quality public spaces positively affects how often they interact with others. While some respondents believe that their cities already provide enough opportunities for meeting and communication, a large portion answered “some, but not enough” or “very few”. This implies that there is a general awareness of the social importance of public spaces, but also recognition that their current condition and design often limit their potential. Furthermore, when asked whether they would like to see more places that encourage community interaction, the vast majority answered “definitely yes”, confirming the strong social need for better-designed and better-maintained environments.

Do you feel that your city provides enough opportunities for social interaction in public spaces?

41 responses

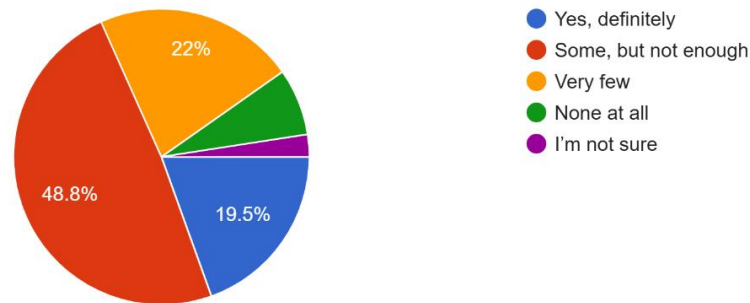


Figure 5: The Results of the questionnaire

Would you like to have more public spaces that encourage socializing and community activities?

41 responses

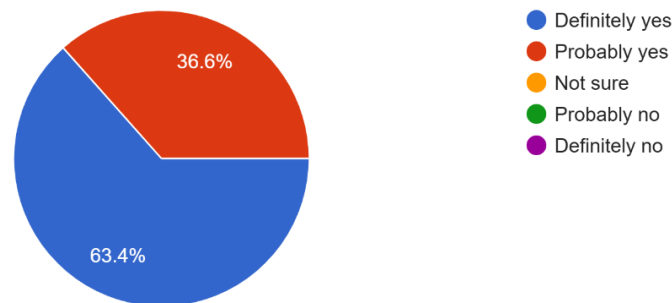


Figure 6: The Results of the questionnaire

4.6 Patterns and Observations

Authors' observations over time, together with the survey results, show a clear connection between the quality of public spaces and the extent of social interaction that occurs within them. Participants who live in cities where public spaces are described as clean, green, well-maintained, and easily accessible tend to spend more time outdoors and use these places for various social purposes, such as meeting friends, attending events, or simply relaxing among others. For instance, several respondents from cities such as Graz or Vienna noted that they visit public spaces daily or several times a week and often stay between 30 minutes and two hours. These individuals associate their outdoor routines with social interaction, highlighting that the pleasant environment, safety, and availability of urban elements naturally encourage people to spend time together, relax, and communicate.

In contrast, respondents who live in cities with fewer or poorly maintained public areas expressed different habits. Many of them visit such spaces less frequently, often once a week or rarely, and tend to spend shorter periods of time there, typically under 30 minutes. Their responses often describe public areas as dirty, poorly equipped, or lacking in organization, which directly affects their willingness to stay and engage with others. For example, participants who indicated that their cities have "very few" public spaces or that they are not clean enough also reported that they mostly pass through these areas or use them alone, rather than for socializing. In other words, when physical conditions are poor, public spaces lose their social function and become primarily transit corridors rather than meeting points.

At the same time, participants from cities with a moderate level of quality (where some parks or squares exist but are not consistently maintained) tend to occupy an intermediate position. They often visit public spaces several times a week, usually for short walks, exercise, or relaxation, but social interaction remains limited or situational. These users emphasized that they would participate more in social life if spaces were cleaner, better equipped, and supported by community events such as open-air markets, concerts, or sports activities.

These cross-city patterns suggest that the design and maintenance of public spaces directly shape both the quantity and quality of social life within them. In well-managed cities, social interactions in parks occur almost naturally, without the need for formal organization. People are willing to stay longer, engage with strangers, and use these areas as extensions of their living space. In contrast, where maintenance and comfort are lacking, the same spaces are reduced to their most basic use, and that is walking through or briefly resting with minimal social engagement. This supports the idea that the physical environment both shapes and encourages how people behave and interact with each other: when the stage is well designed and cared for, people perform social life openly; when it is neglected, social connection quietly disappears.

Table 1: Synthesis of Analysis

City (Respondent)	Frequency of use	Average stay duration	Perceived quality of space	Main comments / improvements suggested	Observed social behavior
Graz, Austria (10/10/2025 00:03:07)	Once a week	30–60 min	High (Clean, safe, green, accessible)	Wants more events and cafés	Uses space regularly to relax; comfortable environment encourages longer stays
Graz (10/23/2025 15:30:29)	Daily	30–60 min	Very high (4–5 on all criteria)	Only minor improvements (maintenance, lighting)	Spends time daily, feels safe and socially active
Brussels (10/14/2025 14:20:07)	Several times a week	1–2 h	High (Clean, green, safe, open)	Requests for more benches and cultural events	Stays long and participates in social life
Sarajevo (10/26/2025 13:02:15)	Rarely	< 30 min	Low (dirty, limited lighting)	Wants cafés, better pedestrian zones	Uses spaces only for passing through; low interaction
Sarajevo (10/11/2025 11:29:38)	Once a week	< 30 min	Low (2–3)	Requests for more activities and cafés	Short visits, minimal social engagement
Rădăuți, Romania (10/14/2025 14:48:29)	Several times a week	1–2 h	Low (1–3)	Requests for more cultural events and safety	Visits often but interacts little; uses space individually
Cluj-Napoca (10/14/2025 14:09:29)	Once a week	1–2 h	Moderate (3–4)	Requests better maintenance and accessibility	Participates occasionally; potential for higher use
Rijeka, Croatia (10/14/2025 15:40:59)	Several times a week	< 30 min	Moderate to high (3–5)	Wants cleaner environment and organized activities	Uses space often but for short periods; social potential underused
Sarajevo (10/10/2025 14:06:41)	Several times a week	< 30 min	Moderate (2–4)	Suggests more events and better maintenance	Frequent visits but short stays; low spontaneous interaction

Source: Author’s survey (2025)

4.7 Author’s observations

During years of living and travelling through different European cities, I have personally observed how the quality and design of public spaces shape people’s everyday behavior. In this part, I will describe the cities where I have lived and the differences, I noticed in how people use public areas. In cities like Graz, parks and pedestrian streets are alive throughout the day; people stop to talk, have picnicks in the parks inside of city, children play, people read their books and so on. These spaces are clean, well-lit, and integrated into daily routines, making them natural points of connection. In contrast, in Sarajevo or other cities where public areas are not as well maintained or popular, people tend to walk quickly through them, often using parks only for brief relaxation, to sit while waiting to go somewhere else. The difference is not just in physical design but also in the culture of public space use. I think where spaces are inviting and safe, social interaction becomes spontaneous and where they are neglected, people tend to use them just as passage. These observations align with the survey findings, reinforcing how the physical and social quality of space directly influence participation in public life.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 The Relationship Between Design and Social Interaction

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that the quality, design, and maintenance of public spaces have a strong influence on how people use them and how social interactions occur within them. Both survey responses and personal observations indicate that well-designed and properly maintained public environments naturally attract people, encourage them to stay longer, and create opportunities for informal encounters. But spaces that are poorly maintained, dirty, or perceived as unsafe tend to be underused or function mainly as transit areas, where social interaction is minimal.

5.2 Theoretical Connections

These results are closely aligned with the ideas of Jane Jacobs (1961), who argued that everyday street life and visible human presence are essential for building trust and safety in urban areas. Her concept of “eyes on the street” suggests that public spaces thrive when people feel comfortable and secure enough to occupy them, which in turn promotes natural surveillance and a sense of community. The recurring requests from survey participants for better lighting and a stronger feeling of safety directly reflect Jacobs’s theory. In places where respondents reported good lighting, active cafés, and regular pedestrian movement, they also indicated higher levels of comfort and social activity.

Similarly, William H. Whyte (1980) emphasized the importance of micro-design elements such as seating, shade, and amenities in shaping people's behavior in public spaces. According to his observations, people stay longer and interact more when physical comfort is provided. The results of this research strongly support that argument: across all cities, comfortable seating areas and shaded places were among the most frequently mentioned motivators for spending more time outdoors. Participants clearly associate physical comfort with social engagement, confirming Whyte's conclusion that even small design details can determine whether people remain in space or simply pass through.

The findings also correspond closely with Jan Gehl's (2011) categorization of outdoor activities into necessary, optional, and social. Gehl argued that people first come to public spaces for necessary activities, such as commuting or shopping, but will only engage in optional and social activities if the environment is pleasant and welcoming. In this study, respondents who described their public spaces as clean, green, and safe reported more frequent and longer stays, often mentioning that they meet friends or relax around others. In contrast, participants who viewed their surroundings as dirty or unsafe tended to use them briefly and alone. This pattern supports Gehl's argument that social life in cities emerges when optional activities become desirable and that this depends primarily on the quality of the physical setting.

Furthermore, Carmona (2019) highlights that successful public spaces rely not only on good design but also on management, maintenance, and inclusivity. This research echoes his perspective: participants did not necessarily demand large-scale reconstruction, but rather better care, regular cleaning, and more organized community activities. Many respondents specifically mentioned that organizing events or improving maintenance would make them more likely to socialize. This suggests that the social potential of public spaces often depends less on physical form and more on how they are managed and animated over time.

The importance of inclusivity and social cohesion is also emphasized by Dines and Vermeulen (2020), who argue that public spaces play a central role in fostering a sense of belonging among urban residents. The survey results support this view: participants from different backgrounds repeatedly expressed the desire for places that feel welcoming and connected to their community. The call for cleaner, safer, and more active public areas can therefore be interpreted not just as a demand for better design, but as a search for a stronger sense of belonging and social connection.

5.3 Implications for Urban Design and Everyday Life

Taken together, these findings show that the social role of public spaces is shaped by three connected factors:

- Physical quality- the comfort, cleanliness, and design of the space
- Perceived safety and inclusivity- whether people feel secure and welcome
- Social programming and management- how the space is maintained and activated over time

When these elements are present, parks and such areas become shared social spaces where people interact naturally and strengthen communities. When one or more are missing, even the most visually appealing spaces can lose their vitality and social purpose.

Overall, the discussion confirms the broader conclusion that the quality of public space directly influences the quality of urban life. Cities that invest in accessible, well-maintained, and inclusive public environments are not only improving their appearance but also enhancing the everyday social bonds that make urban life better.

The findings of this research carry important implications for urban design and everyday urban life. They reveal that public spaces are not only architectural compositions but also social infrastructures that shape people's sense of community, safety, and belonging. A clean and inclusive environment signals that citizens are valued and respected, which encourages them to use public areas with confidence and pride.

From an architectural and planning perspective, this means that the role of designers extends beyond aesthetics. It basically includes long-term maintenance, management, and social programming. As Carmona (2019) and Gehl (2011) emphasize, the success of a public space depends on how it functions in people's everyday lives. Architects and urban planners should adopt a human-centred approach that focuses on comfort, accessibility, and inclusivity. The goal is not to design monumental spaces, but places that people will actually use, and that means spaces that invite participation rather than dictate formality.

The results also show that community participation plays a key role in creating successful public environments. Respondents expressed interest in cultural events, markets, and small gatherings, suggesting that citizens want to co-create the public life of their cities. Municipalities should therefore involve local communities in planning and maintaining these areas through participatory workshops, seasonal programs, and volunteer initiatives. Such collaboration can transform maintenance from a municipal duty into a shared civic responsibility.

5.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how the quality and design of public spaces influence social interactions and everyday behavior in urban environments. Through the combination of an online survey with 41

participants from different European cities and personal observations, the study revealed a consistent pattern: public spaces that are clean, comfortable, safe, and well-maintained strongly encourage social interaction and community life, while those that are neglected or poorly equipped tend to be used only for passing through or short, individual stays.

The results confirmed that physical design and management directly shape human behaviour. Participants living in cities with well-organized and pleasant public areas, where seating, greenery, and safety are prioritized, reported visiting them daily or several times a week, often spending between 30 minutes and two hours there. These spaces are not only functional but also serve as social platforms where people meet, talk, and participate in community life. In contrast, respondents from cities with fewer or lower-quality public spaces described shorter visits, limited interaction, and a strong desire for improvement. They expressed the need for better lighting, cleaner environments, more benches and shaded areas, and organized events, emphasizing that these elements would make them feel more connected and more likely to engage socially.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings align with the ideas of Jacobs, Whyte, Gehl, Carmona, and Dines & Vermeulen, all of whom underline the relationship between spatial quality and social life. The study demonstrates that creating active and inclusive public spaces does not depend solely on architectural form, but also on how spaces are maintained, managed, and socially activated. Design may attract people initially, but ongoing care and programming keep them engaged.

Based on the results and comparative insights, some recommendations can be made:

1. Prioritize cleanliness and maintenance- regular cleaning, greenery care, and infrastructure repairs are essential to make people feel welcome and safe.
2. Improve comfort and accessibility- adding more benches, shaded areas, and accessible paths can extend stay-time and attract a wider range of users, including the elderly and families.
3. Enhance safety and lighting- well-lit spaces promote evening use and increase people's sense of security, which directly encourages social presence.
4. Support community and cultural programming- organizing local events, markets, and cultural performances can strengthen the sense of belonging and make public spaces socially vibrant.
5. Encourage mixed-use and social utilities- integrating small cafes, kiosks, and playgrounds can create "everyday meeting points" that sustain constant public life.
6. Promote inclusive design- including citizens in the design and care of public spaces helps make them more suited to local needs and builds a shared sense of responsibility.

If these strategies are applied, cities can transform their parks, squares, and pedestrian areas into living social environments that enhance both individual well-being and community cohesion. Ultimately, this study concludes that the quality of public space is inseparable from the quality of urban life. A city that invests in its public spaces is really investing in its people, creating places not just for walking or relaxing, but for real human connection.

Beyond the specific findings of this study, the research process itself has provided valuable personal insights into how people relate to their environment. Having lived in and observed various cities, I realized that public spaces are often a reflection of a city's culture, organization, and priorities. In cities where public areas are respected and cared for, residents feel a stronger connection to one another and to their surroundings. Clean parks and vibrant pedestrian zones create not only aesthetic pleasure but also a sense of mutual trust, people stop to talk and feel comfortable spending time outside.

The study also shows that improving public spaces requires more than technical upgrades. It requires a collective change in mindset, an understanding that shared spaces belong to everyone and that their quality directly affects social well-being. For cities like Sarajevo or others facing similar challenges, even small improvements such as adding benches, better lighting, or organizing community events can have a profound social effect. These actions transform public areas from neutral transit zones into active social places.

Ultimately, the research highlights the deeper meaning of public space as a mirror of social relationships. A city that invests in comfort, safety, and accessibility invests in its people, cooperation, and a shared urban identity. The findings serve as a reminder that designing good public spaces is not only about form but about nurturing everyday human connection.

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