

Pocket Parks and Urban Green Space

By Michael Hart

One of the things that make cities so valuable and interesting is how they can pack so many people and businesses together. And while this proximity creates multiple work, eating and entertainment options, it sometimes also means green space gets squeezed out of our cities. Over the years, urban planners came up with the concept of “Pocket Parks” or small intentionally planned green spaces squeezed into relatively small spaces in urban centers to help bring nature back into our dense cities. We can see examples around the world of successful cities looking for ways to bring back some of their green space in small but important ways.

Global Examples

New York City, one of the densest cities in North America has some interesting pocket parks including Greenacre Park which contains trees, a waterfall and seating in only a few hundred square meters. Paley Park, also in Manhattan uses only a few hundred square meters to also create a quiet urban escape.

In Philadelphia, the John F. Collins Park fits the bill as small and green. It is a refuge for city residents during the day and can even be rented for special occasions such as weddings or cocktail parties.

During his time as Mayor of London, Boris Johnson had a campaign calling for 100 pocket parks and offered funding for winning proposals submitted to his administration. The goal was to create “small public spaces that provide relief from the hustle and bustle of the city.” Their list is quite generous with large and small parks included. A favorite pocket park of mine in London is Postman’s Park, it is easy to miss, but if you find it you are rewarded not only with quiet green space, but also some dark stories of London’s past residents in its “Wall of Heroes.” Or if you are down near the Thames, the Middle Temple Gardens provide a bit of green in the middle of one of the world’s financial capitals.

And closer to home in Shanghai, Jing’an Park although not tiny is a green oasis along the crowded Nanjing West Road area. Last time I visited Shanghai a ragtag band of locals had drawn a large crowd to enjoy the shade and the music. And in Beijing, the Olympics in 2008 were a great excuse to squeeze more park space into the city’s Olympic Park.

Green Space in Tianjin

Tianjin actually has an abundance of green space within its six urban districts, some intentional and some more accidental. The intentional space includes large parks such as the Water Park, Nancuijing

Park and Changhong Park all in Nankai district and People's Park and the Culture Center area both in Hexi district. Heping district has the Five Boulevards and Central Park, while Hebei has the pedestrianized green parts of Italian area, all vestiges of Tianjin's colonial past. Green space has also been increasing along Tianjin's Hai river thanks to recent government efforts.

The areas I would call more accidental are those along other water bodies in Tianjin. The pathways on both sides of the South Canal in Hongqiao district are starting to see restaurants open nearby and the paths are quite lovely. So are parts of the pathways along the Jinhe River which runs across much of Nankai and Hexi districts. I estimate that nearly half of Tianjin's population passes this ribbon of green and blue each day without even noticing.

Tianjin even has a few areas that could be called pocket parks including one near the intersection of Guizhou and Chengdu Roads that has been planted with trees and flowers or the courtyard in front of the St. Joseph's Cathedral as well as plenty of unnamed spaces often with outdoor exercise equipment installed, guaranteed to bring out Tianjin's older limber residents at all hours of the day.

Future Plans

Even though Tianjin is blessed with a decent amount of green space, the older parts of the city tend to have more of it than the newly developed parts do. And some of what people think of as parks in Tianjin today are in fact just lots waiting for redevelopment. Residents will be disappointed once construction starts, but at least in the interim we get to enjoy flowers and trees. Parks including small pocket parks are important to allow people to gather to play games, make music and just talk with their neighbors or colleagues. Let's hope developers who are building the new and more dense complexes take a leaf out of the books of urban planners in other major cities and ensure a few new Pocket Parks sprout in Tianjin as well.

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