

Restorative vs. Pathogenic Public Spaces: Investigating the Impact of Urban Green-Space Parks in Rapidly Growing Mid-Sized Cities

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ABSTRACT: Urban green spaces play a critical role in shaping mental health, offering environments that can either restore well-being or exacerbate stress. However, access to these restorative benefits often reflects deeper socio-economic patterns, raising questions about equity and inclusion. This study investigates how visitor perceptions of urban parks—gathered through Google reviews—differ between neighborhoods with varying degrees of gentrification. Examining this data alongside the socio-economic trajectories of neighborhoods in mid-sized cities like Greenville, Spartanburg, and Charlotte aims to inform urban planning and policy-making strategies that prioritize equitable access to restorative green spaces, ultimately ensuring that parks benefit all community members.

The stakes of this inquiry are significant. As cities grow and invest in public green spaces, disparities in access and perceptions of safety, usability, and comfort can emerge and perpetuate social inequities. This study situates itself at the intersection of urban design, public health, and social justice, asking: How do perceptions of parks as restorative or pathogenic align with neighborhood socioeconomic profiles, particularly in areas experiencing gentrification compared to historically marginalized neighborhoods?

By analyzing user-generated reviews, this paper uncovers recurring themes related to greenery, safety, accessibility, and community-oriented design. These findings are then juxtaposed with neighborhood-level data to reveal patterns of preference. Readers will learn how urban greening efforts may unintentionally contribute to social stratification and strategies for designing parks that prioritize inclusivity and shared well-being. Ultimately, this research highlights the need to reimagine green spaces as equitable resources, ensuring their benefits are accessible to all, regardless of socioeconomic status or neighborhood context.

KEYWORDS: Green-Space, Mental Health, Gentrification, Urban, Parks

INTRODUCTION

Urban green spaces have long been lauded as essential to the mental well-being of urban residents, offering opportunities for relaxation, social interaction, and connection to nature (Nutsford et al., 2013). Yet, the benefits of these spaces are not equally distributed (Engelberg et al. 2016). As mid-sized cities across the United States grapple with rapid growth, urban parks become contested spaces where questions of access, equity, and usability emerge. This paper delves into these questions through Google reviews by analyzing visitor perceptions of parks in mid-sized cities in the southeastern United States (Greenville, Spartanburg, and Charlotte), offering a window into how restorative and pathogenic qualities are experienced across neighborhoods with different socioeconomic profiles. A case-study approach allows a deeper exploration of the relationships between visitor experiences, neighborhood characteristics, and socioeconomic shifts, particularly regarding gentrification processes. Urban parks in these cities thus serve as distinct yet interconnected cases to better understand how the benefits of urban greening initiatives may differ by neighborhood.

This study focuses on the relationship between neighborhood gentrification and the perceived quality of green spaces. Parks in areas undergoing gentrification often receive high praise for their safety, aesthetic appeal, and maintenance, contributing to their restorative potential. In contrast, parks in historically marginalized or underfunded neighborhoods are frequently criticized for lacking upkeep, safety concerns, and insufficient amenities, fostering a sense of exclusion and discomfort (Anguelovski et al. 2018). These disparities raise critical questions about who perceives neighborhood green parks as comfortable, safe, and convenient.

The paper is organized into several key sections. First, the literature review provides a theoretical framework, exploring restorative environments, social equity, and green gentrification concepts. Drawing from the work of scholars such as Isabelle Anguelovski and Alessandro Rigolon, this section establishes the dual potential of urban parks as spaces of healing and harm. The methodology section outlines the study's comparative case study approach, detailing how mixed data were drawn from Google reviews, master planning documents, and historical records. These methods allowed for an in-depth analysis of user perceptions and their alignment with neighborhood characteristics. The results and discussion sections reveal a nuanced picture of urban park experiences. Across the five parks studied, themes such as the role of greenery, perceived safety, accessibility, and community-oriented

design emerge as significant factors influencing visitor satisfaction—and yet, contrary to our hypothesis, reviews were proportionally good across all parks. Still, important patterns emerged when paired with socio-economic indicators. While parks in gentrified neighborhoods were lauded for their thoughtful design and upkeep, they also sparked concerns about overcrowding and exclusivity.

Meanwhile, parks in non-gentrified areas were more likely to be described as poorly maintained and unsafe, reflecting broader patterns of neglect. The discussion examines how urban parks can simultaneously foster inclusion and exclusion, depending on their design, location, and the communities they serve. While not a central conclusion of this study, the concept of green gentrification is highlighted as an area for future exploration. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of viewing urban parks as physical spaces that mirror social and economic realities. By illuminating the disparities in how these spaces are experienced, the study invites readers to rethink the role of green spaces in fostering mental health and social equity.

1.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Gentrification is a complex socio-economic process characterized by transforming urban neighborhoods through the influx of higher-income residents. This transition frequently leads to the displacement of long-standing, lower-income communities, thereby altering the demographic landscape of these areas. One significant factor in this dynamic is the development or enhancement of urban parks, which, despite their numerous benefits, can unintentionally catalyze gentrification known as green gentrification (Anguelovski et al. 2022; Oscilowicz et al. 2022; Cole et al. 2017; Lewartowska et al. 2024).

Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014) argue that park planning decisions are rarely neutral; instead, they are shaped by a complex mix of political, economic, and social interests. While the benefits of urban green spaces are well-documented, their accessibility and qualitative characteristics are vital for maximizing their restorative potential, which is heavily influenced by socioeconomic factors, urban policies, and community engagement. Furthermore, research regularly connects access to green space with enhanced mental well-being but emphasizes challenges related to social equity and the risk of worsening socioeconomic disparities (Larson, Jennings, and Cloutier 2016). Planners have noted the lack of clear definitions and goals around green equity, inclusion, and justice, which hinders the effective implementation of equitable green planning within municipal climate action and sustainability efforts (Connolly, Anguelovski, and Oscilowicz 2023).

Beyond gentrification complexities, the design of urban parks plays a crucial role in influencing psychological and social well-being. The Attention Restoration Theory (ART) suggests that access to green spaces can alleviate stress and cognitive fatigue, improving mental health outcomes (Herzog, Maguire, and Nebel 2003). In addition to psychological benefits, green environments have been known to improve social interaction and reduce people's sense of loneliness (U.S. Department 2021; Pasanen et al. 2023). However, the effectiveness of parks in yielding these benefits depends on design elements such as vegetation or greenery, tree canopy coverage, seating availability, and maintenance quality (Klemm et al. 2017).

Moreover, neglect, poor maintenance, and safety concerns can significantly diminish the benefits of green spaces. Wang'ombe (2024) points out that inadequate infrastructure and safety issues can detract from the positive impacts expected from urban green spaces, contributing to higher crime rates and a growing sense of insecurity, particularly in underfunded areas. Further studies conducted by Jelks, Jennings, and Rigolon (2021) indicate that while urban greening seeks inclusivity, it can paradoxically lead to the displacement of low-income residents, undermining social cohesion and equitable access to park benefits.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative case study design. By integrating quantitative assessments of environmental psychology indicators with qualitative analyses of community perceptions, the research aims to elucidate how restorative and pathogenic elements of park design in a gentrified area. Focusing on mid-sized cities experiencing rapid growth—Greenville and Spartanburg in South Carolina and Charlotte in North Carolina—the study will explore how history and growth trajectories shape perceptions and usage of these public spaces.

Data was collected using secondary sources, primarily focusing on extracting and analyzing Google park reviews, examining master planning documents, and reviewing historical data for each park. We collected all Google park reviews until December 14, 2024, with a total of $n=30,979$ reviews on a Likert scale and $n=13,033$ reviews, including written perceptions. Data was also extracted from Google using Outscapper.

2.1 Google review analysis

The analysis followed a multi-step process to examine Google reviews in relation to gentrification and economic class. First, the dataset was cleaned by removing duplicate entries, irrelevant content, and extraneous elements such as HTML tags. The reviews were then standardized for consistency, and a frequency analysis of key terms was conducted to identify dominant themes. Topic modeling, specifically Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), was employed to uncover latent thematic structures, followed by a qualitative interpretation of sampled reviews within each topic. Sentiment analysis classified reviews as positive, negative, or neutral, with further categorization into five-star rating groups to extract major thematic narratives. Finally, qualitative coding was used to assess key environmental indicators—natural light, noise levels, greenery, and perceived safety—to evaluate their influence on

visitor perceptions. ChatGPT was employed as a computational tool to assist with data processing, text analysis, and thematic categorization.

2.2 Master planning documents and historical data analysis

Master planning documents and historical records were reviewed to understand the design intentions, development timelines, and socio-economic factors influencing each park's evolution. These documents provided insights into how planned features align with user experiences reported in online reviews.

A comparative analysis was conducted to juxtapose insights derived from user reviews with findings from master planning documents. The inductive approach allowed emerging themes to shape the analysis, condensing broad initial observations into focused conclusions.

3.0 RESULTS

The results were analyzed to compare user perceptions with the documented design intentions, revealing gaps and successes in park planning. Key observations were categorized to understand how design elements contribute to restorative or pathogenic experiences. We define restorative experiences as positive perceptions of green spaces, such as the accessibility of the park's features, a safe environment, and kid-friendly elements. Conversely, pathogenic experiences refer to perceptions that highlight the negative aspects of the park, including litter, overcrowding, and a lack of parking. The iterative nature of the study allowed for a dynamic interpretation of the data, refining insights over multiple analysis cycles.

We conceptualize gentrification as changes in the urban design structure of historically lower-income areas that impact the region's economic trends. This often results in the displacement of previous residents and the influx of new residents who meet the new economic demand. We utilized urban design plans and historical data to interpret gentrification in the park areas, noting inconsistencies in its measurement. Features such as added sidewalks, commercial businesses, water features, and increased funding for new amenities raised economic demand in these areas, attracting individuals from a higher income bracket.

While we anticipated higher restorative perceptions in parks within gentrified areas, our results showed similar pathogenic and regenerative perceptions across all parks. This suggests that perceptions of park spaces were consistent regardless of gentrification status, supporting a null hypothesis.

3.1 Park review findings

Most reviews for each of the five parks were considered "good," with an average rating of 86.11%. Among the "neutral" reviews, the average rating among all five parks was 11.50%. In addition, reviews considered "bad" had the lowest percentage, with an average rating of 2.39% (Table 1). Across all locations, Falls Park in Greenville, SC, had the highest written reviews (9,996), while Latta Park had the lowest (420).

After analyzing the park reviews, five main themes, including three sub-themes, emerged (Table 2). The results of this study demonstrate both regenerative and pathogenic feedback through park reviews categorized into five main themes: the role of greenery, perceived safety, accessibility and connectivity, community-oriented design, and overcrowding as a barrier. Three sub-themes emerged: balancing open spaces and comfort, maintaining and perceived restorativeness, and social interaction and family-friendliness. For each main theme, including the associated sub-theme, three examples were highlighted from the overall park review to represent the characteristics of the conceptualized themes.

Table 1. The authors analyzed perceived gentrification based on an archival review of city planning maps obtained via direct contact and county-level population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau data to estimate 2024. The authors identified the number of acres for each park through individual park webpages. All reviews for each park were collected via Google, through December 14, 2024, when the authors extracted data, including any review dated before extraction. Source: (Google, 2024)

Park Name	Park Location	# of Total Reviews	# of Total Written Reviews	# of "Good" Reviews	# of "Bad" Reviews	# of "Neutral" Reviews	Perceived Gentrification Area	# of Acres
		N	N	n(%)	n(%)	n(%)	Yes/No (Y/N)	N
Latta Park	Charlotte, NC	863	420	357 (85.0%)	21 (5.0%)	42 (10%)	N	31
Freedom Park	Charlotte, NC	7,629	1,000	859 (85.9%)	16 (1.6%)	125 (12.5%)	Partially	98
Cleveland Park	Spartanburg, SC	2,235	1,035	903 (85.0%)	26 (2.0%)	106 (13.0%)	N	578
Falls Park	Greenville, SC	19,136	9,996	8,565 (85.7%)	31 (0.3%)	1,400 (14.0%)	Y	26
Unity Park	Greenville, SC	1,116	582	519 (89.0%)	18 (3.0%)	45 (8.0%)	Y	60

Table 2. Conceptualized Themes among Key Findings. Source: (Google 2024)

Theme	Examples from Park Reviews
<i>Sub-Themes</i>	
The Role of Greenery	Frequent mentions of the park's "trees" and "scenic beauty" indicate that natural elements are crucial to visitor satisfaction. - <i>Freedom Park (Charlotte, NC)</i>
<i>Balancing Open Spaces and Comfort</i>	Some feedback highlights a lack of sufficient shade in key recreational areas, impacting comfort. - <i>Unity Park (Greenville, SC)</i>
Perceived Safety	Positive reviews describe the park as "safe and family-friendly," but lower-rated reviews highlight concerns about "poorly lit areas" leading to discomfort. - <i>Latta Park (Charlotte, NC)</i>
<i>Maintenance and Perceived Restorativeness</i>	Some negative reviews mention "litter" and "overcrowding" issues, impacting overall perception. - <i>Unity Park (Greenville, SC)</i>
Accessibility and Connectivity	The park is praised for its "well-connected" trails and pedestrian-friendly design but faces occasional issues with crowded pathways. - <i>Falls Park (Greenville, SC)</i>
Community-Oriented Design	Comments indicate that some entrances lack proper accessibility features for strollers and individuals with mobility issues. - <i>Latta Park (Charlotte, NC)</i>
<i>Social Interaction and Family-Friendliness</i>	Visitors praise its open spaces that host local events and social gatherings. - <i>Cleveland Park (Spartanburg, SC)</i>
Overcrowding as a Barrier	Reviewers frequently mention "great for kids," highlighting the playgrounds and splash areas as key attractions for families. - <i>Unity Park (Greenville, SC)</i>
	Some reviews mention that "weekend crowds" make it difficult to find quiet spots. - <i>Freedom Park (Charlotte, NC)</i>
	Reports of "overcrowding in playgrounds" suggest the need for better spatial planning. - <i>Unity Park (Greenville, SC)</i>

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1. Initial hypothesis and correlation with findings

This study examined visitor perceptions of environmental features (such as greenery, natural light, noise levels, and perceived safety) and how amenities shape overall satisfaction ratings across city parks with varying levels of gentrification. We hypothesized that areas depicted as gentrified through changes in urban planning designs would exhibit more restorative perceptions than areas that appeared non-gentrified, reporting pathogenic qualities. Contrary to our hypothesis, the reviews did not indicate a substantial divergence in public perceptions. Both gentrified and non-gentrified parks received similar proportions of positive and negative ratings, suggesting that visitor satisfaction was not shaped by potential gentrification status. Our findings highlight the complexity of measuring gentrification's impact through public perception alone.

4.2. Interpretation of findings

Collectively, findings from the parks' Google reviews (Table 2) emphasize the complexity of designing urban parks that cater to diverse needs while addressing challenges such as safety, accessibility, and overcrowding. By integrating greenery, enhancing safety features, improving accessibility, fostering community engagement, and mitigating overcrowding, urban parks can better realize their potential as restorative and inclusive public spaces. Although the analysis revealed a predominantly positive visitor experience, the underlying factors influencing these perceptions are opaque. Specifically, the review data did not directly capture respondents' positionality—particularly their socio-economic background and relationship to the neighborhood. Given this gap, further investigation into neighborhood changes at a higher level of fidelity becomes essential. Indeed, evidence of urban transformations observed in these parks suggests potential impacts of gentrification, which could alter park demographics and influence user experiences. Nonetheless, inconsistent definitions and measurements of gentrification complicate efforts to link demographic shifts to review authorship or thematic trends within park evaluations.

4.2.1. Green spaces generally receive positive reviews

Urban parks play a multifaceted role in shaping the experiences and well-being of their visitors (Jang et al. 2024). A central aspect of this is the presence of greenery, which consistently emerges as a defining feature in user feedback. Visitors frequently describe parks as "lush," "scenic beauty," and "green," underscoring the restorative potential of natural landscapes (Table 2). While we hypothesized "gentrified" parks to have more positive feedback, enthusiastic perceptions of the parks' greenery were consistent among each park area. However, the absence of adequate shading in some parks during warmer months is a common point of critique, particularly for visitors seeking comfort during their time outdoors.

Analysis of Google Reviews reveals a predominant focus on environmental attributes, such as greenery, cleanliness, and recreational facilities, leading to an overwhelmingly positive characterization of parks. Users

frequently praise these features, as elements like fresh air and spaces for exercise and play naturally garner favorable reviews regardless of broader socio-economic changes. However, reviews rarely acknowledge demographic shifts, rising costs, or changes in the social fabric that may influence park accessibility and use. Notably absent are perspectives from displaced residents or individuals who no longer feel welcome in these spaces. As a result, online reviews primarily reflect the experiences of current users, reinforcing a narrative that overlooks the social dynamics of neighborhood change and obscuring potential concerns about accessibility, exclusion, and displacement.

Perceived safety is a critical factor influencing how visitors engage with urban parks. Research indicates that individuals who perceive parks as safe are significantly more likely to visit and utilize these spaces (Lapham et al. 2016). Positive reviews highlight well-lit, high-traffic areas as safe and inviting, fostering a sense of security that encourages greater usage. Parks with clean, well-maintained amenities tend to elicit favorable responses, with visitors associating these features with a feeling of order and care. On the other hand, poorly lit or infrequently trafficked areas evoke discomfort and discourage use, particularly in the evening. Issues such as litter and inadequate maintenance detract from these spaces' visual appeal and amplify feelings of neglect and insecurity. These findings highlight the need for regular maintenance and thoughtful design strategies prioritizing visibility and cleanliness to enhance safety.

Despite the positive impacts of community-oriented spaces, overcrowding emerges as a recurring concern in user reviews, aligning with findings from other studies that identify overcrowding as a significant factor negatively influencing visitor experiences and potentially diminishing the restorative benefits parks offer (Aydemir et al. 2024). During peak times, congestion can hinder visitors' ability to enjoy the park, reducing the availability of quiet or personal spaces. Overcrowding in specific areas, such as playgrounds, also disproportionately affects children, limiting their access to essential recreational opportunities. This feedback points to the need for thoughtful spatial planning that accommodates both high usage and a variety of activities, ensuring that parks remain functional and enjoyable for all demographics.

4.2.2. Displaced voices are absent in reviews

In the context of displaced communities, capturing user perceptions presents a significant challenge, as online review platforms such as Google Reviews primarily reflect the experiences of current park users. Individuals most affected by neighborhood change—long-term residents displaced due to rising costs or demographic shifts—are often absent from these platforms, resulting in a gap in the dataset. This absence limits the ability to evaluate whether gentrification has rendered parks more exclusive or less welcoming to former residents, ultimately constraining assessments of how urban change influences access to and perceptions of public space. These findings underscore the need for participatory design approaches that actively engage current and former residents to ensure that public spaces remain inclusive and responsive to the broader community's needs.

Analysis of Google Reviews revealed recurring themes related to accessibility, connectivity, and the social function of urban parks. Reviews frequently highlighted the value of well-connected trails and pedestrian-friendly pathways, which were praised for enhancing mobility and creating a seamless visitor experience. However, accessibility challenges emerged as a notable concern, with reviewers citing insufficient parking and inadequate infrastructure for mobility devices and strollers. These barriers disproportionately affect families with young children and individuals with disabilities, indicating gaps in inclusivity that limit equitable park access.

The social dimension of parks also featured prominently in visitor feedback, particularly regarding the role of community-oriented design. Reviews consistently emphasized the appeal of parks that support social interaction through events, multi-generational gathering spaces, and recreational amenities. Features such as playgrounds, splash pads, and picnic areas were frequently praised for fostering community and belonging. These findings underscore the importance of designing parks that reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities, reinforcing the role of public spaces in strengthening social ties and collective identity.

4.3. Limitations of user-generated reviews in assessing gentrification and displacement

Gentrification is a complex and multifaceted process, making it difficult to define and measure consistently across different urban contexts. Although various institutions, such as Fannie Mae and the University of California's Urban Displacement Project, have developed novel mapping tools using Adjusted Median Income (AMI) to track gentrification trends, the methodology behind these calculations often lacks transparency. The U.S. Census Bureau provides publicly available income data that can be analyzed over time. However, the difficulty in determining the proportion of individuals above or below income thresholds limits its applicability at the scale of individual parks. Furthermore, demographic shifts alone fail to capture these spaces' social and cultural transformations, complicating efforts to establish clear metrics for gentrification.

These measurement challenges necessitated an alternative approach in our study. Relying on urban planning indicators, we categorized parks as "gentrified" or "non-gentrified" based on new amenities and infrastructure improvements. We also incorporated historical articles to contextualize contemporary developments and strengthen our analysis. However, the lack of standardized methodologies for assessing gentrification underscores the need for clearer guidelines and frameworks to evaluate urban change and its impact on community access to public spaces.

In addition to these data challenges, user-generated online reviews, particularly from platforms such as Google Reviews, present significant limitations in assessing perceptions of gentrification. Reviews tend to reflect polarized

perspectives, with users either expressing dissatisfaction with specific park features or broadly endorsing park amenities. As a result, nuanced insights into how gentrification affects accessibility and inclusivity are largely absent. Furthermore, because the platform does not prompt users to reflect on displacement or broader social dynamics, it is unlikely that former residents—those most affected by neighborhood change—will document their experiences. This exclusionary bias restricts our ability to assess whether parks have become less welcoming to displaced communities.

Moreover, online reviews disproportionately represent individuals actively engaging on digital platforms, often excluding low-income residents, older populations, and those without internet access. The absence of these voices limits the ability to capture the long-term effects of gentrification on public space accessibility and equity. Additionally, reviewers may not explicitly articulate experiences of exclusion or displacement, making it difficult to extract deeper insights into socio-spatial barriers. These challenges reinforce the need for more inclusive research methodologies incorporating participatory engagement with current and displaced residents to better understand the evolving role of parks in gentrifying neighborhoods.

4.4. Future directions

Given these limitations, future research should aim to develop more comprehensive and transparent methodologies for assessing the socio-spatial effects of gentrification on urban green spaces. A standardized, open-source framework for tracking gentrification in urban parks is needed to support interdisciplinary research and policy interventions. Transparency in data collection—such as public records on park funding, zoning policies, and demographic shifts—can help researchers and planners make informed, equitable decisions.

CONCLUSION

Urban parks significantly reflect and shape the socioeconomic dynamics of rapidly changing neighborhoods. Parks in gentrifying areas frequently offer restorative attributes such as meticulous landscaping and perceived safety, yet grapple with overcrowding and exclusivity. Conversely, parks in economically disadvantaged areas often suffer from poor maintenance, safety issues, and inadequate amenities, limiting their restorative potential and deepening feelings of community neglect. To counteract these disparities, volunteer-driven initiatives could enhance park upkeep and foster community pride and ownership.

While limitations included reliance on passive data from Google reviews, the integration of planning documents and historical records helped provide depth to the analysis. Future research should employ primary methods, like interviews and surveys, to better capture nuanced user experiences. Addressing issues like overcrowding and exclusivity through equitable, inclusive planning could mitigate unintended outcomes like displacement or social stratification, ensuring that parks serve as restorative and inclusive community assets. These findings offer critical insights for urban planners, architects, and policymakers, highlighting the necessity for equitable design and informed investment strategies that prioritize inclusivity and community engagement in park planning.

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