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Challenges on functionality of urban public open spaces in Axum town: Tigray regional state, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Public open spaces are the foundation of urban livability which attracts people to visit, live and work. Axum town is currently experiencing multiple problems related to spatial and physical development. These problems of the town are well prevailed by its poor quality urban public open Spaces. Yet, underutilized, lack attention, less effective and efficient functionality of public open spaces in the town are some of problems observed. Hence, this paper is undertaken with the main purpose of assessing on challenges about functionality of public open spaces of at Axum town; in case of in Hawelity area and Ezana Park. The study was undertaken by employing non-probability sampling as well as sample size of 73 was selected. Relevant data were gathered through Questioner distribute to users on site, field observation, interview with key-informants and individual users, focus group discussion and review of different relevant published and unpublished documents. Finally, to improve their weakness and to protect and enhance the positive attributes of the public open spaces, the study provides recommendations.

Key terms: Public open spaces, challenges and functionality

1. Introduction

The starting flourish of public open spaces, returns back to the ancient civilization of Greek and Roman around 5th and 3rd BC respectively. Valued greatly as spaces for social interaction and optimized in the aesthetic quality that these public open spaces come to pass (Carmona, 2008).

Public open spaces have great values in social, environmental, economy (motivate tourism industry and other), lunges of urban dwellers by providing pure air (oxygen) and enhancing ecological balances. Public spaces can be a setting for physically and mentally rewarding activities such as exercise, gardening, and conversation and creates physical and visual contacts with nature and plants that can also results important health.

Aksum is a town and separate worerda in northern Ethiopia. It is 1025 km north direction from the capital city of Addis Ababa, 220km North West direction away from Mekelle city. Axum town is located in geographical coordinate of 14^{07'} N latitude and 38^{044'} E. (Aksum, 2016)

The climate of Axum is “WeynaDega” or modernity. The annual average maximum and minimum temperature of the town became 28.1⁰c and 10.9⁰c respectively. Annual rainfall of the town became also between 500ml - 900ml (Socio economic profile of Axum, 2012).

Based on the socioeconomic profile of the town (2012) projection from the 2007 housing and population census the estimated total population of the Axum town in 2013 is about 53,891 of which 25,035 are male and 28,856 are female. The population density of the town became also 29.74 people per sq km.

2. Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were used for this study. Primary data were collected through interviews of government body and officials such as municipal Mayor and experts concerned with the points of the study and other involved stake holders. Relevant documents from planning department in Axum town, core process of urban planning of Tigray regional state, NUPI (national urban planning institute) and also other relevant documents from the municipality of the town, websites and books will be use as secondary resources.

In order to look in depth at the research issue, a “case study” method is chosen for this study. The data was mainly analyzed using qualitative and descriptive technique. The tools that were used under the qualitative method include: personal observations, both open ended and close ended interviews with participants related to the issue, discussions, site visits and use of photographs. However, in some case some quantitative analyses will also held using the statistical package for social science (SPSS) and excel. In the case of displaying the data the researcher was use graphs, maps, figures and tables.

3. Results

3.1 Activities and Functions in the Parks

The field response of on-site users together with researcher’s observation reveals many different expressions of people using Public Park. Ezana Park has an important role as a means of development, social (public interaction), economical, improve quality of life and values the enrichment culture of the town dwellers and/or visitors Figure 3.1.

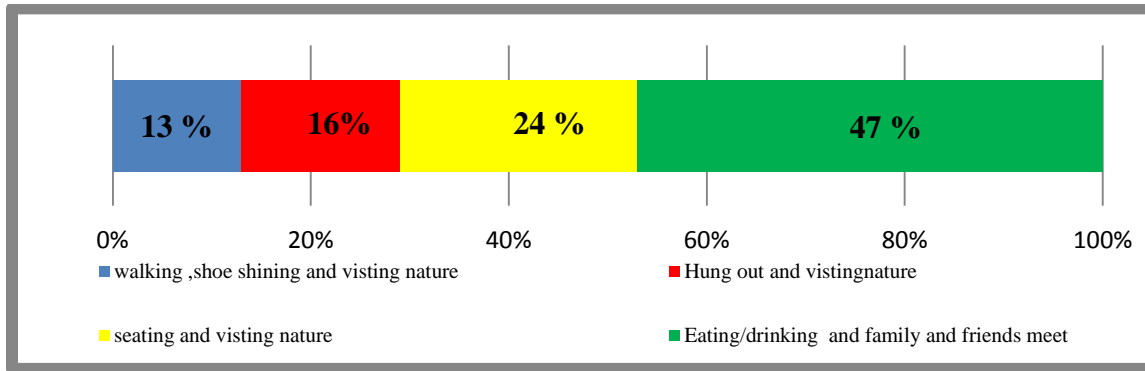


Figure 3.1: Activities of respondents and functions of the park

3.2 Functions of public open spaces

The functions could be categorized into religious, commercial, political, cultural and day to day activity.

The Stelae square – It is located at 14° 7'53.77"N latitude and 38°43'10.03"E longitude. Complying with the fact that the stelae square was functioning as social fact for the purpose of the religious ceremony of “Meskel” festival every year on seventeen September. The stelae square at that time is filled with people to celebrating the festival(structure is built from dry wood and burnt for ceremony and Priests sing religious songs and dances on the ceremony).

The Stelae square also use by small scale enterprises for photography and informal trading activity of handcrafted products. The reasons they choose this place: tourists come to the square and buy goods from them. The place is relatively free from legal authorities than other places. But, informal traders are facing problems since they are very small in scale, they are not registered as tax payers the fact that they are not allowed to work here.

Italian piazza - Italian piazza is used for trading activities by small and micro-business enterprises and hand craft man. As informed by the administration and coordinator of zonal cultural and tourism office of Axum town, no kind of trade is allowed in the space except Saturday. All the trade activities on the space out on Saturday are illegal. There are people who use the space for trading every day

informally. The usual activities of the spaces are trade or selling of small scale goods; bicycle renting and coffee ceremony. As interview of people on site informs it what's more use the spaces for political activities, cultural, and community events.

DaroEla piazza - DaroEla piazza has a huge sycamore tree sits in the center of the space. The edges are defined by the intersection of various major routes. Shaded terraced steps surround the base of the tree, a place for people to watch the passing traffic, including donkeys laden for market and people carrying water from Mai Shum. The wall is kissed and prayed are quietly recited by passing pilgrims as they go about their daily lives. The piazza also marks the transition between the rural (descending from Beta Giyorgis) and the urban. In the early morning, traders descend on camels and donkey carts to sell their goods and take product through the streets of the old town to the market. Camels and traders all gather at the south edge of the piazza and wait there until it is time to go to market.

In generally the main categories of the study area are set with respect to their character spatial organization, land use of the public open spaces and function in the study area: religious activities that "Mihlela" (prayed) which takes place happens for the first seven days of every month at DaeroEla piazza, commercial activities at Italian piazza and historical character at Stelae squares respectively.

3.3 Levels of stakeholder participation

Problems that arise in public open spaces in Axum town caused are the lack of involvement of citizens in the development and management spaces. As information gathered from interviews of the spaces users stated that they tend to wait for government work. Based on the results of interviews with local peoples/visitors and qualitative analysis of the questioners; the local government, private investors, local communities and other concerned bodies involvement in planning and /or designing or managing the public open spaces have not become issues.

3.4 Major Challenges and constraints faced in the study area

Findings reveal the following challenges

3.4.1 Lack of coordination among multi sectors

Public open spaces is not at all a task of to be left to a single institution, but as per the information obtained from the head of the tourism office this kind of phenomena is common in Axum which the mandate is only left in the culture and the tourist office of the town. Therefore, this becomes the main challenge for the development and effective functionality of the public open spaces in Axum town.

3.4.2 Inadequate in quality and quantity facilities and service provision

The facilities and service provision of hard public open spaces and in public recreational park is not adequate in its quality and quantity. Respondents at the public who use it criticized on the issue of sanitation and lack of recreational facility and service. The inadequate service provision of quality and quantity public open spaces has also a great influence on the tourism development of the town by negatively experiences on tourists.

3.4.2 Lack of infrastructure development and issues of geographical location

The studies notice that public open spaces highly requires quality infrastructure to achieve and promote fruitfully functional spaces for local community and tourist stay in the town and tourist sites. The availability of proper, reliable and effective infrastructure service like power (lighting), water supply, road access and sanitation around the public open spaces within tourist sites affect tourists. As a result, they can turn back to their homes even before the elapse of the pre-designed budget and time. In relation to this the researcher asked tourist during focus group discussion to forward their opinion in order to facilitate them and other tourists what facilities are needed in the tourist attraction areas; based on this most of the tourists suggested about infrastructure facility as better seating, clean sanitation facilities, pedestrian walk way, proper signage and information access.

3.4.3 Human resources

The interview made with head beautification and environmental officer who manage the office and responsible park administration and service provision in recent past clearly indicates that the office do not have adequate and professional human resource. For example, one of the tasks of the beautification and environmental office is designing parks, but the office does not have any architect and landscape designer to accomplish its task. This is not the only problem that the office encountered; since it doesn't have autonomous status to use its resources and have a financial deficiency it is unable to bring these professionals from outside and get the works done. The manager of the municipal offices stated professional turnover is also a problem. On Ezana park level, there is no professional workers who have leisure, recreation and park as educational background. In addition to this the interview made with head of municipal beautification and environmental office indicate that the park do not have enough security staff to solve safety and security problems that visitors and/or users come across within the park. In addition to this the office hinders by lack of human resources to promote clean and solve sanitation problems in both piazza and the square in the study site.

3.4.4 Difficulty of physical condition and Environmental quality

The study recognize difficulty concerning situation physical condition and environmental such as poor pavement of surfaces create difficulty to peoples with disabilities; dilapidated housing nearby the public open spaces and less attractive landscaping nearby; very dirty and poor waste collection that is not well-organized, experienced and programmed solid waste collection in the town, car accident and sound pollution of heavy vehicles are few of many problems constrain to successful functionality of public open spaces in the study area.

3.4.5 Huge Financial requirement

The study identified inefficient use of financial resources as one of the major constraints in public open spaces planning, development and management within Axum town in general and study area specifically. The insufficient financial resource and low budget allocated by the municipality for development and maintenance of the insignificant and destroyed facilities of public open spaces become less attractive to the users.

3.4.6 Lack of planning and design implementation and management in public open spaces

The study find out Weakness in planning and/or design, implementation, maintenance and management are the major challenges and constraints for well-organized and useful functionality of the public open spaces. As the manager of the municipality of the town, the head environmental and beautification office, zonal cultural and tourism office of Axum, land management and development expert indicated there is no much work done with planning and/or design, implementation, maintenance and management urban public open spaces in the study area by Considering them as a tourism attraction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to assessing the challenges about functionality of public open spaces, the relationship between the public open space and the tourism industry, the role of different stakeholders, existing planning and design implementation and factors related to functionality public open space in case of Hawelit area and EzanaPark.

The study investigates that accessibility issues, underutilized, misunderstanding and low attitude users and concerned bodies towards the subject, unorganized and less systematical managed, poor quality and quantity of facilities and services. In generally the spaces are not given the right legitimacy for urban life. So, there is a need for change in the way these spaces are perceived and managed.

The study recognize the different functions and values that these public open spaces are being proved to local community and tourists includes economy (mainly the tourism industry and as spaces

of income sources) , social interaction ,community events, political activities, cultural and religious celebrations.

Finally, the challenge is very great finding of the study in promoting the renaissance of the public realm in the towns. But, it is a potentially very rewarding and demands a new set of priorities.

Recommendations

Researcher recommends the following approaches to solve the existing problems discussed in previous chapters.

1. Awareness creation and general education to local community, decision makers, local political actors and administrators should be given on the issues to take care of urban public open spaces to utilize the spaces in a proper manner and inhabitants of the town to understand more about their public open spaces.
2. Skill human resource need better consideration and concern in regard to capacity building and training sufficient manpower to ensure successful functionality of public open spaces.
3. Adequate budget should be allocated for the upkeep and improvement of the public open spaces to enable allocation of more resources and establish good system of management.
4. The government should concern about guidelines, regulation and strategies that create synergy, proper management technique, effective and efficient functionality of urban public open spaces in the study area.
5. Degenerated and underutilized public open spaces (piazza, square and public park) should be refurbished through collaborative efforts and contributions of environmentalist, corporate bodies, educational institutions, donor communities and the local community who should also be empowered on effective utilization and management public open spaces.
6. Formulate professional associations and friends as well as governmental and nongovernmental organizations. These are individuals and organizations legally separate. But, support by giving time and money to achieve their ambition. Moreover, having professional association help workers to share information, provide continuing education, and advocate. Besides this, these associations provide guidance to their members on professional practices such as fundraising, sponsorship, organizing volunteers, and accommodating disabled visitors.
7. The public open spaces should be studied and the design in accordance with these studies and indigenous skill and art of local community. This would ensure a design that is contextually

appropriate cultural values and integrate vernacular public art, talent, skill and facts of local peoples.

8. Since urban public open spaces have great contribution of development of smokeless industry of tourism by being an attraction tourists. Ensuring upkeep of existing public open spaces should be organizes and integrates to preserve archeological heritage.
9. Improving and coordinating the activities between intuitions, governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders and creation of public-private partnership and participation that enhance the integrated approach to promote quality and excellently functional public open spaces. With this, there could be many solutions to the problems at hand , enhancing the priority level of urban public open spaces and the government will give the needed attention along with the other priorities.

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