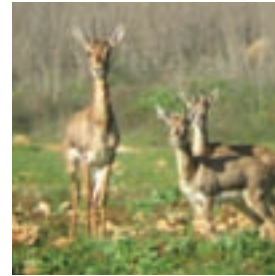




Shoham gardens. Photo: Judy Elispor



Top to bottom: Galia Ben-Shoham, Eyal Mitrani, Amir Balaban



Open Spaces In Urban Places

Less than 10 square meters of land for urban parks and gardens are allocated in Israel per person, less than half the amount in Western countries

Urban public open spaces are all too frequently viewed as free real estate, empty spaces in which to build and develop. Yet, open space is a vital component of urban environmental quality. If a city cannot provide quality open space to its residents, they will seek green spaces elsewhere, opting for one-story houses in the suburbs and thus accelerating the vicious cycle of open space depletion. Recognition of these simple facts has led the Ministry of the Environment to pay closer

attention to the subject of open spaces in urban places.

The move was triggered by developments outside of Israel, such as the UK initiative "Green Spaces, Better Places," and by growing public demand for urban parks in Israel itself. Yet, despite growing public concern, there was no single agency ready to take responsibility for the issue. Rather, responsibility was dispersed among different government ministries and authorities - Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Housing, local authorities and landscape architects and gardeners. The Ministry of the Environment decided to meet the challenge.



Improving the environment and preserving open spaces



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▶ Photo: Eyal Yaffe



Urban Open Spaces – The Statutory And Planning Aspects

A study commissioned by the Ministry of the Environment on the statutory and planning aspects of urban open spaces surveyed more than 100 plans in 11 cities, reviewed guidelines approved by the government in 2001 on the allocation of land for public purposes and compared conditions in Israel to conditions worldwide. Following are some of the findings:

- Israel's guidelines on the allocation of open space in terms of square meters per capita are much lower than in other countries.
- While Europe and the U.S. allocate more than 20 square meters of land for urban parks and gardens per capita, Israel's guidelines call for half this amount – less than 10 square meters per person.
- Deviations in plans are often allowed for the construction of public institutions or even infrastructure at the expense of open spaces.
- Many public open spaces are left derelict and remain undeveloped.
- The hierarchy of parks – city, quarter, neighborhood – is either inadequate or non-existent.

Examples from the Field

Israel's unique conditions – population growth, rapid development and an urban population - make the preservation of open spaces for the benefit of its citizens an imperative. Yet, as demonstrated by a study commissioned by the Ministry of the Environment, Israel's urban population is being denied its right to open space in the quantity and quality necessary. For example, in a Lod neighborhood, planned for a population of 14,000, only 1.15 square meters of parks per capita have been allocated, although Israel's guidelines require a minimum of 5 square meters per capita at neighborhood level. And to make matters worse, Lod does not even have a single urban park or sufficient open spaces to serve as neighborhood parks.

Even when land is allocated for public open space, it is not always developed for parks and gardens. Thus, in Tel Aviv only 70% of the public open spaces are developed, in Jerusalem (2003 figures) only 52% are developed and in Rahat (the largest Bedouin settlement in Israel's south), only one park exists. What's more, in Beersheba, for example, park maintenance is inadequate and existing parks are not adapted to climatic conditions in the Negev.

To make matters worse, all too often changes in the designation of open spaces are allowed for public institutions or even for roads, commerce or parking. In Kiryat Gat, cultural institutions were built in open spaces designated for parks. In Beersheba, a technological college will be built on a one-hectare area within the bounds of a neighborhood park spanning three hectares and none of the urban renewal projects currently include neighborhood parks.

So What's Being Done?

How to preserve green spaces in urban places? The Ministry of the Environment believes that the dearth of both quantity and quality in urban public open space is largely the result of lack of awareness and knowledge among planning agencies and local authorities. Therefore, in cooperation with other bodies, it is publishing

(cont. p. 21)



Bustan Brody: The Story of a Community Garden

It all started a little more than a year ago with a knock on the door of one of the residents of Brody Street in the Kiryat Shmuel neighborhood of Jerusalem. A representative of the Ginot Ha'Ir Community Center wanted to know how to get in touch with representatives of the "House Committees" in the nearby apartment buildings. The reason – an initiative to turn a neglected plot of wasted land, previously the target of building plans, into a community garden.

The response was enthusiastic. With the Community Center serving as coordinator and organizer, events were planned to transform vision into reality, most of them scheduled to coincide with national or religious holidays:

- **August 5, 2004:** General cleanup day, with the participation of entire families, coinciding with Tu B'Av, celebrated as the Day of Love for the Environment.
- **January 14, 2005:** Planting day, coinciding with Tu B'Shvat or Arbor Day.
- **March 18, 2005:** Wood chip covering day, coinciding with the holiday of Purim.

Additional activities included the placement of small rocks and the planting of small plants around the edges to define the garden area, outdoor classes on ecological gardening for young and old, and even the burning of *chametz* (fermented grain) just prior to the holiday of Passover.

Today, the 2,000 square meter triangular garden is beginning to take shape. The cooperative effort initiated and organized by the Community Center, with initial funds from the municipality and a lot of good will and volunteerism on the part of the residents, is making a difference. Municipal funds, supplemented by donations from the residents, have helped to buy and deliver soil and saplings for planting and to set up an automatic irrigation system, representatives of the Jerusalem branch of the Society for the Protection of Nature provided guidelines on what and where to plant, while the residents themselves took part in the events, sold drinks to gather additional funds, and even provided musical entertainment on each occasion. Each event became a festive happening. In June 2005, even the mayor of Jerusalem himself showed up to plant a tree.

Ideas for the future abound. Benches, urban ecology, bird watching – these are just some of the plans on the agenda. But most important is the community spirit, the sense of participation felt by young and old alike. In planning "Bustan Brody," the residents of this neighborhood got together to identify community needs and accommodate community interests for the benefit of all. The result: bonfires for youngsters on the holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, composters for the ecologically inclined, walks, talks, events, music and even designated spaces for dog owners.

From a neglected plot of land, "Bustan Brody" is being transformed into a green space for the benefit and enjoyment of community members, a place to meet, chat, rest and dream.

The Gardens of Holon

Some 180,000 people live in Holon, a major city in the central region of Israel, which aims to be a national cultural center for children and families. In recent years, special attention has been focused on cultivating the appearance of the city with "green lungs." There are dozens of public parks and gardens in Holon, but the most unique are 13 fairytale gardens. These public gardens display outdoor sculptures created by well-known artists, which are inspired by children's poems and stories. The combination of literature with plastic arts is serving a twin function: increasing the children's love of literature while developing the "green lungs" of Holon.

Park Rehabilitation in Taibe

There are only two public parks in the Arab city of Taibe, serving a population of some 34,000 residents. Both are small and run-down. But things may well change as the result of a unique competition initiated by the Al-Tanmiyeh w'al-Tahsil (Development and Achievement) association: a prize-bearing school competition to rehabilitate one of the parks. Many of the local children prepared models – a stream running through the park, a fish pond, a zoo, and even a tram.

Yet the competition stimulated more than models alone. A group of sixth grade girls prepared documents on the status of the park, including a map of different plots and proposals for rehabilitation, and sent letters to commercial companies and government officials asking them to help. This catalyzed the municipality to have a local engineer prepare a detailed plan for park rehabilitation so that donations may be solicited. Moreover, the residents themselves have taken up the idea, promising to donate materials and manpower to help transform vision into reality.

GALIA BEN-SHOHAM ON URBAN PARKS

Why did the Ministry of the Environment decide to promote the subject of urban parks?

In recent years, we have become increasingly aware that park development is a major environmental issue especially in a small and densely populated country where more than 90% of the population resides in urban areas. To a large extent, the existence of quality open spaces is an indicator of quality of life and quality of the environment in an urban setting.



guidelines targeted at the country's planning agencies. On the social front, we are drafting background papers and guidelines which relate to ways of planning urban parks which respond to the needs of the residents, young and old. This may relate, for example, to the optimal arrangement of benches -facing each other to

promote conversation among young people or facing the playground to watch children play for the older population - or to the best use of lighting so that the park is lit up without disturbing nearby residents.

What did the study on the planning aspects of public urban open space reveal?

It revealed that the situation is not good. First, the allocation of public open space for urban parks is lower in Israel than in the developed world. Second, even when public open space is allocated, local authorities do not necessarily develop it. Third, when open space is allocated for parks, the designation is often subject to change to allow for other uses such as public buildings. Fourth, in order to meet quotas for open space, local authorities tend to allocate the "leftovers" of planning. This means that small strips around buildings or traffic islands are painted green on planning documents as if they were public open spaces. Fifth, public open spaces are often used for other purposes such as water towers or water pools.

What can be done to ensure that public open space is allocated for parks?

We have to give decision makers and planners the right tools. Therefore, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of the Interior are preparing a manual, in cooperation with other government ministries, local authorities

Our determination was reinforced by the results of a survey on environmental considerations in municipal elections, which was conducted a couple of years ago. The findings showed that urban residents attribute high importance to environmental issues, with parks and green spaces coming in second among a long list of environmental subjects which are of special concern to the public (preceded only by urban cleanliness).

What is the Ministry of the Environment doing to promote urban parks?

The ministry serves as a watchdog in the country's planning agencies when it comes to the quantity, quality and hierarchy of public parks at the municipal level. We are working hard to assure that planning agencies do not yield to pressures to establish educational, religious or cultural institutions on areas allocated for public open space.

But that's not all. We are currently working on professional assessments and action plans for public urban open space which relate to four major realms: planning, social, management and maintenance, and funding. On the planning front, in cooperation with other ministries and authorities, we are preparing



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and NGOs, on the quality and hierarchy of public open space. We are also organizing seminars and training sessions to generate the necessary awareness and knowledge to bring about the necessary changes.

What should the public do?

Public participation and involvement are of major importance. For example, in the hierarchy of urban parks, community and neighborhood gardens are often initiated bottom-up, by community centers, green groups, grassroots organizations and concerned citizens.

There are examples of initiatives throughout the country where residents have taken responsibility for the maintenance and enhancement of existing gardens or for the planning and development of new parks or agricultural gardens. The idea is to transform neglected areas into community gardens in which all sectors of the population can take part.

Experience has shown that the development of community parks and gardens strengthens the community and fosters a feeling of involvement and belonging. We have also found that when residents take an active part in planning and maintaining community parks, vandalism is significantly reduced.

 Playground in Shoham. Photo: Judy Elispor



studies, preparing guidelines, setting thresholds for open public spaces in urban renewal plans, organizing seminars and workshops and promoting awareness through its website.

In February 2005, the Environment Ministry published a manual entitled "Revitalizing Urban Parks: How to Develop Friendly Gardens," a first in a series of manuals aimed at increasing municipal awareness of the importance of public parks. The manual includes chapters on public parks, community parks and urban ecology, and surveys success stories worldwide. Yet another study, prepared jointly by the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of the Interior, is nearing completion. It will provide the necessary tools for planners to assure that the public is indeed provided with a sufficient number of quality open spaces.

Some Bright Spots

Today, there are already some signs of progress. Cities such as Modi'in, Tel Aviv, and Holon have given high priority to the development and maintenance of high-quality urban parks. Modi'in, in fact, is the only city actually to exceed the government guidelines on the allocation of open spaces for parks while in Tel Aviv and Holon, the municipalities have compensated for lack of quantity by quality.

Furthermore, new master plans for Jerusalem, Modi'in and Karmiel incorporate quality open spaces, plans in Tel Aviv and Kfar Saba are based on a green backbone, and efforts to improve the green appearance of the city are visible in Ra'anana and Ashdod.

There is no doubt that awareness of the importance of urban open space is growing. Residents in several localities are beginning to demand quality as well as quantity as they realize that the quality of their life depends, to a great degree, on the quality of their urban environment.

Throughout the country, people are beginning to recognize that urban parks and gardens can provide a green refuge from the hectic pace of modern city life, that they are key elements in urban renewal, public health, quality of life and community identity.

Quality of life depends on the quality of the urban environment