

"Good design for inclusive access is central to ...health and quality of life; social inclusion; tourism; countryside access; urban renaissance; safety and crime; and the implementation of ...legislation."

- From *OPENSspace: the research centre for inclusive access to the outdoors*
<http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/2005>

Introduction

In planning for open space in Seattle for the next 100 years, the needs of diverse communities must be taken into consideration in order to create and preserve attractive, accessible, functional and ultimately livable places in which people can feel comfortable, interact safely and productively with others, and become active participants in the shaping of their own neighborhoods and city.

On December 3, 2005, Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation convened a community workshop with representatives from various neighborhoods and backgrounds. The objectives of the workshop were to provide a forum for individuals and groups that are not normally invited to sit at the table. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences and needs with respect to open space. What ensued was a remarkable series of open and thoughtful conversations about definitions of, barriers to and visions for open space in Seattle. Their observations and experiences, which are summarized here, will provide the basis for planning into the future for robust open spaces that serve multigenerational and multicultural citizens of Seattle.

Definitions of Open Space

Participants expressed preferences for both large pastoral spaces with views to water and mountains, as well as small intimate spaces with benches and lawn. The importance of **large gathering spaces for family** and community events was stressed. There was a broad range of definitions of open space, including: a place to encounter nature; a gathering space for people to meet and discuss ideas with people from their own language, ethnic, religious, or age groups, as well as meeting with new groups. Importantly, many observed that open space comprised more than traditional parks, including plazas, traffic circles, street ends, sidewalks, green roofs, rooftop gardens, pocket parks, remnant spaces, and other hybrid and multi-use spaces.

Barriers to Participation

Physical, financial and cultural access were major concerns, with multiple suggestions for improving transportation to and from open spaces by using free inter-park bus or shuttle services, such as in downtown Kent, or offering "green pass" days to parks. Financial barriers prevent low income residents from experiencing learning centers such as the zoo and the science center. Further lack of information in non-English speaking communities limits knowledge of and access to parks. Lack of sensitivity to cultural and physical needs also inhibit use. Safety, and the perception parks attract criminal activity, prevent many people from utilizing parks.

Future Open Space Needs

Community representatives emphasized the need to establish **strong connections between school and open spaces**, including supplying information about park opportunities to families in school information packets. Further, participants underscored the importance of **cultivating appreciation**

and stewardship of open spaces in school children in order to ensure the longevity and vitality of an open space system.

Many voiced the need to create **welcoming environments** that embrace **multicultural and intergenerational users** and in which diverse individuals and groups feel safe. One participant observed that often parks are a sanctuary, the only venue in which he as an African American male can enjoy without being harassed for “loitering”.

Zoning of activities was deemed important, creating opportunities for multiple planes of activities, in which people can enjoy natural beauty, into which habitat for wildlife can be incorporated, in which visitors and residents can participate in a variety of active and passive pursuits, and in which technologies can be accessed. At the same time, participants stressed the need for **connectivity of open spaces** to different use spaces in their neighborhoods and across the city. Wayfinding to and through open spaces was also identified as critical. Others indicated the need to provide **access to active exercise** and recreation opportunities, such as biking, skating, hiking, canoeing, soccer, basketball, as well as **meditative or restive places for contemplation**, yoga, tai chi and spiritual practice.

Several participants suggested the need for **access to fresh fruit and vegetables** to ensure proper nutrition for residents in surrounding neighborhoods. Activities for youth, such as wireless and open microphones, as well as midnight basketball and concerts, were deemed important, including efforts to keep the design and programming positive.

Finally, many voiced the need to **respect history of neighborhoods** as well as acknowledging the need to provide **opportunities to incorporate new voices**, through education about different cultural practices. Art as a means of recording history, inspiring participation and engaging young people who might not otherwise be interested or involved in sports or nature was also emphasized.

To summarize, several key points were distilled from the many rich and varied conversations. Open spaces are:

- changing
- safe spaces that are welcoming to diverse communities
- educational spaces that are fun
- linear spaces that address multiple uses for exercise and connect open spaces to each other
- family and community spaces
- spaces for privacy, solitude, spiritual and religious practice
- venues for environmental education
- financially supported spaces to ensure access
- system-based spaces
- roof-top spaces
- new types of spaces
- integrated, accessible, pedestrian-friendly spaces
- non-traditional open spaces