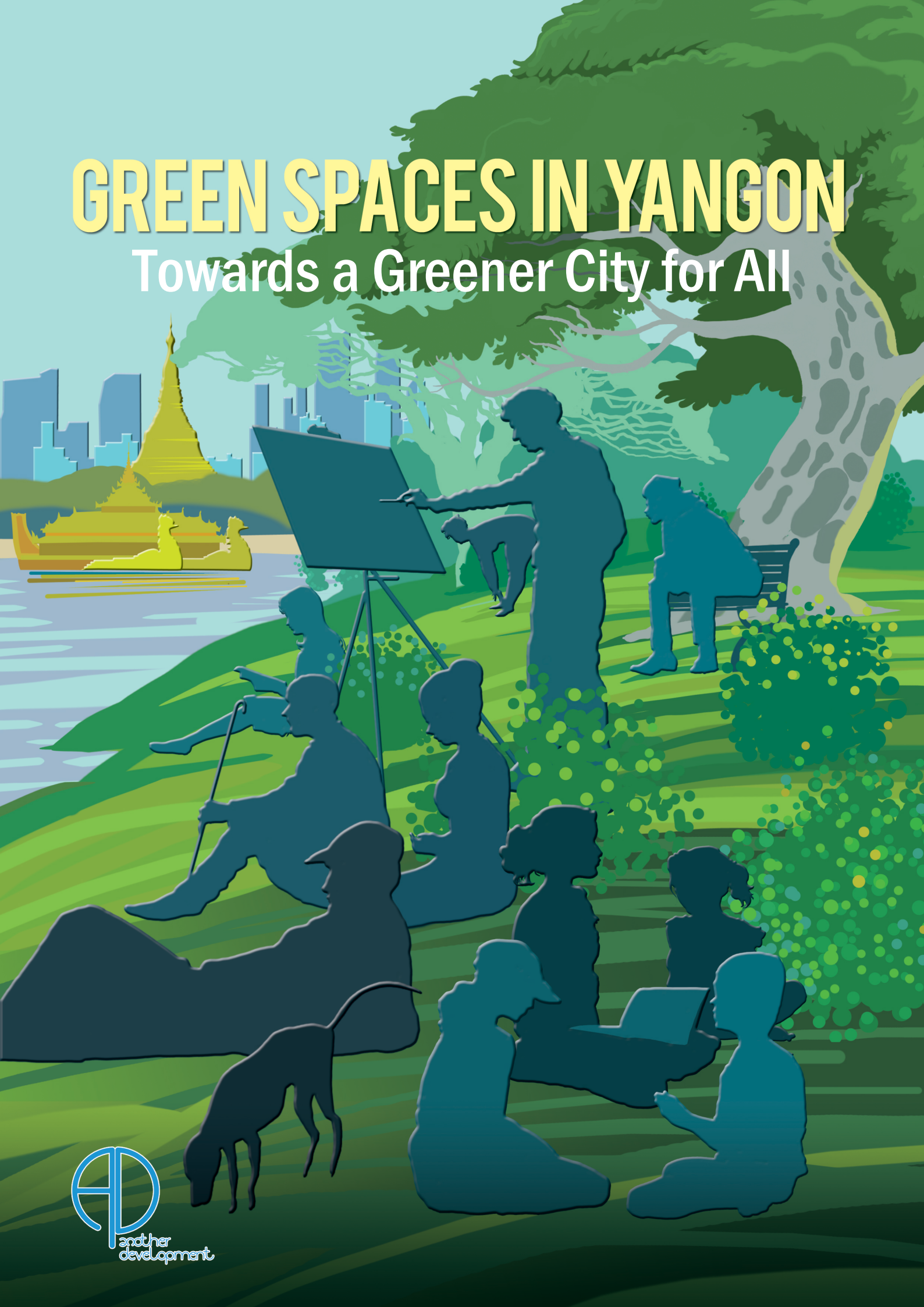


GREEN SPACES IN YANGON

Towards a Greener City for All



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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About Another Development Policy Think-Tank

Another Development (AD) is a local Myanmar think-tank and a non-profit organization. AD's work focuses on five main thematic areas: Human Rights; Multiculturalism; Decentralization and Federalism; Rural Economic Development and Social Enterprises; and, E-government and E-citizen. AD was set up in 2015 to be part of the solution to the problems and conflicts prevailing in Myanmar by advocating for effective public policy change. AD has four functional departments: Strategic Communication; Policy and Research; Consulting and Professional Services; and, Operation Support Department.

Green Spaces in Yangon

Towards a Greener City for All



CONTENTS ■

| | |
|---|----|
| ACRONYMS | 4 |
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 5 |
| INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| CONTEXT | 9 |
| Definitions | 9 |
| Global trends | 10 |
| Benefits of urban green spaces | 11 |
| GREEN SPACES IN YANGON CITY | 13 |
| Distribution of parks in Yangon City | 13 |
| Access and use of public parks in Yangon City | 15 |
| Governance | 17 |
| Current developments in Yangon City | 19 |
| Advocacy and strategy | 20 |
| WAY FORWARD | 21 |
| CALL TO ACTION | 27 |
| REFERENCES | 28 |

ACRONYMS

| | |
|------|--|
| AD | Another Development |
| CBD | Central Business District |
| CSOs | Civil Society Organizations |
| JICA | Japan International Cooperation Agency |
| MIMU | Myanmar Information Management Unit |
| MPs | Members of Parliament |
| WHO | World Health Organization |
| YCDC | Yangon City Development Committee |
| YHT | Yangon Heritage Trust |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ■

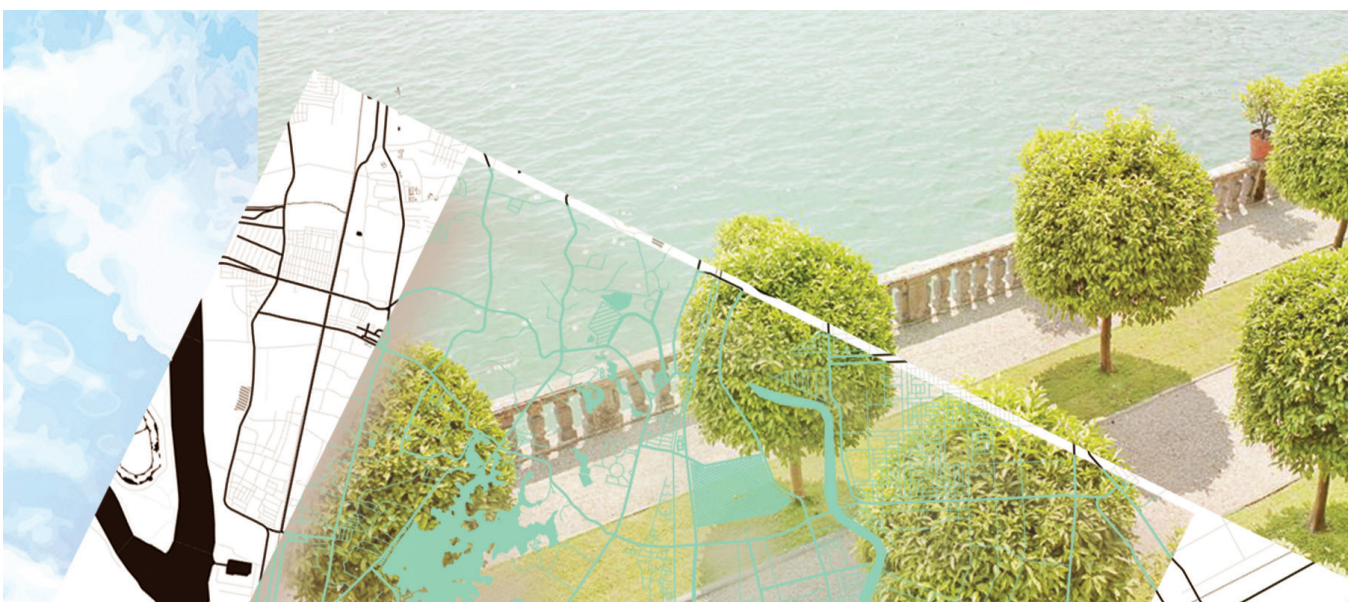
Through our current project focusing on green spaces, Another Development (AD) is aiming to promote good, sustainable and inclusive urban planning practices in Yangon City for the well-being of all residents. As part of the project, AD has developed this position paper to understand the challenges relating to green spaces in Yangon, and identify some next steps for positive reform.

Green spaces play a key role in the quality of urban communities in cities, with benefits ranging from the health and well-being of individuals and their relationship with nature, to the regulation of climate impacts, branding, economic development, tourism, character and culture of a city. The importance of green spaces to cities has been growing globally, and they have come to play a key part in the quality of urban communities in cities.

Generally, green spaces are defined as the areas that are artificially or naturally covered with vegetation, however, we limit the definition of green spaces in this paper to focus mainly on accessible public parks in Yangon City.

Green spaces in Yangon City

The current population of Yangon City has nearly doubled from 2.9 million in 1990 to 5.2 million in 2014. Over this period, the amount of green space per person has declined by almost 40%. There are in total 63 public parks in Yangon City covering 211.25 ha (522 acres) of land which equates to 0.41 square meters (4.37 square feet) of green space per person. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that a city should have 9 square meters (96.88 square feet) of green space per person. Distribution of parks in Yangon City is unequal with almost half of the total number of parks located in the CBD and Inner Urban City Zone. There are seven townships that have one public park, and nine townships have no park.



There were more than one million park visitors per month in September and October 2018 in Yangon City, according to Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC). A survey conducted by AD with park users showed that: young people (aged 13 to 25) formed the majority of park users; 54% of park users were male and 46% were female; 43% of users stated they visit parks monthly; and, 78% of people said they visit parks for recreation. 31% of respondents said that parks were fine, while 22% stated that facilities and the number of parks did not meet the needs of users, and 10% reported it took too long to travel to parks.

YCDC is the body in charge of parks, and the Department of Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens is the responsible YCDC agency for green spaces in Yangon City. The goal of the Department is to have one playground in each ward and one park in each township, and to keep parks green and playgrounds accessible. However, there has been no significant increase in the number of public parks in Yangon City, and growing population and rapid urbanization has resulted in construction development projects taking over green spaces. There are a number of private companies that have had green spaces handed over to them including major developments in Kanthaya Park and Mya Kyun Thar Park. On the other hand, there are organizations focusing on developing green spaces, urban planning and regeneration in Yangon City. Since 2017, Doh Eain has been running urban planning projects such as heritage restoration and the upgrading of public spaces aiming to renew Yangon City.

There are also organizations focused on long-term advocacy and strategy for improving green spaces in Yangon City. One of the organizations, Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), has been planning urban heritage focusing on the downtown area. In 2016, they produced Yangon Heritage Strategy in which they pointed out that many parks in Yangon City are inaccessible for the public and have been eroded by semi-private developments. The Japan International Cooperation Agency is another organization working on parks and green spaces, and engaged with YCDC in 2013 to prepare a strategic urban development plan for Greater Yangon with the agreement of Regional Government.

Way forward

There are many challenges with regard to maintaining current and creating new accessible green spaces for an increasing population in Yangon City. The Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department's goal to have a playground in each ward and a park in every township is a welcome start, however, there is much more work to be done to create a Yangon in which increased and improved urban green spaces allow for the well-being of all citizens.

A green space strategy should be developed that ensures the expansion of public parkland in Yangon City to satisfy the WHO's standard of nine square meters of green space per person. Recommendations relating to parks and green spaces laid out in YHT's Yangon Heritage Strategy should be supported and committed to. Also needed is enhanced collaboration among YCDC agencies and departments to improve urban planning and better meet the needs of the residents.

Civil engagement and public voices are not sufficiently heard in urban green space planning and development in Yangon. YCDC should ensure that inclusive public participation is practiced in all Yangon City urban planning projects.

A number of relatively simple improvements to improve public parks should be implemented such as more shady trees, sports facilities, trash bins, lighting, seats, educational tools for children, and the removal of access fees for park facilities such as toilets. Increased maintenance including water sprinkling and trash collection would be beneficial, as would promoting the holding of events such as educational, literature, and celebrity talks and other ceremonies in parks, as a way to attract users and promote tourism.

Finally, ensuring that public parks are accessible for all kinds of people including disabled people, and improving the safety of parks through increased security staff, would enable parks to be shared by all, and people to feel safe when doing so.

Green spaces will play a crucial role not only in the quality of life for the people of Yangon, but also in the economic and environmental future of the city. Additionally, as Myanmar undertakes widespread democratization across the country, green spaces can be a contributing factor in the formation of a democratic society, and a tool for strengthening social inclusiveness and cultural diversity.

AD calls on YCDC, Yangon Regional Government, MPs, and CSOs working in this field, to act on the ideas in this paper and make green spaces an issue that matters, so that the future of Yangon City resembles the vision and ambitions of its citizens.



INTRODUCTION ■

Green spaces play a key role in the quality of urban communities in cities, with benefits ranging from the health and well-being of individuals and their relationship with nature, to the regulation of climate impacts, branding, economic development, tourism, character and culture of a city. The importance of green spaces to cities has been growing globally.

In Yangon, green space is increasingly under pressure due to economic growth, a growing population and rapid urbanization. Green spaces are being overtaken by real estate developments and targeted through a number of economic activities, and a marked increase in population has created challenges in delivering basic adequate infrastructure and services. These combined challenges create poor urban settings and fail to promote the well-being of residents.

Through our current project focusing on green spaces, Another Development (AD) is aiming to promote good, sustainable and inclusive urban planning practices in Yangon City for the well-being of all residents. As part of the project, AD has developed this position paper to understand the challenges relating to green spaces in Yangon, and identify some next steps for positive reform.

In developing this position paper, AD had initial discussions with a number of stakeholders before conducting thorough research. We met with Yangon Youth Network, and conducted interviews with the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), as well as Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) and Doh Eain. Additionally, AD conducted an in-person public survey with 157 people across 10 parks to gauge their opinions and attitudes on parks in Yangon City.

In this paper you will first find the Context, outlining a definition of green spaces for the purposes of this paper, as well as global trends and the benefits of urban green spaces. This is followed by Green Spaces in Yangon, which details the past-to-present of green spaces in Yangon, governance structures, economic and infrastructure developments, as well as current advocacy and strategies for the future. Finally, in the Way Forward, we outline a number of next steps and recommendations to promote positive reform for green spaces and urban planning in Yangon.



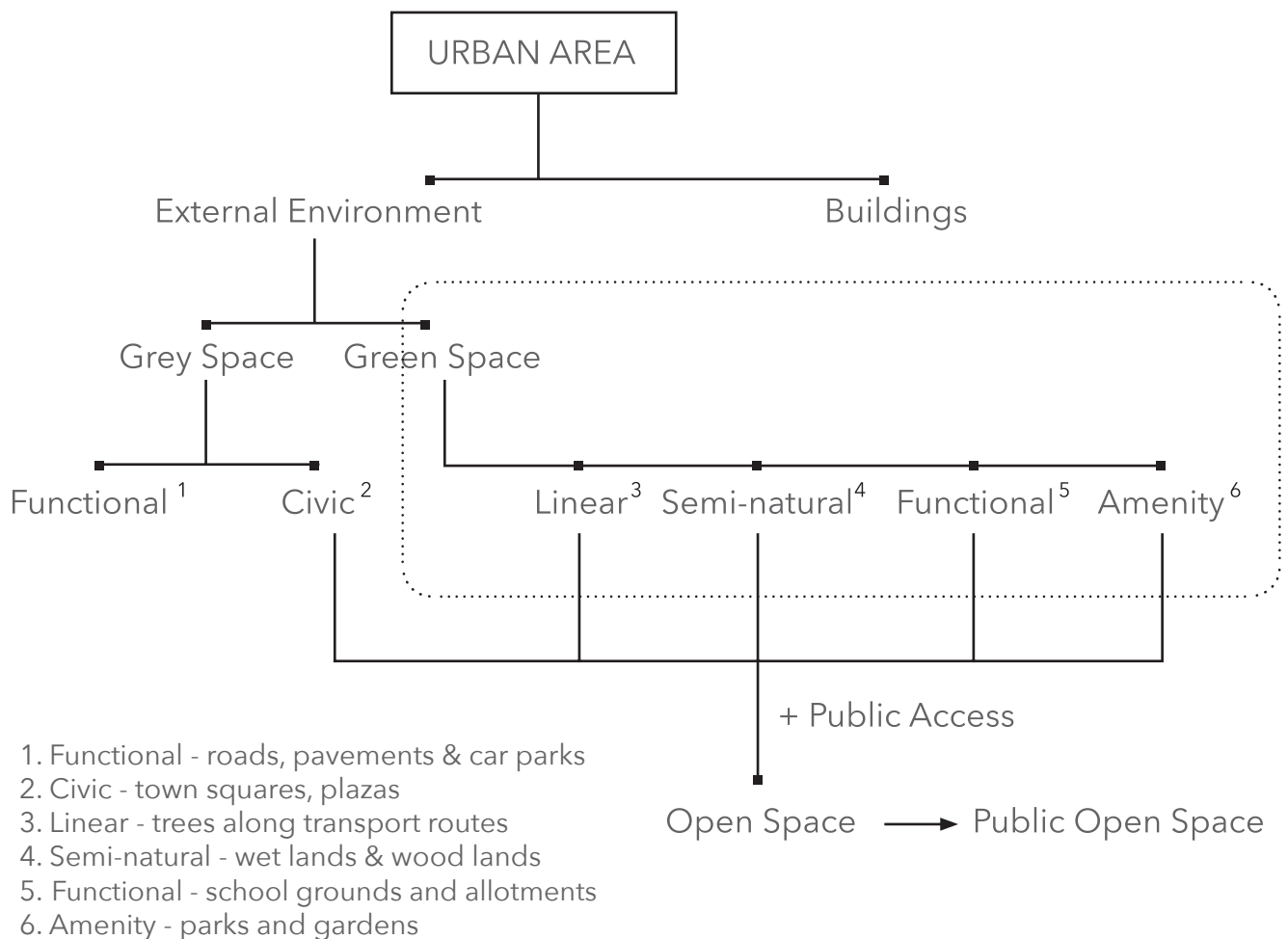
CONTEXT ■

Definitions

Public open spaces

Public open spaces are places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without profit motive¹.

Figure 1: Conceptualization of public and green spaces²



Sources: Enhancing quality of life through the lens of green, 2016

As per the above figure, public open space means an environment having no residential buildings, which all members of the public can easily access, that is safe to use and provides well maintained facilities.

Green spaces

Green spaces are areas that are artificially or naturally covered with vegetation. They are all vegetative spaces including all areas that have trees, shrubs and grasses. They are defined as lands that are made up mainly of unsealed, permeable soft surfaces such as soil, grasses, shrubs, forests, parks, gardens, wetlands and trees which are privately or publicly accessible or managed³.

For the purposes of this paper, we limit our definition of green spaces to focus mainly on accessible public parks in Yangon. Although this does not comprehensively account for all green spaces in Yangon (such as areas with vegetation but no parkland, greened/regenerated streets etc.), it was necessary to set this limitation so we could make conclusive statements about the amount of green space in Yangon based on data that is available. Developing a comprehensive measurement or data-set on green spaces in Yangon was outside the scope of this project.

Case Study (1) Greenest city, Vienna

Vienna, which regularly ranks in the top positions for the world's most livable cities, is one of the greenest cities in the world. More than half of metropolitan area is made up of green spaces. There are 120 square meters of green spaces for each head of the 1.7 million population. It has a total of 2,000 parks⁴.

Global trends

In the 21st century, cities around the world have become pivotal to the development of countries as the majority of a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is generated from cities⁵. On the other hand, there is an increasing rate of urbanization and growing population. It is projected that 68% of the world's population will live in urban areas by 2050⁶. Cities, therefore, become the centers of both the production and population of a country. This presents pressing challenges for urban areas, especially for cities to provide healthy and sustainable living environments.

In the global context, urban green spaces have come to play a key part in the quality of urban communities in cities. They are directly or indirectly associated with an individual's well-being - physically, socially, emotionally, and mentally. They can provide a number of benefits such as health, social, environmental and economic benefits.

Politically, they are important to promote a democratic society. They become a place for urban communities to conduct public meetings in the policy making process. They become a tool in enhancing social inclusiveness and cultural diversity through which they can promote human and civil rights. Economically, urban green spaces are used in the branding of cities, attracting investment and promoting tourism. Cities with well-maintained green spaces are able to attract more investment, both national and international. They also increase the property values of their surroundings⁷.

On the other hand, rapid urbanization brings the demand for commercial property and public housing infrastructure which results in the lack of the development of new green spaces in city planning. In some cases, the

formation of large green spaces has been found in the outskirts of the cities, however, they bring the challenge of long distance travel and the necessity to rely on transport⁸.

Benefits of urban green spaces

It can be challenging to measure the benefits of urban green spaces due to the broadness and intangibility of certain metrics, however, the following are a number of benefits in terms of health, social, environmental and economic, that have been identified through research.

Health benefits

Access to urban green spaces has a great influence on human health and lifestyles. Research shows that green spaces improve general public health and enhance psychological well-being of urban residents, has an association with reduced obesity⁹, lowered odds of having type 2 diabetes mellitus¹⁰, reduced cardiovascular morbidity¹¹ and mortality¹², and improved pregnancy outcomes¹³.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), green spaces also offer the following benefits:

- a) improved relaxation, restoration and social capital
- b) improved functioning of the immune system
- c) enhanced physical activity, improved fitness and reduced obesity
- d) buffered anthropogenic noise and produced nature sounds
- e) reduced exposure to air pollution and urban heat island effect and
- f) optimized exposure to sunlight and improved sleep¹⁴.

Social benefits

Regarding social benefits, research commonly shows that green spaces can provide:

- a) social interaction and social cohesion
- b) crime reduction and reduction of accidents probability
- c) aesthetics and recreation
- d) local/regional identity
- e) nature education and nature experience¹⁵.

Case Study (2) Crime reduction

In a residential neighborhood in southern Ontario, Canada, a community garden was created on the site of an old rubbish dump, previously a place that attracted local criminals and was avoided by the 1200 local residents. It resulted in a 30 per cent drop in crime over the following summer. Moreover, the reduction in crime in surrounding buildings has encouraged residents to use the streets more at night, increasing natural surveillance. As a result, fear of crime has lessened. The garden has brought other benefits too, including greater interaction between different ethnic groups within the community¹⁶.

Environmental benefits

Green spaces provide a number of different environmental benefits as they:

- a) regulate air quality and climate, and reduce energy consumption by countering the warming effects of paved surfaces
- b) recharge groundwater supplies and protect lakes and streams from polluted runoff
- c) reduce surface water runoff, keeping the valuable elements and pollutants in soil
- d) reduce on-site heat buildup, decrease runoff and enhance night-time cool downs
- e) hold soil in place, keeping sediment out of lakes, streams, storm drains and roads; and reducing flooding, mudslides and dust storms
- f) remove smoke, dust and other pollutants from the air¹⁷.

Economic benefits

With regard to economic benefits, green spaces have both direct and indirect benefits such as:

- a) a positive effect on nearby residential property values, and can lead to proportionately higher property tax revenues for local governments
- b) an impact on home prices depending on how far the home is from the open space, the size of the open space and the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood
- c) providing fiscal benefits to municipal governments
- d) providing economic benefits to real estate developers through higher home sale prices, enhanced marketability and faster sales or leases than conventional development¹⁸
- e) boosting retail sales (goods, food and drink) through increasing tourism¹⁹.

Case Study (3) Gardens by the Bay and its economic impacts

Gardens by the Bay is a nature park which covers 250 acres in central Singapore. It greatly contributes to the tourism industry of Singapore, attracting over 20 million visitors since opening in 2014. The site received 6.4 million visitors in 2014, more than one third of the total tourist arrivals to Singapore in 2014 (15.1 million visitors in total). It is listed as the number one site to visit in Singapore on Trip Advisor. It was the 13th most checked-in place in the world on Facebook in 2015. It has won numerous awards worldwide from tourism boards, architecture and design industry associations and building and construction groups. Tourism is worth US\$ 29 billion per year to the Singaporean economy²⁰.

GREEN SPACES IN YANGON CITY

Distribution of parks in Yangon City

The current population of Yangon City has nearly doubled from 2.9 million in 1990 to 5.2 million in 2014. At the current rate, the population of the City will be about seven million in 2024.

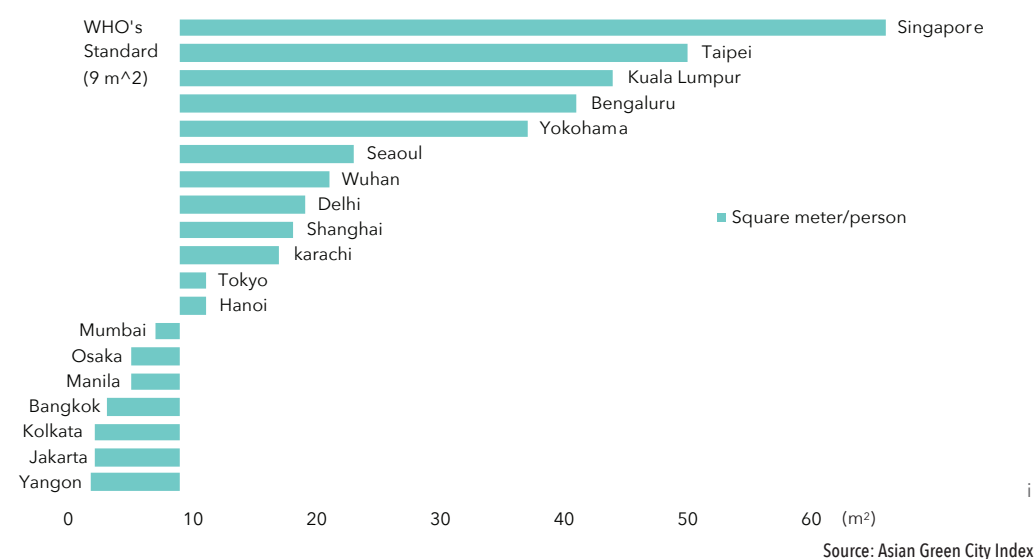
Table 1: Green space per person²¹

| Year | Park Area (sq. mile) | City Area (sq. mile) | Population (million) | Green space per person (sq. ft/person) | Change since 1990 % |
|------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|------------------------|
| 1990 | 3.2 | 84.0 | 2.9 | 30.5 | |
| 2002 | 3.3 | 231.2 | 4.2 | 21.9 | -28.2% |
| 2014 | 3.5 | 306.7 | 5.2 | 18.7 | -38.7% |

Source: YCDC, 2016

There are in total 63 public parks in Yangon City covering 211.25 ha (522 acres) of land which equates to 0.41 square meters (4.37 square feet) of green space per person. This increases to 1.74 square meters (18.74 square feet) per person if the Zoological Gardens and Hlawga Wildlife Park are included, as they are in official YCDC calculations for green space per person²². Including these two spaces somewhat skews the data given they are large paid-entry attractions, rather than free public parks. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that a city should have 9 square meters (96.88 square feet) of green space per person²³.

Figure 2: Green Spaces in Asian Major Cities²⁴



i Zoological Gardens and Hlawga Park are included in this area per person.

Distribution of parks is unequal with almost half of the total number of parks located in the Central Business District (CBD) and Inner Urban City Zone. In total, these two zones have 31 public parks while the Eastern and Southern Zones have two parks each²⁵. There are seven townships that have one public park, and nine townships have no park.

Table 2:
Public parks in Yangon City²⁶

| Zone | Number of Parks |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| CBD area | 6 |
| Inner City Zone | 25 |
| South-East Zone | 12 |
| Northern Zone | 16 |
| Southern Zone | 2 |
| Eastern Zone | 2 |
| Total | 63 |

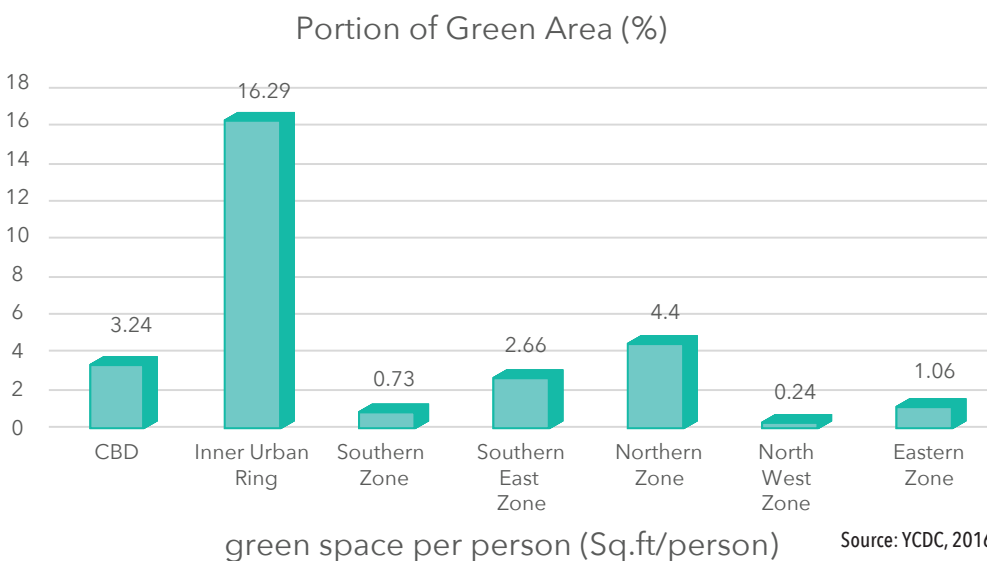
Source: YCDC, 2016

Table 3:
List of top 6 townships for parks²⁷

| No. | Township | Number of Parks |
|-----|----------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Bahan Township | 9 |
| 2 | Mayangone Township | 7 |
| 3 | Dagon Township | 6 |
| 4 | Thingangyun Township | 5 |
| 5 | Insein Township | 4 |
| 6 | North Okalapa | 4 |

Source: YCDC, 2016

Figure 3: Ratio of green space per person by areaⁱⁱ



Source: YCDC, 2016

Based on data from the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), the areas with the most green space per person (CBD and Inner Urban City Zone) are also the least vulnerable zones according to the MIMU's vulnerability index²⁸.

Access and use of public parks in Yangon City

According to an interview with the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, YCDC, there were approximately more than one million park visitors per month in September and October 2018ⁱⁱⁱ.

Table 4: Number of park users

| Month | Total Visitors |
|-----------|----------------|
| September | 1,160,364 |
| October | 1,815,708 |

Source: Playground, Parks and Gardens Department, 2018

YCDC does not maintain data on the demographics of park users, however, as part of this project AD conducted an in-person public survey with 157 people across 10 parks in Yangon City. The results of this survey showed the ages of park users ranging from 13 to 59 years with an average age of 28 years. 37% of park users were youth groups aged between 19 and 25, followed by the 26 - 35 and 36 - 45 age groups with 32% and 8% respectively. This shows that young people (aged 13 to 25) form the majority of park users.

Table 5: Age group of park users

| Age Group | Percent |
|-----------|---------|
| 13-18 | 13.2 |
| 19-25 | 37.4 |
| 26-35 | 32.2 |
| 36-45 | 7.5 |
| above 46 | 9.8 |

Source: Survey data, 2018

ii This data is based on 63 parks and does not include Zoological Gardens and Hlawga Park.

iii Interview with Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, November, 2018

54% of park users were male and 46% were female. Regarding education, 40% of visitors were university graduates, followed by 33% high school educated and 15% currently studying at university, with 6% having primary and non-formal education. More than 50% of visitors had an income under 250,000 kyats monthly (28% were between 150000 - 250000 kyats, and 31% were under 150,000 kyats) and 15% had an income of more than 450,000 kyats monthly.

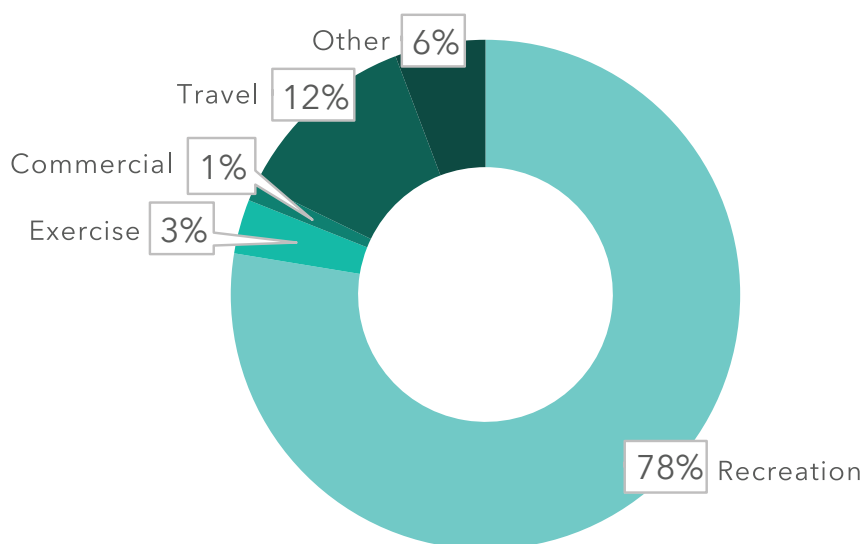
Table 6: Frequency of visiting parks by gender (percent)

| Gender | Daily | Weekly | Monthly | Yearly | Once in three months |
|--------|-------|--------|---------|--------|----------------------|
| Male | 2.2 | 19.4 | 41.9 | 19.4 | 17.2 |
| Female | 5.1 | 14.1 | 43.6 | 20.5 | 16.7 |

Source: Survey data, 2018

According to the survey, 43% of users stated they visit parks monthly while 17% and 4% were weekly and daily visitors. Additionally, according to gender, female visitors were relatively more frequent in daily, weekly and yearly visits. 78% of people said they visit parks for recreation (fun, meet with friends), 12% said they travelled through the parks for daily activities, and 3% visited for exercise. Regarding management of parks, 54% of visitors thought that YCDC was responsible for parks and 20% reported they did not know who was responsible.

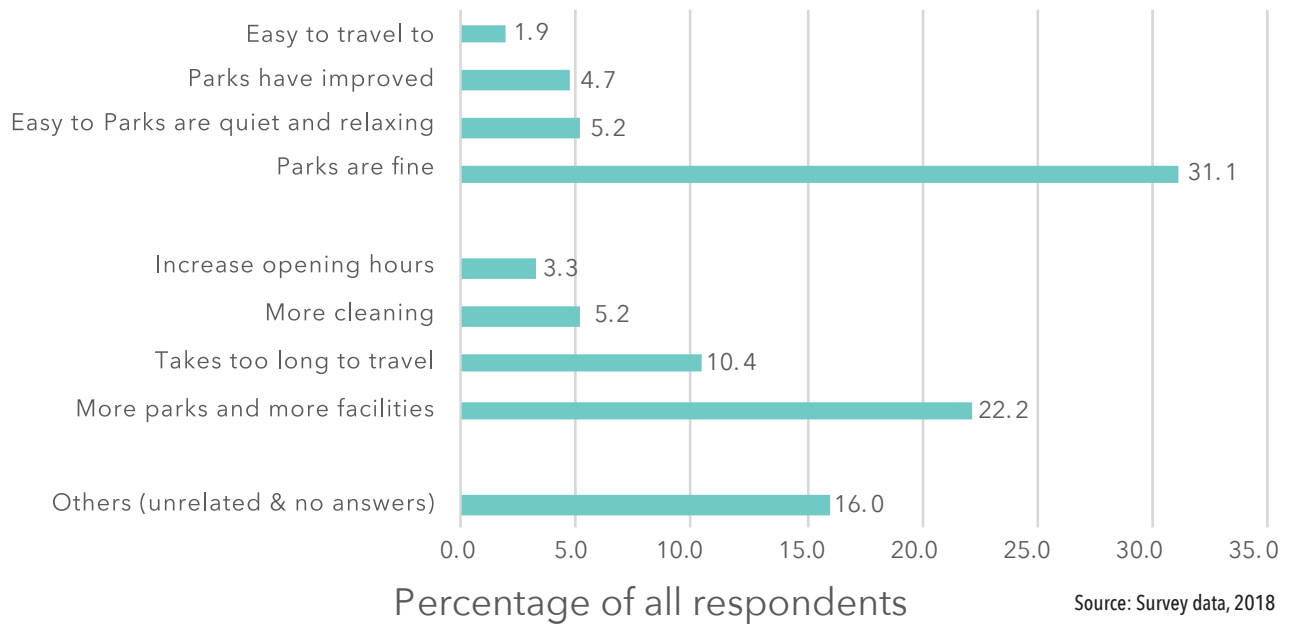
Figure 4: Purposes of visiting parks



Source: Survey data, 2018

Regarding the current conditions of the parks in Yangon City, 31% of respondents said in AD's survey said that parks were fine, while 22% stated that facilities and the number of parks did not meet the needs of park users, and 10% of respondents reported it took too long to travel to parks.

Figure 5: Perceptions on the current conditions of parks



Governance

Generally, YCDC is the body in charge of parks in Yangon City. 33 out of 45 townships in Yangon Region form Yangon City, and municipal services (urban planning, solid waste management and sewage, water supply and sanitation, and public spaces management) of the City are the responsibility of YCDC²⁹. Additionally, Yangon Regional Government may be involved in certain decisions relating to parks - such as granting the right for restaurants/shops to operate ^{iv} - however, YCDC is predominantly responsible for parks.



^{iv} Interview with Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, November, 2018

In 2018, a new YCDC Law (Yangon City Development Committee Law) was introduced with some major changes. It includes 31 chapters with 337 provisions, including penalties for breaching the code of conduct for civil servants. The new law also sets in motion a major shakeup of the regional government's administrative structure³⁰. For the formation, maintenance and management of the parks and playgrounds, the responsibilities of YCDC are described in Chapter Ten of the new law with 10 provisions³¹.

For green spaces in Yangon City, the Department of Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens, YCDC, is the responsible agency. They carry out the following functions and duties:

- constructing and maintaining parks, gardens and playgrounds authorized by YCDC
- growing ornamental and seasonal flowers in gardens and parks owned by YCDC
- creating playgrounds, maintaining and installing playground equipment
- cutting down dangerous old trees and branches and growing plants where necessary
- growing and maintaining ornamental green flowers and grass along the road dividers and roundabouts
- plant propagation and nursery management of seasonal flowers and plants
- creating landscapes and keeping grass and seasonal flowers looking fresh where necessary including road dividers
- constructing buildings at parks when necessary
- procuring and providing equipment necessary to be used systematically for each park and garden
- procuring and maintaining machinery for greenery and managing the amount of petrol used
- growing and maintaining groups of shady trees, hard strong durable trees in vacant lots in the city for preservation of the environment
- to earn some money for YCDC, hiring out vacant lots and buildings at parks owned by the Department, charging for use of public parks such as making videos and special occasional activities
- systematically managing and allocating tasks to each member of staff in the Department
- managing greenness in the city area
- growing and nursing shady trees, and
- cutting down invasive and inconvenient trees in the city area³².

According to an interview with the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, the goal of the Department is to have one playground in each ward and one park in each township, and to keep parks green and playgrounds accessible. Its budget is prepared by holding a meeting between the Department Head and Township Officers, then submitting the budget to the Committee. Additionally, when developing a new park, the City Planning and Land Administration Department is asked to check whether the land is owned by YCDC. The project is then proposed to the Budget and Accounts Department, and is implemented by the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department with the help of the Engineering Department^v.



v Interview with Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, November, 2018

Current developments in Yangon City

The vision of YCDC is “to create green amenity spaces by construction of public parks and improvement of greenery to realize comfortable and healthy urban life and urban development with less environmental impacts”³³. However, there has been no significant increase in the number of public parks in Yangon City, and growing population and rapid urbanization has resulted in construction development projects taking over green spaces.

There are a number of private companies that have had green spaces handed over to them by the Regional Government. Kanthaya Park in North Okkalapa Township which covers 10 acres, has lost its area as a result of Sein Gay Har supermarket and Fun Valley coming in. According to a lease agreement seen by Frontier, YCDC rented Kanthaya Park to a company called Phu Pwint San to build an international-standard theme park, a recreation center and a relaxation center³⁴.

In 2013, the 44.5-acre Mya Kyun Thar Park was granted for commercial construction projects under eight companies. The companies received approval for these projects at the park at a rental fee of K12 million a year per acre. The 44.5 acre site was to contain an amusement park, health care clinics, a cinema, and a golf driving range³⁵. However, the projects were brought to a halt in March 2016 as the rental agreement and planned use of land by the companies was inappropriate and damaging to public property. Four of the eight companies were asked to submit more planning documents in order to continue with the project³⁶. According to the 2018 Yangon Auditor General’s report, the projects were still suspended³⁷. Global News Light of Myanmar, the Irrawaddy and Myanmar Times have also reported that the rental rate of parks in Yangon is quite low³⁸.

In 2015, Frontier wrote that Yangon’s already negligible public spaces are under threat from the city’s commercial construction boom. According to the article, Frontier detailed a plan to develop the 147 acres-Kyaikkasan Sports Ground in Tarmwe Township into a Central Business Area. However, it was unable to verify the status of the project³⁹. In 2018, Myanmar Times and Eleven Media reported that the development would include building the Aung San National Green Park, condos and sports grounds in Kyaikkasan Sports Ground. The project will be jointly delivered by the governments of Myanmar and Japan. Kyaikkasan Sports Ground would be divided into three sections: sports, public area, and construction⁴⁰.

On the other hand, there are organizations focusing on developing green spaces, urban planning and regeneration in Yangon City. Since 2017, Doh Eain has been running urban planning projects such as heritage restoration and the upgrading of public spaces aiming to renew Yangon City. Its alleyway garden project aims to turn wasted land into playgrounds and green spaces for recreation and social cohesion purposes, promoting citizen-led urban heritage conservation and urban regeneration, and involves gardens, street art and playgrounds, as well as recycling and composting techniques. Doh Eain have been involved in the renovation of six alleyways in the downtown area, and there are currently four ongoing alleyways and street improvement projects aiming to improve walkability in downtown Yangon⁴¹.

Advocacy and strategy

In addition to current developments, there are organizations focused on long-term advocacy and strategy for improving green spaces in Yangon City. One of the organizations, Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), has been planning urban heritage focusing on the downtown area. YHT is a prominent organization in calling for Yangon to be one of Asia's most livable cities. In 2016, they produced the Yangon Heritage Strategy. In the Strategy, publicly accessible parks was identified as one of the 12 key principles for a livable Yangon City. YHT pointed out that many parks in Yangon City are inaccessible for the public and have been eroded by semi-private development. For public parks and gardens in their strategy, YHT made recommendations in three areas: the accessibility and management of parks, the renovation of existing assets, and the creation of greenery in Yangon City⁴².

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is another organization working on parks and green spaces and has engaged with YCDC. In 2013, JICA prepared a strategic urban development plan for Greater Yangon with the agreement of Regional Government. According to the plan, they proposed to increase by two times the existing green space per capita, and to reduce the number of townships with no public parks by 2040. Additionally, three strategies have been recommended by JICA - to construct new public parks in new town areas, to renovate the existing public parks and urban area with greenery, and to promote greenery in urban areas. For the promotion of greenery, JICA proposed that when large-scale buildings are constructed or re-constructed, a suitable ratio of green coverage to total development area should be adopted. They recommended the promotion and dissemination of information related to greenery, and the creation of a system for recommending, guiding and supporting greenery⁴³.



WAY FORWARD ■

“If a city does not have parks, there would not be any other places for people to relax. For ordinary people, if one feels stress, they would go to park. But without parks, there would be increased number of mental illnesses and also air pollution as a result of no trees.”

— 22 year-old male respondent

There are many challenges with regard to maintaining current and creating new accessible green spaces for an increasing population in Yangon City. Yangon is becoming a metropolitan city with colonial heritage sites, modern high-rise buildings, that is a hub for businesses and export-oriented manufacturing, and a gateway for tourists into Myanmar.

Green spaces are a key component of a sustainable city and provide significant benefits in terms of environment, social well-being, physical and mental health, cultural exchange, and tourism and economy. Green spaces can promote the creation of job opportunities, new business start-ups, private investment, and can increase local gross valued added. To this end, AD supports the goal of the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, YCDC, to have a playground in each ward and a park in every township in Yangon City. This view was often mentioned and supported in AD’s survey.



The City Hall and Sule Pagoda as seen from Maha Bandula Park
(Photo: U Zaw Nai)

AD supports the goal of the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, YCDC, to have one playground and one park in every township in Yangon City.

“Parks are crucial. I think it would be best if the number of parks could be increased in Yangon City. Children like to play very much in it.”

— 54 year-old male respondent

In addition to having a park in every township, AD believes that Yangon should be meeting WHO standards with regard to the amount of green space per person. The development of a green space strategy may be an effective way to meet this standard. There are many case studies of municipalities and/or communities that have developed green space strategies. A green space strategy is an important tool for urban parkland planning, and is a plan that guides long-term planning for new parks and improved access to existing parks. Basically, the strategy is a collective vision of the needs and priorities of residents and the meaning, value and importance of urban green space to a city. If Yangon is to become a future regional hub, our goals must be ambitious. The city would benefit from the development of a green space strategy that captures the vision of Yangon’s residents for the future of their city. To that end, a green space strategy should be developed and supported by YCDC as well as Yangon Regional Government, to ensure Yangon meets and enjoys the benefits of satisfying the WHO’s standard for green space per person.

AD recommends that YCDC and Yangon Regional Government develop a green space strategy that ensures the expansion of public parkland in Yangon City to satisfy the WHO’s standard of nine square meters of green space per person.

Case Study (4) Józsefváros district, Budapest, Hungary

The urban green space strategy of Józsefváros was developed at the district level. A small group of experts started the strategy development and secured increasing political and public support. Public involvement was achieved through: holding several meetings (local forums) with inhabitants of the quarter; arranging workshops to inform about planned green space development activities; preparation and circulation of posters and flyers; and, public events. With public activities and action, Józsefváros successfully raised awareness about green spaces amongst citizens and politicians. This was the first green space strategy in Hungary and served as a positive example of how to promote and develop green spaces in a city⁴⁵.

More green space alone will not be enough to bring the significant benefits associated with them including boosting tourism. The quality, uniqueness, and safety of green spaces are also key factors in attracting tourists⁴⁶. Improving existing parkland, as well as the compulsory inclusion of public green space area in new urban developments in city areas are needed. As previously mentioned, YHT has conducted extensive research and policy work on this issue in their Yangon Heritage Strategy.

YHT's recommendation relating to green spaces:

- ensuring that fences of parks are removed or gates are built and opened in regular intervals
- careful controlling of commercial activities within public parklands and reviewing of existing activities to protect the parkland and ensure public benefits
- improving provision and quality of circular walking and cycling paths within public parklands
- designating former War Office compound as public parkland and re-greening the compound to ensure stability of subsoil
- removing all entrance fees on all public parks to encourage public use
- protecting public parks through application of conservation area designations
- reviewing existing legislation dealing with public parks and strengthening to ensure public access and sharing public ownership of these spaces is enshrined in law
- undertaking an audit of all public parks in Yangon with a view to protecting them
- having a dedicated live-in caretaker or team and a budget for maintenance
- commitment of 20% of park space within large-scale development
- creating new waterfront parks
- greening public streets, and
- protecting heritage trees so they can be enjoyed and used by the public⁴⁷.

Additionally, in an interview with YHT, they recommended YCDC approach the owners of some abandoned lands in the City to explore the creation of more green spaces. According to our survey, a number of suggestions of respondents aligned with YHT's recommendations. Accordingly, AD supports YHT's recommendations with regard to green spaces in Yangon City, and believes that YCDC and Yangon Regional Government should also offer their support.

AD calls on YCDC and Yangon Regional Government to commit to recommendations in YHT's Yangon Heritage Strategy that relate to parks and green spaces in Yangon City.

Urban planning initiatives, including developing parks and green spaces, require effective collaboration amongst all key stakeholders. Research states that local coordination and collaboration is a pressing challenge in municipal governance in Yangon as there are many different departments at the township level, as well as numerous committees with a lack of clear mandates. In addition, coordination at these levels is compounded by the lack of integrated, township-level planning process⁴⁸. AD's interview with the Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department, confirmed this to be an issue. The creation of a municipal association or similar forum may be beneficial to allow municipals to communicate with each other to share experiences⁴⁹. A clear delimitation of roles and a definition of responsibilities among agencies may also be helpful⁵⁰.

AD recommends YCDC enhance collaboration among agencies and departments, to improve urban planning and better meet the needs of the residents.

Civil engagement and public voices are not sufficiently heard in urban green space planning and development in Yangon. Engaging communities in the urban planning process is the responsibility of planners and implementers. Public participation in urban planning strengthens democracy by preventing conflict between the public and government and increases public confidence in public institutions⁵¹. Public participation in decision making helps people understand the role they can play in deciding their own future, and therefore, people come to understand the contribution they make and become full participants in the process. It is a way to renew public trust and return credibility and legitimacy to all levels of governments⁵². Media can also be a platform where citizens can engage or raise their voices, opinions, and discuss urban planning regardless of their gender, age, location, and education⁵³.

Case Study (5) Los Huertas Del Cura: A community park designed by and for the people

Los Huertas Del Cura Park in Colima City, Mexico, is a historical park that had been abandoned. The park was redesigned by the municipality of Colima City collaborating with Sustainable Cities International (SCI). This was perceived as a community-guided redesign project for the revitalization of a local historic park. A participatory approach was used in this project, and it emphasized the importance of “true” participation by community members. The participatory process began with community members in the neighborhoods surrounding the Las Huertas Park in February of 2010. In total, more than 400 community members were involved in the process, with half being local youth and children. This process consisted of asset-mapping and vision-mapping workshops, community meetings and reviews, events and celebrations, as well as the painting of a large mural, which showcased the final park vision. The enthusiastic and continuous engagement by community members and local youth was integral in facilitating a shift from the traditional planning process to one which considers the local community as experts of their space, community needs and visions for the future⁵⁴.

Participatory Urban Planning

Participatory urban planning is the direct engagement with neighborhood residents, where planners include the whole community or neighborhood in the planning process. Residents provide local knowledge and information to technicians and officials, and solutions are collectively developed to meet the needs of the community. There are different approaches to participatory urban planning, but a participatory approach generally involves: sharing of knowledge and experience; recognizing and encompassing different perspectives; working in teams on practical tasks; the use of visualization and analytical tools; an open-ended creative learning process; the development of shared understanding and jointly owned plans or other products; and, the capacity for reflection and self-assessment⁵⁵.

Based on successful models such as Los Huertas Del Cura, AD believes that inclusive public participation should be promoted in all urban planning projects in Yangon City, ensuring that the voices of all community members are captured regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, or any other social categorization.

AD recommends that YCDC ensures inclusive public participation is practiced in all Yangon City urban planning projects.

Through conducting a survey of park users, AD learnt of a number of relatively simple yet positive suggestions from survey respondents to improve green spaces in Yangon City. Respondents asked for improvements in parks such as more shady trees, sports facilities, trash bins, lighting, seats, educational tools for children, and the removal of access fees for park facilities such as toilets. AD believes these would be positive additions.

AD recommends YCDC increase shady trees and shelter, sports facilities, trash bins, lighting, seats, and educational tools for children in parks, and remove access fees for facilities such as toilets, to better meet the needs of users.

Survey respondents also suggested improved routine maintenance of parks such as water sprinkling and trash collection.

AD recommends YCDC increase routine maintenance of parks including water sprinkling and trash collection.

Case Study (6): Yangon Photography Festival in Maha Bandula Park

In March 2017, the Yangon Photography Festival was exhibited in Maha Bandula Park in Yangon City. It has turned into one of the most important photography events in South East Asia, and an audience of over 100,000 people has enjoyed to the exhibitions and screenings by 80 local and international photographers⁵⁶.

Respondents expressed that events like educational, literature, and celebrity talks and ceremonies should be held in the parks of Yangon City as a means to attract both park users and tourists. Respondents also suggested that green spaces should be created in Yangon based on international examples of popular parks, and should include things like art, monuments and other decorations and attractions. Detailed earlier in this paper, Gardens By the Bay in Singapore is one such successful example of a green space that promotes tourism.

AD recommends YCDC promote the holding of events such as educational, literature, and celebrity talks and other ceremonies in parks, as a way to attract users and promote tourism.

AD recommends YCDC develop parks based on successful international examples to promote tourism in Yangon City.

“I would like to make them (the parks) accessible for all disabled people. I would like to include disabled peoples perspectives in designing them. I would like to enforce rules and disciplines and also want to have more dustbins in the parks.”

— 27 year-old female respondent

Survey respondents proposed making parks accessible for all kinds of people including disabled people^{vi}. To improve the safety of parks, they suggested more security staff in parks. AD believes that parks should be shared by all, and that people should feel safe when doing so.

AD recommends YCDC ensures all parks in Yangon City are accessible for every member of the community including providing disabled access.

AD recommends YCDC improve safety for users by increasing the number of security staff in parks.

There were a number of additional suggestions from survey respondents including: a designated area for betel spitting; a strategy for street children; increased enforcement of rules with regard to the behavior of park users; and, providing health clinics/facilities. These suggestions appear to be small parts of much larger and complex policy issues in Yangon, and unfortunately fall outside the scope of AD’s research capability in this project. There may be benefit in YCDC, or other organizations, exploring these issues in greater detail.

vi An individual who is limited in function and/or ability to conduct activities in daily living to participate in society due to physical, seeing, hearing and intellectual or learning impairment. (Myanmar National Disability Survey, 2010).

CALL TO ACTION ■

AD has a vision for a Yangon City in which increased and improved urban green spaces - developed according to the needs of the public - allow for the well-being of all citizens. This paper is part of a journey to realize this vision, and will be used in AD's future advocacy on this important issue. We also hope that this paper will provide inspiration to the public, community organizations, and MPs, in taking action and making progress on this issue.

Through developing this paper, we've seen that top-down planning and urban planning projects without true public participation have failed to meet the needs of the community. Green spaces in Yangon City have been degraded through neglect and the replacing of green spaces with urban development projects. If proper consideration for green spaces is not ensured in all urban planning processes, this degradation may get worse, and the residents of Yangon will bear the burden of this failure.

Public issues like green spaces must be understood and recognized as important, and a collaborative approach must be pursued amongst decision makers, government agencies, and the public, so as to better serve public needs. It is our hope that in encouraging the public to raise their voice and get involved, Yangon will develop and ingrain a culture of participatory urban planning.

Green spaces will play a crucial role not only in the quality of life for the people of Yangon, but also in the economic and environmental future of the city. Additionally, as Myanmar undertakes widespread democratization across the country, green spaces can be a contributing factor in the formation of a democratic society, and a tool for strengthening social inclusiveness and cultural diversity.

AD calls on YCDC, Yangon Regional Government, MPs, and CSOs working in this field, to act on the ideas in this paper and make green spaces an issue that matters, so that the future of Yangon City resembles the vision and ambitions of its citizens.



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“In the 1990s, Yangon had over 30.5 square feet of green space for every resident. This has already reduced to round four. And as Myanmar’s economy grows, the concreting over of our parks looks set to continue apace, unless action is taken. Allowing this to happen would be shortsighted and make life for us in our great city less pleasant.”

AD developed this position paper to understand the challenges relating to green spaces in Yangon, and identify some next steps for positive reform.



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