Socio-Cultural Value of Public Open Spaces with Hamchas in Dera Ghazi Khan City, Pakistan

ATIFA BATOOL*, NEELUM NAZ**, AND GHULAM ABBAS ANJUM***

ABSTRACT

The socio-cultural value of open spaces normally refers to the behavior of users towards their surroundings. In the city of DGK (Dera Ghazi Khan), the wooden cots (locally known as *Hamachas*) are placed at almost every chowk and pathway. The *Hamacha* culture of the city acts as means of social interaction in the neighborhood where the people discuss personal, political and social issues in a friendly environment. This paper presents the social and cultural value of urban open spaces, specifically the placement of *Hamachas* in the public squares of the city. For this research, around 200 interviews with locals were conducted to gauge the role of public open spaces in shaping the culture of the city. The satisfaction index reveals that a vast majority of the users are highly satisfied with these public open spaces. The paper concludes that the use of *Hamachas* in open spaces plays a vital role in strengthening social ties among the locals. Other than a means for social interaction, these spaces are used for multiple activities ranging from conflict resolution to crime control. The findings of this study may be useful for future planning and design of squares/chowks and other public open spaces in other places.

Key Words: Dera Ghazi Khan, Urban Open spaces, Hamacha System, Social Interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Urban open public spaces hold vital importance in the development of the human settlements. Public open spaces (natural or man-made) contribute to the quality of life in many ways. Recently, the concept of "open space" in urban fabric is not restricted only to parks, but also includes non-park-non-natural- places. Public spaces such as streets, school yards, squares, cemeteries, and public squares are few major elements of open spaces [1]. Since, everyone has access to these areas; their planning and design holds vitality to make them look attractive.

There are many historical evidences of the public open spaces (e.g. Greek holy gardens and agoras, the forum in Rome) used intentionally by ancient cultures [2]. A perfect example for open spaces development in big cities is the Urban Regeneration Model of Barcelona [3]. Another example is that of Hong Kong, one of the world's most populated cities, has an area of around 1000-1500m^2 consisting of small public spaces scattered around [4].

It is believed that the network of interconnected public spaces has served the local community better due to their location. The results from different studies show that the cities designed with these elements have low street level crimes, enhanced social cultural values and escape from daily routine tensions resulting in improved health issues and enhanced quality of life [5].

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DGK one of the historic cities of Pakistan has an estimated population of 0.4 Million [6]. It is characterized by its most condensed part presenting the overall image of the city. The other major aspect is quality of social life of the people. The increase in the quality of social and cultural values of its urban environment can be judged by proper consideration of the urban open spaces in their system.

In DGK, there are a large number of big wooden cots (locally known as *Hamachas*) usually having size 8'x12' woven with date leaves, which are kept at almost every chowk and pathway. Normally people sit together on these *Hamachas* and this culture of the city has become a social interaction space for the neighborhood people. Here, the people discuss their personal, political and social issues in a very friendly environment. This paper focuses on socio-cultural values of urban open spaces and use of these spaces in the tradition of DGK City. Urban public spaces result as a product of social processes which happens in a continuous historical period - such spaces in the city have a different form and character.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

It is important to gauge the capacity of public open spaces in DGK City with regards to their role in promoting social interaction among the local people. Primary and secondary data was used to conduct this research. Interviews were conducted with the locals residing near these open spaces and users of these spaces. The interviews aimed to determine how these public open spaces affected the social life of users. The results from the interviews helped in shaping the questionnaire.

The questionnaire included questions relating to: socio-cultural characteristics of the respondents, provision of *Hamachas* in chowks and on pathways; maintenance of public open spaces; and the role of *Hamachas* in controlling street crime. Moreover, the respondents' level of satisfaction with the open spaces was also gauged (the level of satisfaction was determined by three point scale; (1) satisfied, (2) indifferent and (3) dissatisfied). YIS (Yeh's Index of Satisfaction) for various activities

performed in public open spaces was used to analyze data. The selected respondents had a similar socioeconomic profile. A total of 250 questionnaires were filled by the residents and users of *Hamachas*. However, only 200 questionnaires were considered for analysis as they were completely filled and 50 were dropped because of incomplete data. Fig. 1 indicates the total number of visitors using the public open spaces at different timings. It reveals that in the evening there are maximum users of these spaces. Secondary source helped validate the authors' analysis of the survey.

3. BRIEF HISTORY/HIERARCHY OF SPACES

In DGK, the framework of planning starts from a point that understands the need of social and cultural values of users of these spaces. Planning was done to preserve the natural environment of the area, both for ecological and human health. The new town was laid out on a gridiron pattern consisting of 66 blocks with wide roads and streets. In each block, two open spaces were planned for social gatherings. All blocks are similar to each other. All of the blocks have the same number of streets and squares. The area of all blocks is same with (north-south length of 697 ft and east-west width 477 ft as shown in Figs. 2-3).
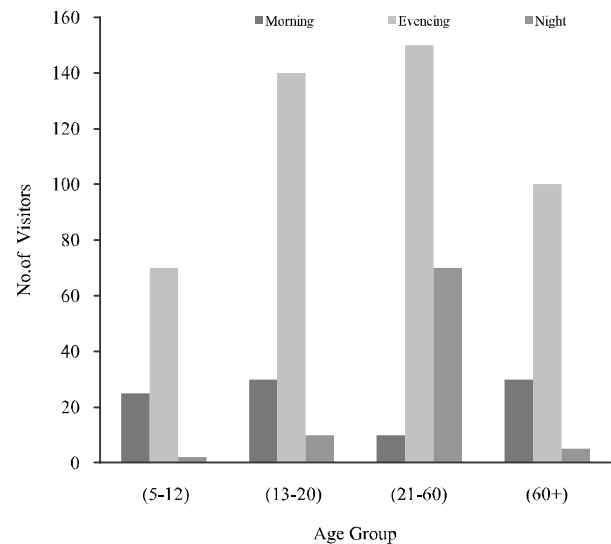

FIG. 1. NUMBEROF VISITORS AT DIFFERENT TIMES

Every block has two streets in north-south axis, which run through the whole city and one street is 20ft and the other street is about 15 ft. Likewise, on eastern and the western axis, there are six streets where three streets approach to central chowk. These streets connect the two blocks with each other.

In Fig. 2, the chowks are indicated by the color, white in each block. There are two chowks on the southern and western axis having length 114 ft and width 75 ft in every block. Streets that approach these chowks pass through the whole city. Only the chowks of block 6 and 7 are not opposite to each other. The total number of chowks in the whole city is 130. The total number of *Hamachas* placed at different locations in DGK is 3226. In each chowk, an average number of 4 *Hamachas* are placed. The remaining locations include pathways, in front of the houses of political leaders (locally known as *Sardars* and *Waderas*) from different castes such as Lashari, Laghari, Khosas, Buzdar, Langah and Patafi. Almost 8-10 persons can sit on one *Hamacha* at a time. Over 23,000users, at a time, can interact with each other on these *Hamachas* in the city. Table 1 indicates the number of Hamachas at different places.

One key point in the initial planning of DGK city was the focus on connecting open spaces for human social interaction. In order to ensure that social and cultural
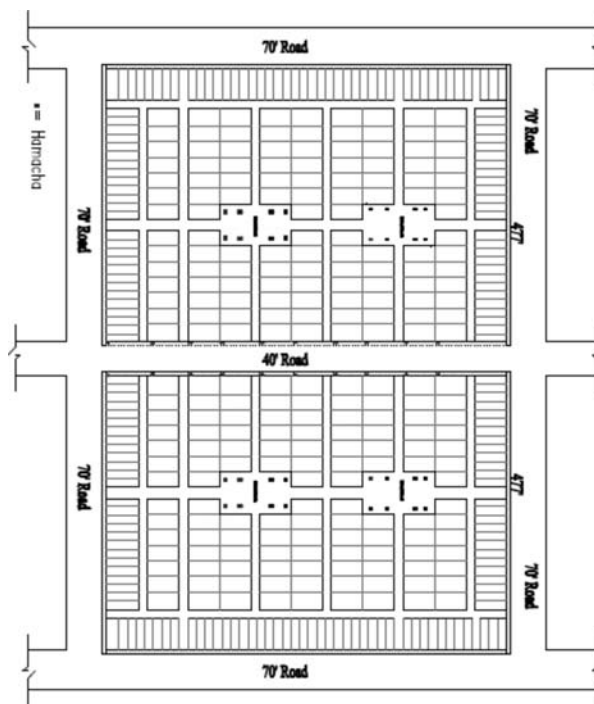

FIG. 3. GENERAL LAYOUT PLAN OF BLOCKS AND INTERNAL CHOWKS

FIG. 2. BASE MAP OF PLANNED AREA OF D.G.KHAN SOURCE: [7]

values are not disturbed in the name of urban planning, the city of DGK supports the integration of public open spaces with their users and culture of Hamacha systems in both, the inner city and the outer suburban communities.

Socio-Cultural Factors: The urban areas in DGK have primarily been shaped under political and religious influences. It is pertinent to note that the legal framework in the city was provided and designed by the *Wadera & Sardar* system. Thus, the *Sardar* system could easily influence the pattern of the main activities through its social provision. These activities included the responsibility for the use of space and the change in the physical environment. *Sardars* framed rules and regulations to guide the actions for reshaping the environment. In this way, the tradition and culture of *Hamachas* continued to affect the trends of physical development and the values of the future generation as shown in Figs. 4-5 there are a large number of Hamachas in front of Sradar's house.

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF HAMACHAS AT DIFFERENT PLACES

Place	No. of Hamachas
Blocks' internal chowks	1078
Pathways in front of houses	596
New housing schemes	718
In front of Sardars' houses	520
Markets and other places	314
Total	3226

FIG. 4. HAMACHAS IN FRONT OF A SARDAR'S HOUSE

Thus, socio-cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping the urban environment. The huge Hamacha also performed the function of holding the meetings of union council or punchayat. Since, people respected the elders normally Sardars acted either as interlocutors or as adjudicators. Therefore, from a cultural perspective, such a council was called a punchayat.

A punchayat handled all disputes of users in the distribution of irrigation water, money matters or the matrimonial disputes between two parties. Additionally, all types of offenses, minorcrimes and disputes were also handled by these punchayats. Instead of going to the city courts where normally a case may take years to decide and where, also, solicitors charge a high fee, the neighborhood people referred the matter to be solved by a local punchayat which made decisions in less time. This decision was always honored by all parties concerned with that matter. To date, the culture of *Hamachas* still remains in the open spaces of the city; the neighborhood people come and sit together in their leisure time. The political leaders normally complete their campaign of votes on these *Hamachas* and after their selection; they come on these Hamachas for understanding and solving the problems of their areas.

4. ROLE OF HAMACHAS IN SOCIAL VALUES

Public spaces play an important role in the social life of people. Access to such form of nature is a fundamental human need. Some of the major aspects of these spaces are described below.

FIG. 5. HAMACHA AT INTERNALCHOWK

Exchange-Based Relationships: With elders keeping an eye onto the children playing in these areas, it develops respect and regard, among the children, for the elders. Several activities are examined and reviewed by those sitting on *Hamachas* placed in open spaces which serve the purpose of tuition centers, educating students in the day light, out in the open spaces.

Playful Spaces: Nowadays, children and older people rarely enjoy local activities, but this system of public open spaces gives them the opportunity to enjoy outdoor fun in their own neighborhood. By extending their knowledge and familiarity with the people from their neighborhood, people can be encouraged to engage in innovative activities in these open public spaces. Furthermore, this pedestrian-friendly urban environment generates a better sagacity of discovery and attachment for the users of the spaces.

Crime Control: A low crime rate is observed in the area where the *Hamachas* are actively used and properly maintained -crimes, such as theft/robbery are significantly limited in these areas. This is because the users are mostly neighborhood people who remain sitting on the *Hamachas* through all the day till midnight. If any unknown or suspected person appears, he is easily identified and interrogated by the local people. Moreover, these Hamachas are mostly placed in front of the houses; therefore any unusual behavior of resident is also easily identified. However, the use of these public spaces at night does become problematic. This is because the Hamacha users, mostly young people, often create problems by drinking alcohol.

Social Events: Marriage events and funerals are also held in these chowks at local level. Thus, these *Hamachas* are also used as urban social spaces.

However, the study identified a situation where the gap between design intent and social outcome design was too broad. People used to dump their solid waste and garbage outside their houses on these chowks and workers from the TMA (Tehsil Municipal Administration) would pay no attention to these places to collect and dispose off that garbage way from residential areas.

Political Influences: As the city has a very strong political background, the political leaders also use these *Hamachas* as a platform for their election campaigns. They use *Hamachas* for addressing the local people, solving the community's issues and problems.

5.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

These chowks are mostly used for different purposes. Data collected reveals that 90% of the children of age group 5-12 and 70% of adults of age group 13-20 use these chowks as playgrounds with an eye of the elders sitting on the Hamachas. Around 40-60% senior citizen of the neighborhood use these open spaces and Hamachas for relaxation, social interaction, and discussion of political matters and they also attend any event. These spaces are used for midnight entertainment purposes, from where street crimes started. Around, 35% of adults from neighboring areas use these spaces for mid night entertainment (Fig. 6).

Physical and Functional use of Public Spaces: Social interaction of people, their comfort, security and their attractiveness towards public spaces depends directly or indirectly on the physical and functional conditions of these places [8] These conditions are directly related to public properties, activities of residents and neighborhood people, accessibility conditions, location and surroundings of these spaces and planning. Public spaces act as the society's playground and the public realm is where the society reinvented [9] Such areas are undefined areas of open space and their functioning needs to be responsive, democratic, meaningful and ecologically friendly as described in Fig. 7.

Responsive: Active community participation, establishment of mix use spaces according to the needs of citizens, appropriate places for organizing social events in public spaces were the main goals for the satisfaction of citizens in these public spaces. These goals help in developing positive public spaces. Therefore, these public spaces in chowks with *Hamachas* help in creating opportunities for cultural and social exchange. It is clear that these public spaces have been designed at a great level of self-regulation and self- maintaining public behavior that is observed to some extent.

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Democratic*:* The diversity of all age groups whose activities affect these public open spaces with *Hamachas* faces many challenges regarding their management. There are many lessons to be learnt from this multi-disciplinary approach established by all the age groups as shown in Fig. 8.

Meaningful*:* Longer distances appear to promote car-based travel and sedentary lifestyles [10]. Connectivity in these spaces promotes walking for exercise and transport. The people who live in communities with a gridiron street pattern appear more inclined to walk to their local market and to their work than the people who live in communities with a haphazard street pattern, because straight connected streets take less time than any other [11]. These open spaces, means chowks and *Hamachas* have good physical access and serve as welcoming spaces to users of the neighborhood. On every block there are two chowks and these are easily accessible to all neighborhood people. This results in a social interactive environment. As planned by planner these open public spaces are embedded in social networks to encourage people go there and sit on *Hamachas* ensuring high social interaction and promoting the culture of the area.

Ecological: Sound planning and design of public open spaces aids in establishing ecological networks [12]. However, these spaces lack green and water spaces and also equipped furniture as shown in Fig. 9.

The overall satisfaction of users with physical and functional activities is presented in Table 2.

$$YIS = \frac{Satisfied - Dissatisfied}{Total Respondents} \times 100$$

Average satisfaction index from these spaces is 62.75. That shows a high satisfaction level of the respondents but still there is a need for improvement.
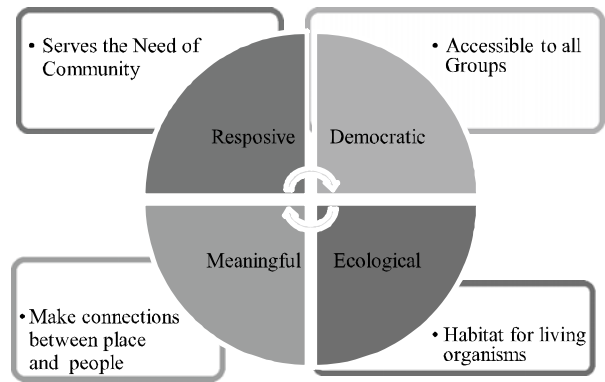

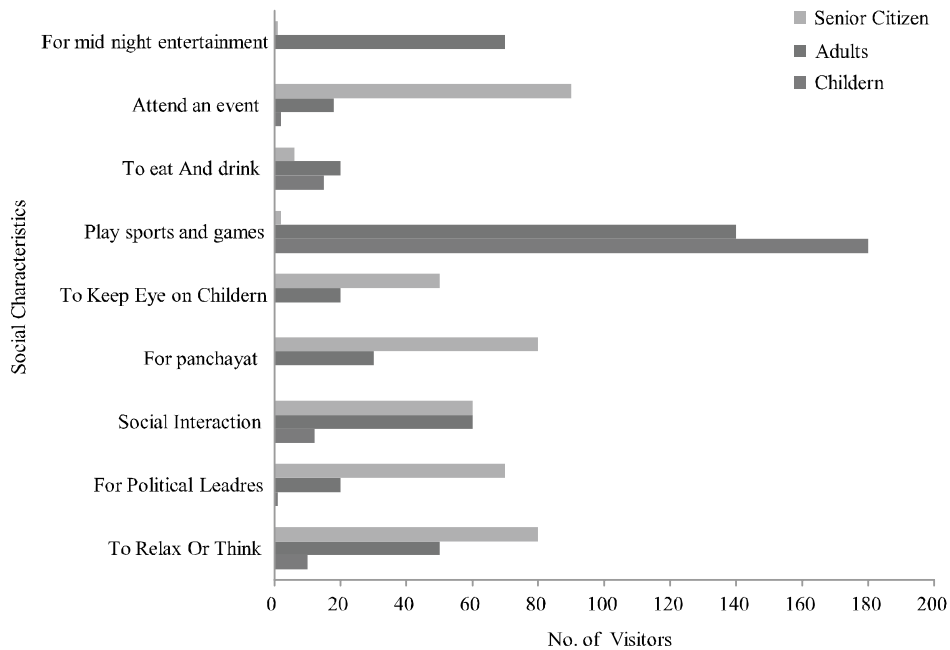FIG. 7. *PHYSICAL & FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITIES OF PUBLIC SPACES*

FIG. 6. *SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF URBAN OPEN SPACES WITH REFERENCE TO AGE GROUP*

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FIG. 8. HAMACHA IN FRONT OF HOTEL

FIG. 9. HAMACHA IN FRONT OF HOUSES

The following significant finding can be helpful for developing a theoretical base and guiding the understanding of social and cultural value of open space users. These findings show that Hamachas have influenced the vitality of public life of urban open spaces like chowks. It is important to note that these spaces and Hamachas have other multiple physical and functional uses which are shown in Table 3.

6.   CONCLUSION

Sustainability of cities greatly depends on urban open spaces. This paper assessed and evaluated the different types of open spaces, and their contribution to strengthening social interaction as well as their design in the overall outlay of the city. Although there are certain negative uses of these public open spaces with *Hamachas,* these spaces also offer opportunities to the residents for extensive social interaction and play a significant role in conflict resolution regarding political and social matters. The system prevents street crime by ensuring the security. It also offers teenagers a space to learn from and interact with elders. The findings of the research have led to the conclusion that the users are highly satisfied with the public open spaces with *Hamachas.*

TABLE 2. SATISFACTION INDEX OF PHYSICAL AND FUNCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Activity	Age Group	Satisfied	Dis-Satisfied	Satisfaction Index
Socialabilty	4-12	32	18	7
	13-16	45	5	20
	17-60	42	8	17
	60+	48	2	23
Total		167	33	67
Uses and Activities	4-12	38	12	13
	13-16	41	9	16
	17-60	40	10	15
	60+	47	3	22
Total		166	34	66
Access and Linkage	4-12	39	11	14
	13-16	48	2	23
	17-60	45	5	20
	60+	46	4	21
Total		178	22	78
Comfort and Image	4-12	29	21	4
	13-16	35	15	10
	17-60	39	11	14
	60+	37	13	12
Total		140	60	40

TABLE 3. PHYSICAL AND FUNCTIONAL USE OF PUBLIC SPACES

Use	Activity	Attributes	Condition
Functional	Responsive	Mixed use	Yes
		Sports and games	
		Social cohesion	
		Cultural values	
		Human scale	
		Self-organized and self-maintained	
	Democratic	Access to groups of all ages	
Physical	Meaningful	Connectivity	No.
		Architectural style	
		Enclosure complexity	
	Ecological	Green/water space	
		Image ability and legibility landmarks	

7.   RECOMMENDATIONS

To further enhance the utility of these public open spaces, the following recommendations may be considered:

(i)   In order to formulate future renewal schemes and devise proposals for public open spaces, it is important to understand how people use existing open spaces and places like street chowks and squares.

(ii)   A starting point for developing strategies for public open spaces can be provided by the local authority or TMA, as they hold this power. This can enhance social, cultural and economic wellbeing of the people who use these open spaces.

(iii)   These chowks can be made traffic free by providing opportunities to children to play outdoors in neighborhood spaces, while their parents and their elders can keep an eye on them as they sit on these *Hamachas*.

(iv)   To control the misuse of public open spaces at night, local standard operating procedures may ensure a peaceful environment where misconduct is not permissible.

(v)   The TMA should devise building byelaws and municipal regulations which ensure that these open spaces are not converted into commercial or residential uses in future.

(vi)   The TMA should also maintain small green areas within existing open spaces for health environment and it should formulate a strategy to encourage families to visit these spaces.

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