Designing Equitable Biophilic Cities

By Julia Triman

The research literature on inequitable access to nature in cities is well established (Wolch et al. 2014, Nesbitt et al. 2019). Recent work is also charting paths towards tangible solutions that might simultaneously make cities more equitable and natureful. From re-imagining former military infrastructure to creating freeway cap parks, researchers are exploring many possible avenues to increasing equity and designing urban nature connections at the same time.

In "The ‘Green Belt Berlin,’" Ingo Kowarik examines adaptive re-use of former military structures in cities, in particular the Berlin Wall (Kowarik 2019). Kowarik describes how military installations, such as the Berlin Wall, often are associated with traumatic experiences and collective memories that may have highly charged and painful associations. Emerging in the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Green Belt Berlin is a multi-functional greenway running along the northern section of the former border between East and West Berlin with some established parks and connections and other features still in planning and design phases. Kowarik’s research examines planning and development processes for the greenway, and emphasizes how the existing and planned features of Green Belt Berlin increase equity in the distribution of green space for local residents. One way this is possible is through the distributed nature of the greenway: neighborhoods and blocks immediately flanking Green Belt Berlin have mixed socioeconomic status, and the vast majority of them presently are rated as not having high per-capita green space relative to the rest of the city. The mix of types of spaces currently offered and planned are intended to meet a variety of demographic and cultural needs, providing a good example of a project developing over many years to suit a wide range of city dwellers.

Another biophilic strategy with the potential to foster outcomes is the introduction of cap parks across freeways and highways. Though not a new practice, Douglas Houston and Michelle E. Zuñiga conducted the first comprehensive study of existing and planned freeway cap parks, which indicated that both those in place and planned have significant implications for increasing park access for underserved areas in cities (Houston and Zuñiga 2019). The authors conclude that cap parks may have a significant role to play in advancing environmental justice in cities by their ability to reconnect communities currently divided by cavernous freeways, reduce the incidence of noise and air pollution, and mitigate disparities in city-wide park access, size, design, and quality. Houston and Zuñiga discuss that while Klyde Warren Park in Dallas, Texas ameliorates the ways the construction of the freeway displaced and disconnected African-American and Mexican-American people and communities, the park is still implicated in economic and growth-driven planning practices without equity as the primary concern.

In contrast, they discuss how community members were continually consulted during Denver’s proposed I-70 cap park planning process (called “Central 70”), and though not a perfect example, includes specific measures to reduce pollution, increase connectivity, and provide community space appropriate to the needs of the people who live there.

Re-use of former military installations and the design and creation of freeway cap parks both have demonstrated potential ecological gentrification as well as planning processes that have varying degrees of inclusion and responsiveness to vulnerable communities and community members. Creative re-use of the former Berlin Wall presents an example of a project developing over many years to suit a wide range of city dwellers. While neither design solution is the single key to more equitable biophilic cities, this recent research highlights the strengths and possibilities of each of these ideas, and suggests complexities that planners and designers might consider when implementing these sorts of projects to increase equitable outcomes overall.

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