

Remembering vacant lots: how residents used informal urban greenspace as children and teenagers in Japan and Australia

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Contact with nature is vital for the development of children and teenagers. In urban areas, formal greenspace such as parks should provide opportunities for such contact. But research suggests parks are often failing to satisfy young people's needs, because park space is not always available and activities are restricted. In the past, informal urban greenspaces (IGS) such as vacant lots were used to avoid restrictions in play. However, children and teenagers today seem less free in choosing how and where to spend their time. Moreover, outdoor play time is declining. To make sure young people today can also enjoy the social, mental, emotional and physical health benefits of IGS, we need to understand better how previous generations used it.

Our study quantitatively compared how adult residents remembered using IGS in their childhood and teen age years in two geographically and culturally distinct cities: Brisbane, Australia and Sapporo, Japan. Questions we asked included: What kind of activities did you use IGS for as a child or teenager? Why did you use IGS and not a park or garden? Did you experience any problems using IGS? We also analyzed how IGS use, reasons and problems differed between genders and the two survey locations.

The results showed most respondents (>70%) remembered using IGS in the past, and preferred it over other greenspace because it was easily accessible. Most (>70%) recalled experiencing no problems (e.g. danger of injury) when using IGS. These results are in contrast with recently increasing parental concern for children's safety. Such trends may limit present IGS use and prevent it from fulfilling the important role it played for previous generations' recreation.

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