

LACKING OF SOCIAL INTERACTION AT OPEN SPACES IN THE CITY OF BAGHDAD, IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the issue on open spaces, which led to decrease social interaction among residents in Baghdad city nowadays, and compares the social interaction issue in Baghdad between past and present (before, and after 2003). The main objective of the paper is to identify the factors that affecting social interaction in the open space, through proving that lack of open spaces led to the lack in social interaction in Baghdad city. This paper employed qualitative method in term of content analysis which mainly focused on collecting, summarizing and analyzing various documentation such as writing journals, articles, researches, books, Websites, manifestos, transcripts and figures from more than 35 source both in Arabic and English languages regarding the importance of open spaces for community interaction. Findings of the paper confirm that sound social interaction need an appropriate open space that meets the needs of community in Baghdad. Appropriate factors of the open space also could determine the nature of social activity and the amount of space occupation.

Keywords: *social interaction, open spaces, Baghdad, Iraq, content analysis method.*

1. Introduction

Baghdad is the capital of Iraq and largest city in Iraq. Located along Tigris River which runs through Baghdad center and divided it to two parts *Karkh* the western shore of the Tigris and *Rusafa* the eastern shore of the Tigris (al-Rajhy, 2006). Since the establishment of Baghdad on the hands of the Abbasid caliph *al-Mansur* (766 CE), it had become a cultural, historical and social center for Arab and Islamic civilization. Baghdad was characterized by gardens, orchards and cultural and social diversity (al-Rajhy, 2006). Presently, the City of Baghdad has been exposed to multiple changes as result of political conflicts, religious diversity, ethnic diversity, administrative changes and technological developments. All of these factors lead to disintegration and change in social interaction, neglecting many recreational facilities and open spaces in Baghdad (Fathel, 2015).

This paper elaborates the issues of lack of social interaction as a result of lacking of open spaces based on the previous literature from different books, articles, researches and etc. to provide a significance information of open spaces to active outdoor recreation and social interaction in Baghdad by comparing social interaction in Baghdad between past and present. The paper transfers an overview of previous studies that published in Arabic and English languages, while documents and papers in this area are very little so it has been relied heavily on some literary descriptions and photos, which are tenuous in the extreme.

2. Iraqi Society and Social Interaction

When mentioning the historical social life in Baghdad, it must deeply highlight the role of Abbasid rule in Baghdad, between 762-1258. Where the social life in Baghdad based on two different social layers: 1) caliphs' and ministers' life lived a comfort and luxury life, and 2) local people which lived a simple life with high social interaction, where some poor people shared the same house, also various social layers of Baghdad were meeting in markets, mosques, riverbanks, parks, orchards and streets. Community of Baghdad was diverse in ethnic and religious, but it was open and amicable therefore, e.g. many of Muslim men married a Christian woman. Also people in Baghdad shared the important social events e.g. Friday prayer, *Eid*, Ramadan, promenade after *Eid*, weddings and festivals and etc. (al-Rajhy, 2006).

Ottoman era and British invasion in Iraq create a vast gap between the authority and local people as a result of Iraqi society that characterized in Bedouin values (neurological, revenge, hospitality, chivalry and etc.) which led to various crisis in Iraq (Wardi, 1971). The period of founding the first Iraqi state in 1920 had a great influence on Iraqi society, where political awareness appeared, attention to follow the news and newspapers, emergence the movement of constitutional claim, referendum its appeared for the first time in Iraq, emergence of national movement (Patriots) and political awareness in Iraqi society has grown

under the framework of religious consciousness and has been linked with it close (Wardi, 1974) and. While Iraqi individual grew up on the disputes and conflicts as a result of wars and conflicts experienced by, Ottoman British wars, communal conflict, religious conflict and a tribal dispute, nevertheless, the revolution has changed a lot in the culture of Iraqi society, it became more coexistence community after the revolution (Wardi, 1980).

Ethnic relations in Iraq have been strained since the last war 2003, ethnic relations have been particularly uncooperative and violent. The crisis aggravation between different ethnic in Iraq led to the decay the interaction between them. The war of 2003 in Iraq has led to the loss of lives and social capital, and has destroyed the Iraqi infrastructure. This substantially lowers the quality of life, leads to the inability to provide essential services and renders state-building activities even more difficult (Rydgren and Sofi, 2011). The human tragedy in Iraq represented in four parts first; daily human losses, second; loss of social capital in Iraq, third; destruction of the Iraqi infrastructure, which has a direct bearing on the daily needs of the Iraqi people, fourth; conflict and strife between the various groups in Iraq, sectarian tensions and Iraq's territorial unity. So it is very necessary to understand and recognize the reality of Iraq's political and humanitarian in order to understand the social, economic and the urban life in Iraq and Baghdad (Ihsanoglu, 2007).

3. Open Spaces and Recreational Forms in Baghdad City

Since the founding of Baghdad, it has been given a special interest for recreational facilities, open spaces, green spaces and parks. Baghdad name has been accompanied with the names of paradise, garden and orchard. Tributary of Tigris and Euphrates rivers were flow in all Baghdad, to promote its beauty and splendor, the vast orchards also extended along the banks of the tributaries, then spread in all city (al-Rajhy, 2006). Every foreigner who came to Baghdad impressed by its beauty, charm and morals of its people (al-hassani, 1958). In Abbasid era there were a lot of recreational means in Baghdad that were shared by both public and special people, Muslims, Christian and Jewish. There was two types of recreation; 1) physical activities that take place in the open space (gardens and green fields) e.g. aviculture, hunting in wild, horsemanship in open field, golf, ships race and etc., 2) intellectual activities e.g. chess and drafts. Baghdad citizens gave a special interest for the design of gardens and parks, that due to their historical experience in Babylon hanging gardens, where usually people went to parks and orchards on Monday (al-Rajhy, 2006; al-hassani, 1958). There were also many types of open space e.g. parks, orchards, rivers blanks, zoo and mosques courtyard. So recreation means were familiar in Baghdad, and promenade was essential activity in Baghdad, because it has been characterized natural beauty, green orchids and a lot of river tributaries (al-Rajhy, 2006).

First zoo in the world history has been established in 797 in Baghdad, during the

Harun al-Rashid rule (one of the Abbasid caliphs), which contained various types of birds, rabbits, fishes, monkeys, lions, etc. Some open spaces were also used to play golf or horsemanship (Mohammed, 2012). As well as Abbasid Caliph *αλ-Μυταωακκιλ* built zoological park to the south of Baghdad city to house more than two thousand kinds of different animals, both wild and domesticated ones. In terms of its plan, it functions as an utterly opulent display of richness as well as a piece of engineering genius. The whole area covered by the park is about 53 square kilometers. A man-made river called *Ναψζακ* was brought to flow from the northern part of the Tigris through the park and finally through the pool to end again in the river. The whole park was densely planted with trees and bushes imported from every corner of the empire and the wild animals, also some dolphins were to be seen there (al-Samarrai, 2002).

In 20th century each component of Baghdad elements were has a special effect on social interaction there including; 1) historical streets and paths were narrow and zigzag, shading by *Σηνασηιλ*, that made houses close and open to each other's (Hayes, 1983). 2) Special schools (*Κυταβ*) emerged in 20th century in Baghdad, where people had sent them children to *κυταβ* to learn principles of reading and writing, Quran, mathematic and physical sports. 3) Public baths; the lack of bathrooms in most of Baghdad houses had to use public baths, that located in each neighborhood in the markets, and there was a private women's baths, so people were find public bath as a mean to meet, interact and enjoy, where many baths were contain a cafe and open space. 4) Historical cafes in Baghdad in 20th century were regard as a social clubs that complement the daily life cycle of the markets and the old neighborhoods, although it was not reflect a special architectural form but it had ample space to accommodate numbers of people to rest, drink some tea or coffee cups and chatting in term of recreation and social interaction (Marouf, 1972). So cafes regards as one of the most important public buildings in Baghdad. Baghdad is one of the oldest Arabic cities in the establishment of cafes, where people meet, rest, paying, chatting and drink Iraqi tea. 5) Traditional markets were one of the most important components of old Baghdad neighborhood, while markets were not only includes basic goods for daily life, but also it was containing neighborhood cafe and bath, and it was regard as a place where people meet every day (Marouf, 1972; Geoffrey, 2005).

A lot of parks, gardens and squares has been constructed in 20th century in Baghdad, Also the establishment of Parks Directorate, which is an institution interested in public spaces and park establishment, in order to improve the atmosphere and for people recreation and relaxation e.g. Najebia Public Park, King Ghazi (Umma) Park and etc. Also there were a lot of entertainment means in Baghdad for social integration e.g. clowns and executors of magical games, promenade near Tigris, Eid habits (installing a simple games for children in neighborhoods open spaces in the Eid), cinema (outdoor cinema), television and museum (al-Tamimi, 2013). 20th revolution in Iraq lead to significant changes in the structural of Iraq and its population and the number of Baghdad residents. After 20th revolution public parks, open

spaces and squares have been developed and increased. also growing the interest in theaters and cinemas and opening the first TV station in Karkh district in 1956 and Baghdadi Museum in 1970 (al-Tamimi, 2013).

War of 2003 in Iraq has also led to many losses, destruction of Iraqi Infrastructure and important buildings. Many local open spaces have become dumping sites for garbage or in winter months collection areas for sewerage and stagnant water (JAU, IOM and UN, 2011). Recreation places such as city parks and the stadium, and activities such as walking along or boating on the Tigris have been either closed or off limits since 2003. Lack of safe public spaces means that families have little respite from the pressures of daily life (Rydgren and Sofi, 2011). This substantially lowered the quality of life and destroyed social interaction (Ihsanoglu, 2007).



Fig. 1: Umma Park after and before the War of 2003

Source: algardenia.com

Existing parks in Baghdad do not perform their role effectively, this in turn reflected on residents' interaction which limited to indoor spaces only. Where the responsible authorities (Municipality of Baghdad and Baghdad Provincial Council) do not make enough efforts for open spaces' and parks' maintenance, construction and administration (Rikabi and Ali, 2013). Existing parks in Baghdad also insufficient in number and space, and the facilities especially children's facilities within this parks are not effective (worn and not protected), this in turn reflected on the interaction of the community (Rikabi and Ali, 2013). Governmental efforts toward this issue are slight as a result of political and economic issue experienced by the country since the war of 2003, also charities and the general financial allocations only belong to humanitarian crisis and living conditions (Rikabi and Ali, 2013).



Fig. 2: Abu Nuwas Park, Baghdad, before and after the War of 2003

4. Open Spaces and Social Interaction in General

Most of the previous studies confirmed that physical space is an essential to achieve social interaction. Where public spaces allow people to meet on ostensibly neutral ground in planned and unplanned ways, to interact with others within the context of the whole community, so public spaces can contribute to the cohesion of communities (Holland et al., 2007). Social relationships vary according to the age, gender and place, where, place and place elements are the key factor to determine the nature of social activity for all ages (Holland et al., 2007). Park is an important space in the relationship of man and nature to promote and provide space for physical activity, health behavior, while to achieve successful park must provide some factors such as; degree of comfort and image (design) while open spaces design have great role to lead individuals to outside spaces, socializing and being together, also space design tools can be used to provide social interaction to cure from complex social diseases (Nezlek et al., 2002). Community (players) in recreational zone (recreational parks) can create a wide range of physical games and being shared and participated as a type of social interaction. This in turn invite people especially children to replace the television, computers and video games with physical games that participate with other people in open space to stimulate social interaction (Bekker et al., 2010). Distance, linkage and good of access where outdoor recreation preferably over shorter distances to closer areas, rather than long distances and trips to more pristine and undisturbed environments (Buta et al., 2014).

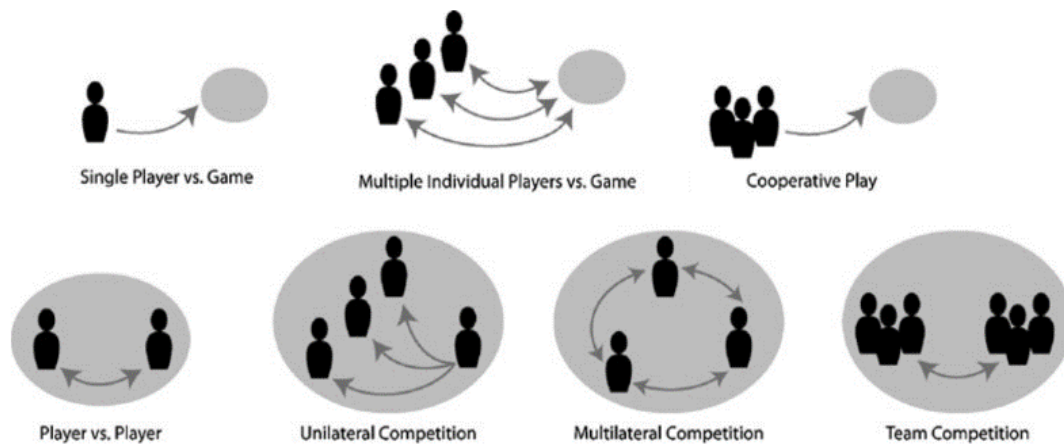


Fig. 4: Patterns of Players Interaction

Source: (Buta et al., 2014)

User and activities where (looking, listening and talking) are the activities which determine the quality of open space, good open space with good facilities plays an important role in the reinforce social contacts and meet their psychological needs of residents. Open space facilities include: walking trails, horse trails, gardens, children's play areas, sitting areas, and green space (Poodeh and Vali, 2014). Maintenance and management of the natural and the built environment, design and image, good access, and socialization are an important factor in the successful park as well (Sakip et al., 2014). The user's characteristics affect how people interact with each other in outdoor spaces. Characteristics such as; age, marital status, educational attainment and annual income are relevant socio-demographic characteristics presumably associated with social interaction (Haggerty, 1982).



Fig. 5: Factors affecting Open Spaces

Source: (Kent, 2009)

Most people in Baghdad prefer to visit *Zawraa* Park, as a result of being the only park in Baghdad which still has some attention and care as well as it is providing a variety of facilities e.g. green open space, entertainment, water bodies, zoo, food courts and etc. Parks in Baghdad have a great social-recreational effect, while parks have an important role to achieve social, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, political and economic benefits for community. One of factors that led to the decline the role of parks in Iraqi society are administrative negligence and poor organization, along with poor planning and design (CAUB, 2005). While being outside in natural surroundings may improve health and how outdoor physical activities benefit participants. Particular attention is given to children's health problems that can be mitigated through outdoor play, sports, and nature study. There is a link between physical activity that takes place outdoors and positive health outcomes and also an association between an indoor, sedentary lifestyle and negative health consequences. There is also evidence that both being outdoors and viewing natural scenes can reduce stress (Godbey, 2009). Outdoor recreational activity is helping to mitigate health consequences associated with sedentary behavior. Enhanced understanding of socio-demographic differences in physical activity (PA) location preferences could therefore contribute to health promotion (Larson et al., 2014).

5. Paper Methodology

The main objective of the paper is to identify the factors that affecting social

interaction in Baghdad through proving that lack of green open spaces led to the lack in social interaction in Baghdad nowadays. So it has been highlighted the relationship between social interaction and open spaces since the establishment of Baghdad till today, as well as highlighted the factors that affecting social interaction in open space in general. This paper employs (Mayring, 2002) recommendations to design the method of the paper while data obtained from more than 35 source varied among articles, researches and books both in Arabic and English languages regarding the importance of open spaces and green area for the community of Baghdad and social interaction. Summarizing content analysis is a tool of research methodology used to determine the presence and meaning of concepts, terms, or words in one or more form or structure of the information. This systematic and replicable technique allows for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories on explicit rules of coding in order to allow researchers to make inferences about the author (Mayring, 2002).

6. Discussion and Findings

Findings from the content analysis regarding to the previous studies about social interaction in green open spaces in Baghdad, emphasize that sound social interaction need an appropriate physical space that meets the needs of community so the key element to achieve sound social interaction is a safe open space that provides various amenities and recreation activities to promote social interaction (Nezlek et al., 2002; Holland et al., 2007). While public spaces allow people to meet on ostensibly neutral ground in planned and unplanned ways, to interact with others within the context of the whole community, so public spaces can contribute to the cohesion of communities. So the conclusion is that, lack of safe green outdoor spaces in Baghdad city recently, may has a direct impact on social problems that occur every day in Baghdad city. This result is similar to (CAUB, 2005; Rikabi and Ali, 2013) results, which confirmed that existing parks in Baghdad do not perform their role effectively, that led to decline the role of parks in Iraq in social interaction. While, the former Baghdad had characterized by a very cohesive social setting coincides with wide spread of green open spaces e.g. parks, orchards, rivers banks, zoo, markets, cafes and mosques courtyard, with different outdoor recreational forms, while it's lose most of the sound social constituents nowadays (al-hassani, 1958; al-Rajhy, 2006).

Findings of this study also confirms that the factors of open spaces to achieve social interaction are:

1. Design, scenery and image (Nezlek et al., 2002; Sakip et al., 2014).
2. Activities, play objects and facilities (CAUB, 2005; Rikabi and Ali, 2013; Bekker et al., 2010; Poodeh and Vali, 2014).
3. Distance, linkage and access (Buta et al., 2014; Sakip et al., 2014).

4. Users' characteristics and interest (Haggerty, 1982)
5. Administration and maintenance (CAUB, 2005; Rikabi and Ali, 2013; Sakip et al., 2014)
6. Safety and security (JAU, IOM and UN, 2011; Rydgren and Sofi, 2011).

So, governmental efforts toward this issue is very slight as a result of political and economic crisis experienced by the country since the war of 2003, also recommendations of charities and the general financial allocations only belong to humanitarian crisis and living conditions (Rikabi and Ali, 2013). Therefore, Municipality of Baghdad and Baghdad Provincial Council should make more efforts for open spaces and parks maintenance, construction and administration. Providing a sufficient number and space of parks with an appropriate criterion in Baghdad will increase the social interaction, (where the existing parks nowadays do not perform their role functionally and effectively). As well as provide a variety of facilities and elements within the parks could improve the function of this spaces and this in turn increases community interaction. Therefore the results of this paper emphasize that that achieving appropriate green open spaces in Baghdad city is an essential to enhance physical, health, mental, social, environmental, and aesthetic aspects for residents and city, thereby encourages social interactions in the city between citizens.

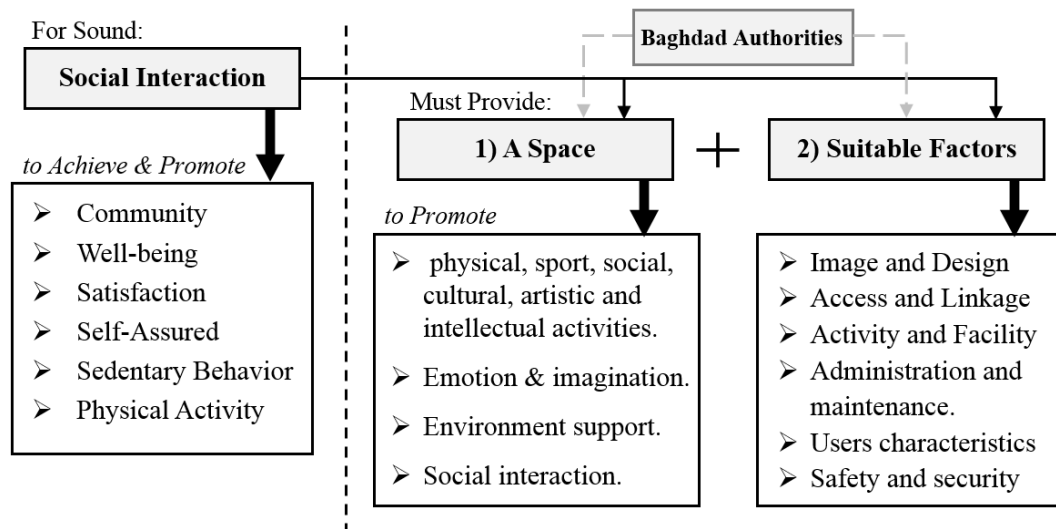


Fig. 7: Means to Enhance Social Interaction in Open Spaces of Baghdad

7. Conclusion

Paper results indicate that one of the means to achieve social interaction in Baghdad nowadays is to provide an appropriate space. Criteria and components of green open space are also an important mean to achieve sound social interaction including, design, activities,

elements, access, users' characteristics, security, administration and maintenance. It has been mentioned the benefits and importance of social interaction in green open spaces as well, including; improve health and wellbeing, sedentary behavior and reduce stress. Therefore the results of this study prove that achieving green open space is an essential to enhance physical, health, mental, social, environmental, and aesthetic aspects for residents and residential area, thereby encourages social interactions in the city between citizens through implementing an appropriate criteria and components in that space. The results of this paper are useful reference for urban and landscape planners, architects, social psychologist, and researchers in this fields, so the significance of this paper lies in linking social-psychology to architectural research.

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