

Spatial Characteristics of Restorative Environments in High-Density Cities: A Qualitative Design Framework for Pocket Parks

Yishanping Lin^{1*}

¹ Department of Landscape Architecture, Southwest Forestry University, Kunming, China

*Correspondence: Yishanping Lin

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Abstract:

Global urbanization currently exhibits a clear trajectory of high-density development, altering the physical and psychological landscape of modern living. This relentless spatial compression frequently contributes to the psychological stress, cognitive load, and chronic sensory fatigue experienced by urban residents worldwide. Within this high-stress contemporary context, constructing highly accessible restorative environments has shifted from being a mere urban aesthetic amenity to a public health priority. Although macro-scale urban parks and extensive regional greenways are proven to possess significant health and ecological benefits, their actual frequency of use is often severely restricted by daily commuting costs, geographic distance, time constraints, and the increasingly rigid schedules of urban populations. Consequently, micro-scale green spaces, notably urban pocket parks, act as critical spatial mediums to fill the ecological, social, and recreational voids within highly congested built environments. Yet, the specific landscape design strategies required to maximize their psychological efficacy urgently require deeper theoretical and practical exploration. Grounded fundamentally in Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and supported by principles of environmental psychology, this study investigates the specific spatial configurations and sensory elements capable of effectively promoting psychological recovery in compact urban contexts. Deliberately shifting focus from purely quantitative measurements, this research utilizes qualitative spatial diagrammatic analysis and typological observation to deconstruct urban micro-spaces demonstrating high restorative potential. The study systematically analyzes how the flexible definition of visual boundaries, the acoustic masking effects of natural soundscapes, the tactile feedback of authentic natural materials, and the engagement of soft fascination through dynamic plant phenology synergistically optimize users' environmental perception. Results indicate that a pocket park's therapeutic value is not linearly dependent on its absolute physical footprint or square footage. Instead, it is highly reliant on its ability to offer rapid psychological detachment through intentional, micro-scale spatial articulation and multisensory integration. Accordingly, this study proposes a comprehensive, actionable set of design guidelines tailored specifically for spatially constrained urban areas. These guidelines focus heavily on the hierarchical creation of boundary spaces, the multilayered integration of sensory dimensions, and spatial organization based on natural ecological succession. By translating complex environmental psychology principles into actionable landscape architecture strategies, this research provides both a robust theoretical foundation and

highly practical pathways for enhancing residents' psychological well-being in ultra-high-density urban ecosystems.

Keywords:

Restorative Environments, Pocket Parks, Attention Restoration Theory, High-density Cities, Landscape Architecture, Sensory Design, Urban Well-being, Environmental Psychology

1. Introduction

1.1. Urban Density, Psychological Well-being, and the Escalation of Stress

Rapid urbanization has led to a dramatic reduction in daily contact with nature, which is increasingly recognized as a major environmental risk factor for urban mental health disorders. Consequently, populations residing in these high-density built environments are facing increasingly severe psychological stress, anxiety disorders, and chronic mental fatigue. The daily urban experience for millions of residents is dominated by continuous, low-frequency noise from complex traffic systems, highly congested street spaces, aggressive commercial signage, and complex visual information. From a psychological perspective, prolonged exposure to environments that demand directed attention leads to directed attention fatigue, a state characterized by an inability to concentrate and increased irritability. Directed attention is the finite cognitive resource required to focus on specific, demanding tasks while actively suppressing distracting or irrelevant environmental stimuli. When individuals are exposed to such high-load, hyper-stimulating physical environments for extended periods without necessary cognitive buffering or spatial refuge, their psychological resources rapidly face severe depletion. Stress is a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances, which significantly contributes to the global burden of disease and diminishes overall well-being.

There is substantial empirical evidence suggesting that access to urban green space is associated with numerous health benefits, including reduced cardiovascular morbidity, decreased psychological stress, and improved subjective well-being; however, these large-scale systems exhibit inherent limitations. The primary limitation lies in their geographic spatial distribution and the resulting equity of daily access. In highly congested metropolitan transportation systems, reaching large green spaces via walking, cycling, or public transit typically incurs substantial time and physical energy costs. This objective spatial barrier directly conflicts with modern urbanites' desperate need for immediate, rapid stress relief during tight work breaks, lunch hours, or daily commutes. Therefore, the restorative benefits of large parks are often relegated to episodic, planned visits during weekends or holidays. Because they demand significant effort to access, they fail to deeply embed themselves into residents' high-frequency, daily life trajectories, leaving a critical gap in the urban public health infrastructure.

1.2. The Emergence and Critical Role of Pocket Parks

In contemporary city centers where land resources are highly scarce and real estate economic values strictly dictate land use, large-scale green space development lacks

both a practical and an economic foundation. Urban planners and municipal governments can no longer easily acquire large tracts of land for traditional park development. Thus, the research perspective and practical application of landscape architecture are rapidly shifting toward micro-scale spatial interventions, often referred to as urban acupuncture strategies. In this context, the “pocket park” (sometimes referred to as vest-pocket parks, mini-parks, or parklets) has emerged as a crucial, highly adaptive typology of urban green infrastructure. These spaces often rely on urban interstitial zones, abandoned vacant lots, irregular street corners, spaces between buildings that were previously considered unusable, or even reclaimed parking spaces. Their physical footprint is drastically smaller than traditional parks, usually ranging from only a few hundred to a few thousand square meters. Despite this limited scale, they possess the unique capability to precisely and powerfully anchor natural ecological elements within the cold, rigid, and highly impermeable urban fabric.

Although the physical outlines of pocket parks are highly constrained by their dense urban context, their ecological and social value as “micro-refuges” is immense and increasingly recognized by urban scholars. The primary advantage of these micro-green spaces is their accessibility. Research consistently demonstrates that the proximity of green space to residential areas is a crucial determinant of the frequency and duration of use. Through scientific landscape planning, careful spatial choreography, and intentional planting design, these micro-scale spatial nodes can offer users brief but highly effective opportunities for cognitive pause and psychological respite. They creating a buffer zone between the external streets and the individual’s need for tranquility.

1.3. Research Objectives and Academic Significance

The core aim of this qualitative study is to bridge the existing theoretical and practical gap between environmental psychology and everyday landscape architecture spatial practices. While environmental psychology provides robust, evidence-based theories on why exposure to nature heals the human mind, landscape architecture must determine exactly how to construct those healing environments physically within extreme spatial constraints. By systematically deconstructing the operational logic of successful micro-green spaces across both physical structures and multisensory dimensions, this study aims to precisely extract the specific spatial elements, material choices, and planting configurations that can significantly induce psychological restorative effects.

The ultimate goal of this research is to rigorously translate abstract psychological theories into a qualitative design framework with strong operability. Through this comprehensive framework, the study provides specific, actionable guidance for urban designers, landscape architects, and city planners. This ensures that future pocket park developments do not merely perform excellently on a visual or superficial ecological level, but actively, practically, and consistently support the deep psychological healing demands of high-density urban populations, thereby elevating the overall quality of urban life.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Attention Restoration Theory (ART) in Landscape Design

To understand the processes underlying restorative environments, this research is primarily anchored in the Attention Restoration Theory (ART), systematically proposed by environmental psychologists Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan in 1989. Attention Restoration Theory proposes that exposure to natural environments assists in recovery from attention fatigue, a concept that has become foundational in environmental psychology. According to Kaplan and Kaplan, directed attention requires effort and is susceptible to fatigue, whereas involuntary attention requires no effort and plays a crucial role in the recovery of cognitive resources. ART explicitly states that achieving a deep, effective psychological healing experience requires the environment to satisfy four core interacting components: Being away, Extent, Fascination, and Compatibility. (Figure 1)

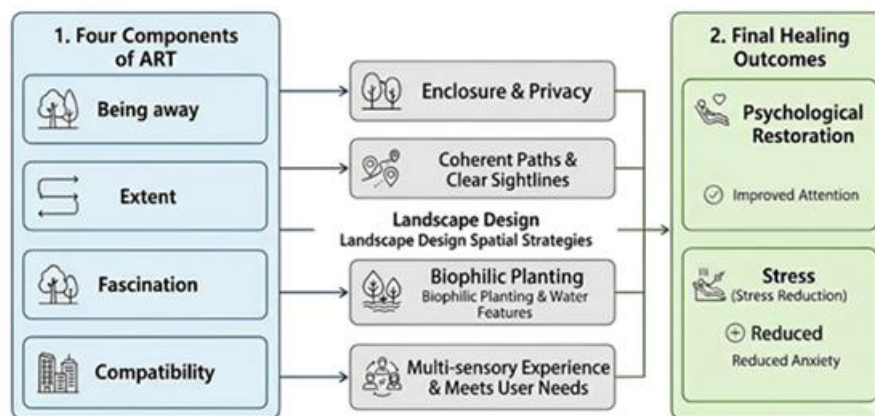


Figure 1. Conceptual framework mapping Attention Restoration Theory (ART) components to landscape design strategies and psychological outcomes.

“Being away” refers to individuals temporarily detaching from daily stressors, cognitive demands, and routine behavioral patterns at the psychological level. Mapped into the physical spatial context of an urban pocket park, this dictates that the site must possess a clear, readable physical or conceptual boundary to achieve effective detachment from the busy streets immediately adjacent to it. It is not merely a physical distance measured in meters, but a psychological shift facilitated by spatial design.

“Extent” demands that this micro-space must possess sufficient perceptual richness, depth, and internal coherence. Despite its small physical footprint, it must be experienced as a miniature but complete “heterogeneous world.” It must provide adequate conceptual carrying space for the free wandering of thought, preventing the user’s mind from immediately hitting a conceptual or visual wall. This requires intricate layering of space to create illusions of depth.

“Fascination”—particularly the concept of “soft fascination”—arises when environmental elements can induce “involuntary attention” without demanding any conscious effort from the observer. For instance, observing the swaying branches of broad-leaved trees in the gentle breeze, watching the dynamic play of dappled sunlight filtering through a canopy onto stone paving, or listening to the complex, non-repeating white noise of a natural waterfall requires absolutely no cognitive resources. Fascination relies on involuntary attention, which requires no cognitive effort, thereby providing the directed attention capacity an opportunity to rest and recover.

“Compatibility” emphasizes the critical relationship between the physical environment and the user’s specific intent or purpose. This concept is deeply rooted in Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory, which postulates that human aesthetic preference for landscapes derives from the evolutionary survival value of environments that afford both prospect and refuge. Whether the user seeks quiet reading, private conversation, solitary meditation, or simply eating lunch away from the office desk, the space must support these activities intuitively, avoiding any psychological friction, spatial frustration, or feelings of exposure during use.

2.2. Qualitative Spatial Analysis Approach

Distinct from purely quantitative research methodologies that rely heavily on large-scale numerical sample collection, physiological sensor data, and complex statistical regressions, this study deliberately adopts a qualitatively oriented, phenomenological spatial analysis method. Quantitative metrics often strip away the nuanced, holistic human experience of a place, reducing complex emotional responses to mere data points. Therefore, this research deeply focuses on observing built, well-functioning, and highly utilized pocket park cases situated within highly urbanized commercial and residential areas.

Based on their specific stimulation pathways to the human sensory system and their intricate spatial organization characteristics, the design elements of these parks are systematically classified from a typological dimension rather than a purely mathematical one. Behavioral observation is a systematic qualitative method used to record and analyze human behaviors in their natural settings, providing valuable insights into how individuals interact with the built environment. By abstracting the complex physical environment into logically clear conceptual models and typological matrices, the profound internal connections among physical boundary conditions, soundscape characteristics, tactile material choices, and subjective environmental perception can be intuitively revealed and operationalized for future design practice.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Visual Enclosure and Boundary Articulation

In the practical design and implementation of urban pocket parks, the primary and arguably most difficult challenge lies in how to effectively shield the space from, and transition out of, the highly oppressive surrounding high-density building clusters and chaotic streetscapes. Excellent therapeutic spaces manage to construct an appropriate, comforting sense of enclosure, acting as a crucial transitional medium connecting the clamor of the city with the tranquility of the refuge. However, achieving this goal absolutely does not rely on constructing rigid, solid, or exceptionally high walls. Rigid, opaque isolation easily induces feelings of claustrophobia and insecurity, creating a prison-like atmosphere that triggers immediate psychological rejection in users. Instead, the core architectural and landscape strategy lies in shaping multi-dimensional, permeable spatial layers with a distinct sense of visual breathing and depth.

Designers must precisely position landscape composition elements to handle the urban background in a “filtering” rather than an absolutely “blocking” manner. According to Appleton’s prospect-refuge theory, human aesthetic experience in landscapes is largely derived from the evolutionary survival value of having the capacity to see without being seen. By observing representative classic cases of urban

micro-refuges, it becomes abundantly clear that successful designers ingeniously overlay towering arbor canopies to create a ceiling, mid-level dense shrub matrices to define walls, and low-lying shade-tolerant groundcovers to articulate the floor, thereby constructing a permeable, three-dimensional ecological barrier.

This specific layering treatment utilizing natural fractal geometries not only effectively dissolves chaotic traffic systems, harsh commercial signage, and the gray street base maps, but also maximizes the retention of the open sky and ambient natural light in the vertical dimension. The dappled light filtering through the canopy provides a continuous, subtle movement that engages soft fascination. This delicate balance of spatial experience directly echoes and stimulates the crucial "Being away" and "Extent" sensations emphasized in ART, effectively tricking the human perceptual system into feeling that the space is vastly larger and more secluded than its actual square meterage suggests.

3.2. Multisensory Engagement and Sensory Masking

Purely relying on single visual landscape beautification is grossly insufficient to trigger deep, lasting psychological restoration; the deliberate creation and management of the auditory and tactile environments play a decisive, often overriding role in spatial healing quality. Noise pollution in urban areas is widely recognized as a major public health concern, with prolonged exposure contributing significantly to cardiovascular diseases, cognitive impairment, and severe sleep disturbance. This constant low-frequency drone severely interferes with the tranquility necessary for cognitive recovery and actively elevates stress hormones.

High-quality pocket parks excel at utilizing the principles of acoustic ecology, specifically deploying "Biophony" (biological sounds like bird calls and rustling leaves) and "Geophony" (non-biological natural sounds like moving water and wind) to achieve a sophisticated "masking effect" against negative urban soundscapes. Introducing dynamic water features is arguably the most effective strategy. Features such as micro-cascading waterfalls, recirculating runnels, or dry streams with high-frequency water splashing sounds can generate stable, continuous white noise. This specific acoustic characteristic can easily and effectively neutralize the intrusive low-frequency rumble of surrounding traffic. Furthermore, intentionally configuring plant groups that easily produce friction sounds under wind disturbance—such as dense bamboo groves or specific broad-leaved evergreen trees—can inject a soothing, unpredictable, and continuous auditory rhythm into the site. This rhythmic soundscape naturally locks in the user's involuntary attention, perfectly fulfilling the fascination requirement of ART while simultaneously erasing the auditory reminders of the stressful city beyond the park boundaries.

Beyond sight and sound, tactile engagement plays an irreplaceable psychological role in strengthening the user's environmental grounding and significantly enhancing the "Compatibility" of the space. In traditional landscape architecture practices, the design potential of the tactile and thermal dimensions is frequently underestimated, treated as entirely secondary to visual form. The integration of natural materials in the built environment, a core principle of biophilic design, has been empirically shown to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and improve overall psychological well-being. Utilizing untreated preservative wood for seating, naturally patterned stone with irregular textures for paving, or loose gravel paths changes the physical interaction between human and environment. From a micro-climatic perspective, these natural

materials possess lower thermal mass and heat capacity, meaning they are significantly less prone to scorching under extreme summer sunlight and retain a sense of warmth in cooler seasons, thereby mitigating localized urban heat island effects. Consequently, they form a highly dramatic, welcoming warm contrast in visual and physical temperature with the surrounding gray, cold, and rigid urban streetscape, inviting users to physically touch and linger in the space.



Figure 2. *Spatial and acoustic analysis of Paley Park (NYC), illustrating design strategies for multi-sensory therapeutic interventions.*

3.3. Phenological Dynamics and Olfactory Engagement

Natural environments are particularly effective at providing soft fascination, as they contain stimuli such as clouds, sunsets, or the movement of leaves, which readily hold attention but leave ample room for reflection. The integration of plant phenology—the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant life—is vital. Introducing flora with highly pronounced seasonal changes ensures that the environment continuously offers novel, gentle stimuli. The emergence of fragile spring blossoms, the deep verdant canopies of summer, the dramatic color shifts of autumn foliage, and the stark, architectural beauty of bare winter branches provide a continuous, slow-moving visual narrative. This dynamic temporal change engages involuntary attention effortlessly, preventing the space from becoming visually stagnant over time and encouraging repeated visits, as the park offers a different experience during each season.

Furthermore, the olfactory dimension serves as a direct, unmediated pathway to the brain’s limbic system, heavily influencing emotional states and triggering deep-seated memories. The intentional design of the “smellscape” is a powerful tool for restoration. The scent of damp earth after a sudden urban rain shower (petrichor), the release of antimicrobial phytoncides from specific coniferous species, or the subtle, wafting fragrance of seasonal understory blossoms can instantly transport the user’s psyche away from the polluted urban context. Aromatic plants like lavender, rosemary, or native fragrant shrubs should be strategically placed near seating areas or along primary circulation paths where users may brush against them, releasing their essential oils. This holistic, multisensory envelopment—combining dynamic sights, masking sounds, warm textures, and natural scents—creates an impenetrable psychological sanctuary within the densest of cities.

4. Design Guidelines for Urban Pocket Parks

4.1. Spatial Organization and Behavioral Mapping

Synthesizing the extensive theoretical discussions and spatial typological analyses presented in the previous sections, this study extracts highly practical, actionable design guidelines for landscape architects constructing restorative environments in extremely confined, high-density urban plots. The foundational step is rigorous spatial organization based on human behavioral mapping.

Spatial layouts must meticulously balance the need for mild social interaction with the absolute necessity for private meditation areas to achieve true psychological compatibility. Designers should establish a clear spatial hierarchy or gradient of privacy. Open, outward-facing seating (socio-petal arrangements) should be positioned near the park boundaries and entrances to meet the needs of users seeking brief rests or non-interventional social observation (people-watching), without drawing them deep into the sanctuary. Conversely, the core areas of the pocket park—deeply enclosed by high-density vegetation and farthest from street noise—must be strictly reserved for individuals desiring solitary meditation, deep rest, or intimate conversations (socio-fugal arrangements).

Crucially, seating placement throughout the entire park must strictly adhere to Appleton's "Prospect and refuge" principle. Benches should never be placed floating in the middle of a space where users feel exposed from behind. Instead, seating must provide users with broad, unobstructed frontal views to observe the space and avoid potential surprises, while relying on solid back walls, dense evergreen shrubs, or artificial topographical changes to provide profound psychological defense depth and a sense of absolute physical safety.

4.2. Material Selection, Micro-climatic Adaptation, and Implementation

Material and sensory integration must consistently prioritize authentic, natural, and low-reflectance materials. The overall material tone inside pocket parks should be highly restrained, actively avoiding hyper-stimulating artificial colors, high-glare metals, and reflective glass, which demand directed attention to process. Materials should be strictly confined to natural earth tones—muted greens, browns, warm grays, and the natural patina of aging wood and stone.

Furthermore, spatial adaptability strategies must aggressively apply wellness concepts to the irregularly shaped and highly restricted non-standard plots that typically characterize urban leftover spaces. When a site's width is extremely limited, precluding the use of traditional horizontal planting beds or wide vegetation buffers, introducing vertical greening systems becomes an essential technical intervention. Modular living walls, climbing vines on bespoke armatures, or terraced planters maximize the site's total biological mass and visual enclosure without consuming valuable, limited pedestrian floor area.

Additionally, active attempts should be made to reshape spatial perception through localized adjustments of micro-topographic elevations. Even minor vertical spatial displacements can have profound psychological effects. For example, elevating a planting bed to eye level brings nature closer to the user's sensory organs, while sinking a central seating area by a mere 40 to 60 centimeters can psychologically and acoustically detach the site interior from the noisy external sidewalks entirely. This creates a literal and metaphorical depression that serves as a protective basin, enhancing the feeling of being completely submerged in a restorative natural environment, completely isolated from the horizontal plane of the bustling city.

5. Conclusions

5.1. *Summary of Restorative Potential*

In summary, embedding highly considered, restorative green spaces into ultra-high-density city centers is not merely a cosmetic endeavor or a superficial visual enhancement of the urban skin. There is a growing body of empirical evidence demonstrating that exposure to natural environments is positively associated with psychological well-being. Examined through the rigorous spatial and psychological lens of Attention Restoration Theory, this research concludes that the healing efficacy of these micro-spaces reaches its peak only when landscape architects precisely manage the transition of boundary spaces, achieve a harmonious, non-competing overlay of multisensory dimensions, and provide abundant dynamic natural elements that induce soft fascination. The therapeutic potential of a pocket park is not defined by its size, but by the density of its thoughtful design details—the specific rustle of a chosen plant species, the exact frequency of a water feature, and the specific tactile warmth of a wooden bench.

5.2. *Future Directions in Restorative Urbanism*

As global urbanization continues its relentless trajectory and urban populations become increasingly subjected to the pressures of high-density living, the mandate for landscape architecture must evolve. Future research and practice must continue to refine these qualitative frameworks, testing them across different cultural contexts and climatic zones to optimize their restorative yields. Ultimately, transforming negative, leftover urban micro-spaces into highly vibrant, emotionally resonant, and deeply healing pocket parks represents an intelligent, economically viable, and deeply sustainable path for modern urban renewal. It ensures that natural ecology, sensory relief, and deep psychological peace do not remain an exclusive luxury accessible only by leaving the city, but become an integrated, accessible, and universal public welfare embedded into the daily lives and routines of every urban resident.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article

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