

“Finding Space for Nature in Cities – The Considerable Potential for Redundant Parking Spaces” NPJ Urban Sustainability

Review 1, Wren Bandrowski, September 14th 2025

I chose the “Finding Spaces for Nature in Cities” research paper, in part because late last night I was having a conversation with two of my closest friends about the difficulties of city planning. Two of us (myself and Friend A) were educating our other friend (Friend B) about Seattle’s Viaduct: an ugly and dangerous piece of infrastructure that was removed in 2019. Friend A and I grew up around the Puget Sound; she grew up in the city meanwhile I’m from Kingston, Washington: a small town on the west side of the Sound in a comparably rural county.

We discussed the Viaduct project and the cultural importance and disruption it had in our lives. I recalled being excited about it and felt fond of the new construction and the more inviting space that the waterfront now provided, but friend A felt differently, which surprised me. She told me that as a kid, the Viaduct provided a sheltered spot for her to walk her dog, and that she would bring him to a nearby pier to run and walk him. She described the shade it provided her on hot days, the gravel train track her dog could run along, but more specifically how the waterfront project changed an incredibly integral space for her and many on a pier that she used to walk her dog. She described the pier (Pier 62) as being ‘empty’ with no structure other than the pier itself. But it was hardly empty, she described it being filled with people walking their dogs, people fishing, people with spray paint art businesses, and others using it to fulfill various needs.

She told me passionately the waterfront project changed this space and gentrified it. “No one uses it, it’s empty every time I walk by now.” She described swings,

plants, concrete benches, and chess boards being placed there. And: no dogs allowed*. Where do you walk your dog now away from cars in the city? Where would she and her family go to get fresh air in a space that felt inviting? She felt this new space was isolating and harsh in comparison to the one before and was extremely disheartened by its current state. It saddened me to hear about how a space that was intended to be an improvement, could upset her so much, and we talked about how it was not addressing the needs of the community. So, I wanted to read this article with this in mind: how do we build in natural spaces to our cities, address the risks of heat waves, flooding, and other climate changes while still providing needed value to communities? And... not just gentrifying an area in the process.

**We looked later together at the pier to confirm / disprove aspects of her experience and did see that it does allow dogs but noted that there was significantly less space to throw a ball and have them run. We looked for a space nearby that could accomplish that and found a dog park that was significantly further away from her home in the city.*

Having read the article and considered my friend's experience of infrastructure improvement, I feel that introducing nature-based solutions (NbS) to a city needs to integrate socioeconomic data alongside the risk / opportunity data that they're gathering. In contrast to this, I can also tell based on the tone of the article the writers seemed annoyed by community members opinions on parking and access to it (such as the sentence: "While some public views of the trade-off are not rational, they are politically important." On page 2). I'd like to counter with community being an opportunity. Yes, it can be a barrier to improvement, but properly integrating the needs

of a city's residents means the things we design and improve get used. Now, it's well understood that people will always be upset by change, but in my friend's case, a need clearly would not have been met anymore by the place she lived in, and not only that I'd bet she would have been priced out because the space is considered so much nicer without the viaduct. How we improve our cities matters, and we can't just bring natural elements without considering who they benefit, and who they disrupt the most.

I want to challenge the writers to include more socioeconomic data in the process of introducing NbS, and clearly, it's possible. I found several different pieces talking about this, include this one by the Stockholm Environmental Institute: [Principles for just and equitable nature-based solutions](#). In this discussion brief, SEI proposes several principals for helping introduce NbS in an equitable way. One of my favorites is their first one: "Ensure that design, governance and implementation processes are inclusive and transparent" (page 4). I think introducing these solutions by taking away a resource like parking, something that provides important access to businesses, homes, and service-providing spaces, is incredibly important. Even if the parking space isn't utilized 100% of the time, you could be removing or reducing a vulnerable community's access to a necessary service. The only way you'll find this information is by engaging community.

I also have personally experienced concern related to removing parking access. I currently work at OZO Coffee on West Pearl. A couple months ago there was a petition to close West Pearl and make it pedestrian only again. My manager and the owner of OZO both expressed concern about revenue for OZO should that happen and said it was very possible they'd have to close the store. I thought this could be a positive change for my store, but it was more complex than that.

Additionally, based on the paper [“Using Data to Increase Equity in Urban Development”](#) by Harvard’s Joint Center for Housing studies, I think the research from NPJ could benefit from overlaying ‘community-based indicators’ data on how well an area is doing based on their own assessment (page 5). This gives ownership and agency to affected groups and creates a starting place for conversation about what people want. It could also be a place to discuss local climate related risks, like Melbourne’s heat waves that NPJ’s research paper mentions.

Some things I think NPJ’s research does well are providing data on the impact of NbS’s. They investigate which tree would be best for providing shade, and ecological interconnectivity for certain insects. I’d say this research excellently make the case for nature-based solutions using their data, and it’s a great starting point for the decision-making process that allow these solutions to be implemented.

In conclusion, reading these articles reinforces my thinking that introducing sustainable solutions can only be done when we bring an equity and justice lens to it. I’m excited by the nature-based solutions and the benefits they provide, but I’m especially excited by ones that address climate risks and vulnerable populations.

References

1. [“Finding Space for Nature in Cities](#) – The Considerable Potential for Redundant Parking Spaces” NPJ Urban Sustainability
2. Capri Fain, Seattle resident and basis of the story told earlier in this paper

3. “Principles for Just and Equal Nature Based Solutions” [Stockholm Environmental Institute](#)
4. “Using Data to Increase Equity in Urban Development” [Harvard School, Joint Center for Housing Initiatives](#)