Article

The Oasis of Peace? Social Perception of Urban Parks from the City-Dwellers' Perspectives

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Abstract: The article focuses on the social perception of urban parks, from the perspective of city dwellers. For the analyses, eight focus groups with N = 48 participants were organized. The findings indicated urban parks as a meaningful part of the city dwellers' place identity, who interpret them as an "oasis of peace" or "places for meeting". The article further analyzes the conflicts emerging from the clashes of different perspectives on how urban parks should be used, what functions they should fulfil, or what characteristics they should have. The article discusses the possible implications of some of these contradictions, connected with the changing nature–culture understanding in contemporary society and the unresolved marginalization of some of the social groups.

Keywords: urban parks; conflicts; sustainability; qualitative research

1. Introduction

The essential role of urban parks is recognized by both city dwellers and their political and administrative representation [1]. The importance of parks in terms of the structure of the city, of rest and leisure, as well as of social events, can hardly be overestimated [2,3]. Therefore, it is not surprising that the topic of urban parks appears repeatedly in current social science research [4]. While most of the studies focus on the environmental benefits of urban parks (e.g., the importance of parks for reducing summer temperatures or the relationship between the frequency and location of parks and their effect on pollution) [5], the perception of urban parks by city dwellers, while not wholly neglected, does not seem to have received as much focus as other social research on the subject [6].

The study focuses on the perception of the values, functions, and preferred features of urban parks by city dwellers. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What do urban parks mean for city dwellers? How are they connected with their place identity and what functions do they attribute to parks?
- How should urban parks look in order to fulfill the expectations of city dwellers? What are the essential features of a good park?
- What social conflicts emerge from the expectations of different groups of park visitors?

1.1. The Importance of City Parks for Sustainability in Big Cities

Urban parks play an important role for both environmental and social aspects of sustainability in cities [7]. They substantially help decrease the noise and O_3 values [8,9], allow park soil to store nutrients and metals [10], and provide green spaces with shade, thus cooling cities and reducing the negative impact on climate change [11,12]. Urban parks may also have minor cleansing effects on air pollution, although the scope of this feature is disputed [9,13,14].

The social aspects of urban parks are also noteworthy. Many authors argue that they promote city dwellers' well being by providing convenient places to walk, play, or relax [15–19]. For example, Bertram and Rehdanz [20] found a relationship between the

distance of residents' homes from parks and their life satisfaction. Larson, Jennings, and Cloutier [21] found that the percentage of city area covered by public parks was among the strongest predictors of overall well being, the other crucial aspects being park accessibility and quality. Svendsen, Campbell, and McMillen [22] argued that parks support psycho-social-spiritual well being. They also have a significant health impact by reducing stress, high blood pressure, and mental health issues [23,24]. As Godbey and Mowen [25] state, close-to-home urban parks motivate people to get more physical activity, thus promoting better resident health. As Cohen [26] found, adolescent girls living near urban parks have more physical activity. Cohen [27] further mentioned that public parks provide an opportunity for physical activity for minority communities. The amount of greenery seems to negatively correlate with the BMI score of residents living in nearby areas [28]. According to de Vries et al. [29], green areas have the strongest effects on marginalized groups and elderly people.

According to Peters, Elands, and Buijs [30], urban parks may promote social cohesion in cities, providing opportunities for various ethnic groups to mingle and interact informally. These authors found that despite occasional negative inter-ethnic interactions, people from various ethnic groups valued being together in urban parks. Similar findings were supported by Seaman, Jones, and Ellaway; Kazmierczak et al.; and Campbell [31–33]. Kazmierczak et al. [34] argued that urban green space can increase social cohesion in socially excluded areas by providing free access to a space for human interactions, relieving stress, restoring mental fatigue, and offering opportunity to participate in voluntary community work.

Furthermore, urban parks may support the residents' relationships with the community and their sense of place. According to Kudraytsev, Stedman, and Krasny [35], the sense of place consists of three domains: place meaning, place attachment, and place identity. Urban parks may be connected with all of them [36]. Kyle, Mowen, and Tarrant [37] found that the visitors' place attachment (i.e., their emotional bond with place) corresponds to their motivation to visit the urban park; for example, with their need to enjoy solitude, get in touch with nature, or promote good health. According to Walker [38], parks help build new partnerships, thus promoting residents' ties with their community. Similarly, Gómez et al. [39] found a positive relationship between residents' psychological sense of community and proximity to a park, regardless of how often it is visited. In addition, urban parks may have a positive impact on residents' nature connectedness, and can work as a mediator between humans and nature [40].

At the same time, urban parks may be also associated with negative aspects of cities, and park visits may be connected to conflicts among different visitor groups. Ioja et al. [41] found that some park visitors perceive dog owners as the main problem of parks, decreasing their quality, and thus, decreasing visitor satisfaction. Santos, Mendes, and Vasco [42] analyzed the conflicts between two particular groups of recreational urban park users: mountain bikers and runners.

Additionally, fear of crime is mentioned in a few studies [43–45]. Groff and McCord [46] found that neighbourhood parks are associated with increased levels of crime in the surrounding area. The fear of becoming a victim of a crime in a park is often more important for some respondent groups than for others. For example, Madge [47] found that women were more fearful of sexual attack, while elderly visitors were more fearful of racial attack. Maruthaveeran and Konijnendijk van den Bosch [48] argued that gender and previous negative experience were more salient factors than those that related to social or physical factors. The same authors [49] identified some factors with the potential to evoke fear among park visitors, including concealing park vegetation (shrubs), solitude, previous crime experience, or prior knowledge about a crime. According to Bonnie and Jim [50], insufficient park gates were the strongest fear factor for younger visitors, while the presence of objects such as syringes and condoms, or dangerous people such as drug addicts or alcoholics, caused fear in older respondents. However, the relationship between park features and crime is complex. For example, Kuo and Sullivan [51] found that vege-

tation was associated with lower crime, while according to Donovan and Prestemon [52], the effect is mixed—low trees in parks increase criminal occurrence, while larger lot trees decrease criminal occurrence.

1.2. The Quality of City Parks: What People Prefer and How They Use It

There are differences in the ways people visit urban parks related to aspects such as time, demographic and personal factors of visitors, or park features. Bertram [53] found that respondents prefer visiting larger parks with picnic facilities for the weekend, while the parks near their homes, regardless of their size, were more visited on weekdays. According to Hutchinson [54], women prefer visiting public parks in the afternoon to early evening hours, mostly in small family groups, while elderly people tend to visit specific areas, particularly in the morning hours when not many other visitors are present. Tinsley et al. [55] did not find visitors' gender or age significant. However, they found differences in the way the parks are used by ethnic minorities. Moore et al. [56] found that older adults who live in areas with a younger age composition were more likely to visit nearby parks than similar citizens living in areas with an older age composition. According to Peschardt, Schipperijn, and Stigsdotter [57], urban parks are mainly used by well-educated people in their thirties and forties. Various groups also use and perceive urban parks differently: adults prefer doing recreational activities; teenagers prefer parks for social activities and relaxing [58]; women are more active in urban parks than men; and older people appreciate their aesthetic value more than younger visitors. The differences among the groups may lead to social injustice, when parks are less used in low-income neighborhoods or by non-white visitors [59]. According to Scott [60], citizens with low incomes use parks less often due to poor health, fear of crime, transport problems, or cost.

Other studies focused on motivation as a personal factor influencing dwellers' visits of urban parks. According to Home, Hunziker, and Bauer [61], older people seek social contact in urban parks, while younger people seek escape and time to reflect. On the contrary, Gibson [62] found that older people visit urban parks to fulfil their need for autonomy. Lin et al. [63] found the level of nature connectedness to be a strong factor influencing the decision to visit urban parks. Kemperman and Timmerman [64] identified four segments of residents based on their various park preferences: "local nature lovers", "passive park users", "visitors of pleasant neighborhood parks", and "active large park users".

The dwellers' preferences about their urban parks may be contradictory [65]. Gobster [66] identified four different visions of nature influencing the public debate on the reconstruction of an urban park in Chicago: while some of the citizens preferred adjusting the parks' nature to serve recreational needs, others preferred their ecological functions, or even wished to return the park's design to its original natural state. Furthermore, as various groups of visitors differ in their needs, they also differ in what park characteristics they find important. For example, Ho [67] found significant differences in preferred park attributes and the perception of positive or negative aspects of parks among different ethnic groups. Furthermore, as Kothenz and Blashke [68] discovered, the citizens' subjective evaluation of park quality may differ from the objective environmental indicators. Generally, the setting of parks, their multifunctionality, and level of maintenance seem to be their most desired features. Urban parks with more facilities or organized activities are mostly preferred by their visitors [59,69–72].

The distance from urban parks as one of the main barriers to visiting was mentioned by Schipperijn, et al. [73], mainly for older citizens or young children; the time needed to reach the urban park is also mentioned by other authors [74].

Maintenance is another, though less salient, factor [71,75,76], along with maintaining the safety or supervision of children. The most frequently mentioned attributes of public parks were their aesthetic values and the quality of their nature [75,77]. For older people, features like a quiet atmosphere, proximity to cafes and toilets, vegetation, wildlife to watch, and regular maintenance are also important [78].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Context

In this study, we present the findings from the qualitative part of research focused on the perception of Brno city parks by their visitors. The research took place in the period of 2019–2020 in the parks of the city of Brno (Czech Republic) and in the vicinity of the Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University. Brno, with approx. 380,000 inhabitants, is the second biggest city in the Czech Republic. It is the setting of ten universities with more than 60,000 students. The city used to have serious problems with air pollution (NOx and benzo-pyrene). However, due to environmental regulation, the situation has improved in the last ten years. It is considered a relatively safe city, with a decreasing level of crime and increasing tourist interest [79]. Brno has plenty of city parks, with the oldest dating back to the late 18th century. In 2021, the municipality announced a plan to establish new city parks [80].

2.2. Data Collection

For the research, we selected seven urban parks in the center of Brno. The selection strategy was meant to achieve diversity in the sample, so that it contained an example of big and small urban parks, parks in the city center and in a remote area, quiet and rather noisy, or parks with different types of vegetation. All chosen parks are marked in Figure 1.
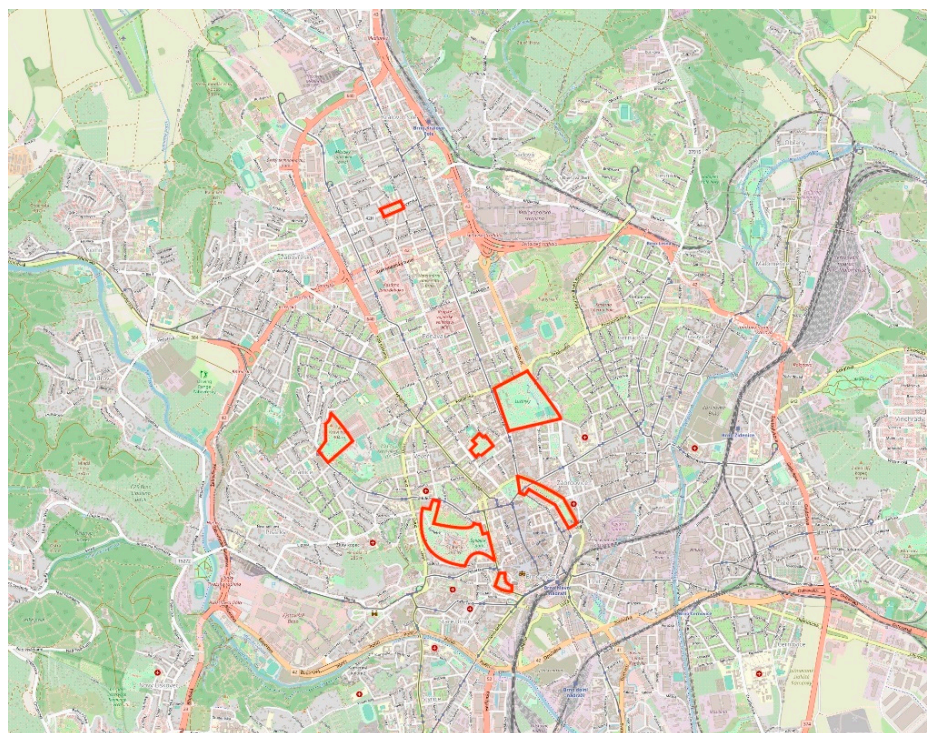
Figure 1. Parks included in the research.

In the next step, we randomly selected streets within 2 km from the selected parks and distributed an invitation to each of the residents in the area. The residents were encouraged to indicate their interest in focus group participation by contacting the research team; they were offered a small incentive. Based on the respondents' interests, we composed six sub-groups reflecting the diversity of the participants in gender, age, education, and social status. All chosen streets are marked in Figure 2.
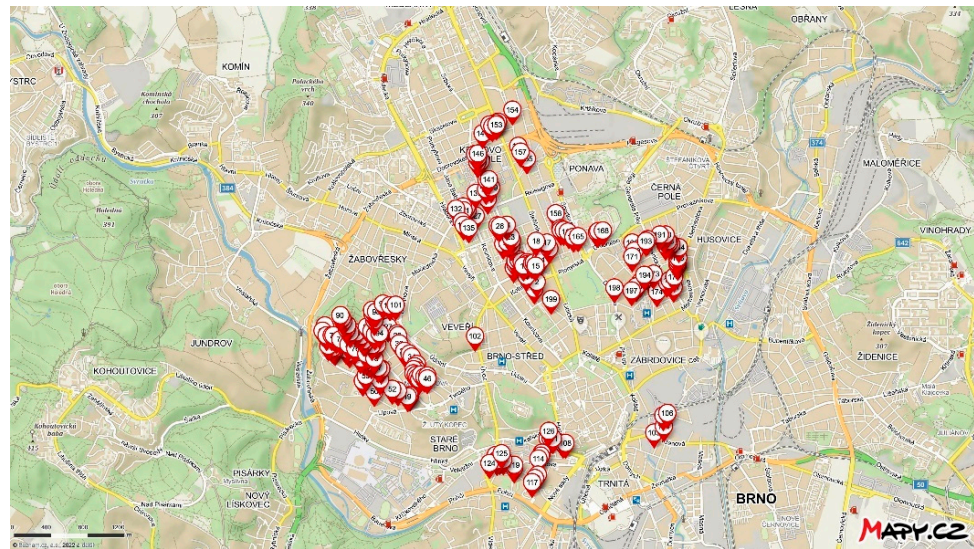
Figure 2. All chosen streets.

Altogether, we organized eight focus groups and collected data from 48 respondents. According to Morgan [81], 6–8 focus groups can be considered as sufficient. Of the overall group, 24 were employed, 5 were self-employed, 7 retired, 4 students, 4 unemployed, 3 on maternity leave, and 1 combined retirement with employment. Thirty respondents had bachelors- or masters-level education, while the rest had secondary or lower education. For the other details about the group, see Table 1.

Table 1. Participants of the focus groups.

Focus Group	Respondents	Female	Male	Mean Age	SD
1	9	7	2	43	12, 19
2	7	6	1	38, 42	16, 95
3	7	4	3	44, 57	19, 83
4	9	7	2	43, 55	15, 97
5	8	7	1	43, 62	19, 82
6	8	5	3	44, 25	19, 66
Total	48	36	12	42, 97	16, 60

In the focus groups, the participants were asked to identify what they generally like and dislike about public parks, which public parks they visit in Brno, what they think should be changed to improve the quality of those parks, and what, if anything, they did to help the parks they visit.

The interviews took approximately two hours. The facilitator encouraged participants to express their opinion and to react to the opinions of the others. All participants gave informed consent and were informed about the possibility of withdrawing their participation in the research at any time without any consequences.

2.3. Analysis

All of the qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed by the open coding method. The process was two-staged. At the first stage, the analyzer went through all of the transcriptions to identify the first set of thematic categories, describing the features of a "good" city park. They were "multifunctionality", referring to the situation when a park offers an opportunity for a broad scale of activities; "control", referring to providing safety to park visitors; and "naturalness", referring to the overall natural dispositions of the parks. These categories were used as the basis for the second stage of analyses, aimed at identifying the deeper social processes connected with the topic.

At the second stage, all the transcripts were re-read and re-coded [82]. The initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories [83], based on which, the following categories emerged:

- "Meaning of parks" refers to the personal meaning attributed to the public parks by the respondents. The crucial feature of this meaning is its personal nature; here, the respondents refer to what the parks mean to them and how they form a part of their place identity.
- "Functions of the parks" refers to the functions that the respondents attribute to the parks to describe their importance for the city as a social ecosystem. The "Functions" are similar to the "Meanings", but differ in that they refer to what the respondents believe the make the parks important, rather than to being part of the respondents' place identity.
- "Preferred features" refers to the characteristics of a "good park" from the respondents' perspective. The "Features" are derived from both "Functions" and "Meanings"; they refer to how the respondents believe the public parks should look.
- "Conflicts" refers to the situations where the respondents' "Meaning" and "Functions" of public parks are endangered by social practices perceived as disturbing. It refers to what the city parks need to avoid in order to fulfil their meaning and functions, as interpreted by the respondents.
- "Remedy" refers to all the practices reported by the respondents intended to help the city parks to better fulfill their meaning and functions.

Finally, the analysis was discussed by the entire team, who then approved its findings. While the coding procedure followed some of the principles of the grounded theory (e.g., open coding) it deviated in others, as the analyses did not aspire to identify a central category describing the overlying social process [84,85].

2.4. Ethical Consideration

Participation in the research was voluntary and the research participants were informed of the right to leave the study at any time without any consequences. All participants signed informed consent. The participants of the focus groups took part under pseudonyms, and thus, appear anonymized in the transcripts, as well.

3. Results

3.1. Personal Meanings and Perceived Functions of the City Parks

City parks matter. There was no respondent in any of the focus groups who believed that the city parks were meaningless or unimportant to them, or to the city in which they lived. On the contrary, all of the respondents referred to the city parks as an important part of their life and a necessary part of their city. At the same time, there were some important differences in respondents' perspectives. Most part of them described the parks as an "oasis of peace", as quiet places contrasting with the noisy urban environment; as places where they can be alone or with their loved ones (e.g., children), sitting, watching nature, playing with the children, or generally relaxing. The expression "oasis of peace" spontaneously emerged in most of the focus groups. For example, G4 (female, 34 years, graduated, employed) reflected:

"Really like an oasis of calm and peace and well being, simply for the person".

For other respondents, parks were good "places to meet"; places where they could be with other people of the same social group, participating in various social activities, including chatting, listening to music, drinking, or generally having fun.

For example, for respondent H1 (male, 32 years, graduated, employed), parks are a place where he can meet with his friends and enjoy music together:

"If I want to meet my friends somewhere, we don't want to meet on the street, so a park is simply the best place for me. At the same time, I will spend time with people (. . .) with whom we do events based on electronic music, and since

last year I have noticed that the trend is slowly spreading here, that more and more things are happening, and for me personally, I think . . . . It will attract young people".

Furthermore, the respondents attribute city parks with other functions that may not be so closely connected with their personal identity, but are important for their city and may reflect some of the other activities that the respondents do in parks. Most of the respondents provided a broad scale of "social functions" of the city parks. Besides the "having fun" or "relaxing" activities, they mentioned the importance of parks for convenience (e.g., shortening the way), for increasing the aesthetic values of the city, for human health, providing social justice in the city (in the sense that the city parks are a place for everyone), or for learning. For the "learning" function, a few of the respondents mentioned the idea of a park as a place for improving human–nature connectedness.

A few respondents mentioned the "ecological functions" of the city parks. Most of them reflect their importance for city microclimate ("cooling the city"). A few mentioned that the parks "clean the city" (i.e., decrease the air pollution). For G2 (male, 35 years, graduated, self-employed), the parks are the defining feature of a city, crucial for the entirety of life in the city:

> "It seems to me that the overall greenery in the city (. . .), or the amount of greenery, determines the character of the city, as it were. Like when there is a huge city and there is, I don't know, one small park or a couple of smaller parks, but otherwise there is nowhere (. . .), as if there is no other greenery that you can see. For example, simply by looking at it from some heights in the city, you don't really feel as good there (. . .) as you would in a city where there are simply trees or some greenery at every step".

3.2. Conflicts over the Parks

Almost all of the respondents perceived that the meanings and functions they attributed to the city parks were, to some extent, endangered by various types of "undesirable" social practices. The interpretation of some of the practices as "undesirable" slightly differed among the respondents, while some of the practices were interpreted as negative by all of them. Altogether, these types of conflicts emerged: (1) Us, the normal, vs. Them, the troublemakers; (2) Learning vs. Fun; (3) Quiet vs. Events; (4) Environmental values vs. Social values; and (5) Safety vs. Freedom.

Conflicts between "Us" and "Them" was the most frequently mentioned type, and was discussed in each of the focus groups. While the "Us" represented the social identity of the respondents, "Them" were the other social groups who were perceived as "troublemakers", i.e., those whose activities are in conflict with how the park should look to fulfill the functions and personal meaning attributed by the respondents. "Them" encompassed a broad scale of social groups, including the homeless, those addicted to drugs, alcoholics, dirty people, ethnic minorities (Romany—an ethnic minority in the Czech Republic, currently comprising around 3% of the Czech Republic population), dogs and dog owners, kids and teenagers, and cyclists. For example, the presence of dogs and dog owners was perceived as a disruption of predictability and calm, as a source of pollution, and as a potential threat. Homeless people sitting on benches or Romany kids bathing in the park fountains were perceived as disruptive elements.

Respondent A6 (female, 74 years, non-graduated, retired) expresses her negative feelings towards dog owners with a mixture of disgust and fear:

> "It is a disadvantage when dog owners sometimes go there with their dogs. They use, for example, Wilson Forest, which (. . .) I live close to. Unfortunately, there are some huge dogs that the owners don't pick up after, which makes me uncomfortable, I admit. I would (. . .), I don't know how to prevent it, because when you approach them and say they should pick it up, they are rude or laugh at me".

The expressions of empathy towards "Them" were relatively less common. Here, respondent C5 (female, 34 years, graduated, on maternity leave) reflected a combination of empathy and fear towards homeless people:

"(...) the homeless (are probably not bad, but I don't know where they sleep in the summer, as they don't like the asylums, where they could spend time too. Otherwise, they'd be in those parks and somewhere in those garden colonies and somewhere like (...). But I don't think the homeless are dangerous. Rather, they are unhappy".

An interesting exchange emerged among the participants of a focus group reflecting on the perceived misbehavior of (implicitly Romany) teenagers in one of the city parks. C3 (female, 57 years, graduated, unemployed) and F3 (female, 18 years, student) expressed their disgust from this behavior:

"(...) that place in front of Janáček Theatre has become a place in Brno where people meet not only in the summer or in the heat, but also in the winter, though of course much less then. As soon as it starts to get a little warmer, they simply meet there (...) in the afternoon and especially in the evening and night—Brno teenagers from the age of fifteen and (...). It's just a horror and they drink a lot of alcohol there, because of course they can't get that alcohol anywhere else, so they go there and there's a huge space—you have something to sit on and it's quite comfortable there".

By contrast, E3 (male, 27 years, graduated, self-employed) argued for a more liberal approach, accepting the "otherness" of the group:

"You said that the teenagers just sit there like that (...). Maybe the question is (...) whether you are just bothered by their presence, or if they leave trash and things like that, if they are loud, or if something specific bothers you, because in the same way that it is a park for you, it is a park for them too. You cannot just exclude them a priori".

From the respondents' perspective, these groups caused noise, pollution, or a danger to "Us", and thus, they spoil their experience in parks. While the respondents tended to agree with the other members of their focus groups, some of them, potentially relating to the "troublemakers", provided a different opinion. For example, some of the respondents admitted to drinking alcohol in a park and did not find their activity disturbing. This conflict was also associated with the "safety vs. freedom" conflict, which emerged in some of the focus groups: while some of the respondents identifying themselves with "Us" would prefer having a strict control over the parks, others disagreed and supported the idea of a park as a place of (responsible) freedom:

"On the contrary, I have the impression that if there were more police officers, I know that it is like a question of some liberality of the Czech Republic that I can have a beer in the park, although it is against the law. But if there were more cops, I think I'd be fine with it. Although I understand the meaning of the law, I myself have 1 or 2 beers in the park and then go away without leaving a mess there". (C6, male, 26 years, graduated, employed)

In addition, some of the respondents discussed other types of conflicts over the parks. While some of the respondents liked when cultural events, such as music concerts, are organized in their parks, others found this practice disturbing. Here, the difference between the respondents who perceived the parks as an "oasis of peace" and those who preferred them to be "places of meeting" was obvious.

Finally, we identified a clash between the respondents who stressed the benefits of the activities of park management (e.g., cutting trees, regular cutting of the lawns or meadows) versus those who preferred environmental values (e.g., less park vegetation maintenance, such as short lawns).

3.3. Preferred Features—How the Parks should Look

The three most popular park features were the multifunctional environment, regular maintenance, and safety. Many respondents also mentioned other features like quiet, accessibility, or the presence of three crucial components: toilets, water features, and trees.

According to most of the respondents, parks should provide a multifunctional environment, allowing a broad scale of social activities. For example, B2 (female, 30 years, graduated, employed) appreciated the multifunctionality of her favorite park:

> "(. . .) It's also nice there (. . .). On the one hand, there's a big meadow; if you want, you can relax there in the sun. Then further on, there are actually benches under the trees, so you can sit in the shade under a tree, if you don't want to sit in the sun on the lawn or meadow. In winter, it is great for children to go sledding. So I think that makes it quite multi-functional as well. At the same time, there are two children's playgrounds, repaired ones".

However, the multifunctionality association of the idea of a park for everyone clashed with the non-compatibility of some of the activities, reflecting differences among the groups and their concepts of the parks' meaning. Based on this, some of the respondents came up with the idea of "differentiating", either external (e.g., every park shaped to some social activities only) or internal (e.g., different zones for specific social activities in one park).

> "What I like about Lužánky Park is that (. . .) it seems to be separate from city and rush; that there is, for example, (. . .) a place for dogs, where they can run freely. Then there is another part where there is a barbeque grill, or parts where people can just sit on the lawn and relax. Then there is a part for dog lovers, which I like". (D2, female, 26 years, graduate, employed)

Most of the respondents also expressed their support for the regular maintenance of the public parks. While some of the aspects (e.g., emptying the dust bins) were not contradicted, in the cases reflecting the clash between social and environmental values (i.e., regular cutting of grass), the respondents reflected contrasting opinions. For example, E3 (male, 27 years, graduate, self-employed) would prefer some elements of "wilderness" in city parks:

> "What I like about Wilson's Forest is that it's at least a little bit wild, whereas most of the other parks are so extremely maintained. On the one hand, it is good that you can lie down there on the grass, of course, on a blanket, but if, for example, a part of the park was allowed to grow a little wilder, it would of course benefit the biodivirsity and the whole thing. It would also work better in cleaning the air and so on, because you not only need trees but, of course, grasses and bushes, which are not always allowed to grow freely there".

On the contrary, C3 (female, 57 years, graduate, unemployed) opposed the idea of "wilderness", as she considered the managed (regularly cut) grass to have higher aesthetic value:

> "Inventing how and where to make the wilderness would be nice, but not maintaining most of these parks (. . .), I don't know. Maybe with the Janáček Theatre Park it would probably not be nice".

Similarly, while the need for safety in parks was highly accepted, the respondents differed in how it should be managed. The ideas of locking the parks at night or increasing the presence of police officers were supported by some, but opposed by others who were afraid of compromising freedom, or who would perceive the police as a sign of potential infringement on freedom in the park.

Relatively uncontested support was given to the presence of three crucial components: toilets, water features, and trees. Namely, the water elements were mentioned repeatedly, in the context of perceived climate change and the need of making adaptation strategies in cities. For example, D4 (female, 51 years, graduate, retired) mentioned the essential function of big trees in city parks:

"I would like to say that it is wonderful there, that there are a lot of big trees, and that it is really cool there. We went there recently and it was very noticeable. They are actually the same as the big roads around, and if you cross only as if from the shade, then it is like there is a fire there. There it's like really awful to know when it, like what are those big trees doing, that (...) that's amazing. I like that grass is grown there, so it's like the land is not so dry".

3.4. Remedy: What the Visitors Do to Protect Their Parks

The scale of action provided by visitors to protect their parks—in the meanings and functions they consider important, encompassed both direct and indirect actions [86]. For direct actions, the respondents mostly reflected picking up litter or, in one case, cleaning the water source.

The indirect actions involved informing the park management about problems and demanding a change. One of the respondents also positively reflected on an opportunity to participate in planning park design.

"(...) We repeatedly called and wrote requests to repair the swings and playground. Absolutely (...) nothing was happening. One dad then temporarily solved the problem in a very improvised way. Then they removed the whole swing, so there was nothing there for 2 months. Then they ceremoniously installed a new one, which (...) seems like a long time to me". (G6, female, 27 years, graduate, maternity leave)

C5 (female, 37 years, graduate, maternity leave) tries to "educate" the dog owners and persuade them to pick up after their dogs:

"Every time I go to the park, I yell at someone who leaves dog poop there (laughs). I don't think that just (...), I give them bags and instruct them, or I just take it away, because it bothers me that the kids touch it".

4. Discussion

4.1. Urban Parks as (Socially Controlled) Nature

One of the interesting perspectives emerging from the analyses is how the urban parks are perceived from different value perspectives. Most of the respondents seem to perceive the park from a utilitarian perspective as something meant to serve social needs. The respondents evaluate the quality of the parks by whether they provide enough opportunities for their social activities, including a feeling of safety, and of a quiet "oasis of peace" for times of solitude or being with family and friends.

This utilitarian perspective seems not to contradict with the value of "appreciation of nature" [87], when respondents appreciate the big trees or animals in the urban parks. At the same time, the ecological perspective (e.g., the value of nature protection) seems to be relatively less represented in the data. While some of the respondents mentioned the importance of urban parks for climate adaptation, they seemed to refer again to a utilitarian perspective. The most evident example of reflecting on the urban parks as a piece of nature worth protecting for its intrinsic qualities was connected with the idea of keeping the parks wilder, which was opposed by some of the other respondents.

This may reflect that most of the city dwellers do consider urban parks as a socially controlled environment, intended to fulfill such functions in the cities [66]. The "control" is supposed to be maintained by managing the safety and cleanliness of the parks, and by providing multifunctional opportunities for their utilization.

At the same time, the respondents also reflected on the parks as something somehow opposed to the cities—an oasis of peace, contrasting with the noisy urban environment. Parks provide an "impression" of the natural environment [88], as they are not real nature, but rather they are artificially constructed by and for humans. The natural elements in parks work both as attractions (small animals, water elements) and sources of peace and

relaxation; the parks form a hybrid reality, merging nature and culture into something that is neither completely one or the other.

4.2. Urban Parks as a Cultural Battleground

The scope of conflict around urban parks points to the different areas of sustainability challenges. On the surface, most of the respondents seemed to support the inclusiveness of the urban parks—to be for all city dwellers. To fulfill the different needs, they often supported the idea of the multifunctionality of the parks, which corresponds to most other studies [69–73]. However, on a deeper level, the inclusive approach started to break down.

Some of the different needs were reflected as competing; it changed the concept of multifunctionality into "differentiation"—different zones or park for different uses and users. This solution was suggested for some of the "less" problematic groups, like cyclists or dog owners, already identified by Ioja et al. [41] and Santos, Mendes, and Vasco [42]. However, some other needs were considered as disgusting, dangerous, or non-compatible with the utilization of the urban parks.

While we do not want to reject the justified worries regarding safety or nature disruption, some questions might be raised. Firstly, some of the non-compatible activities (e.g., kids bathing in water features, unruly people drinking alcohol in the park) did not seem to be dangerous, per se; rather, they may reflect the underlying negative perception of the marginalized ethnic or social groups by the majority. It might be argued that the means suggested by some of the respondents to remove these groups from the parks are a double-edged sword. While they may increase the feeling of safety or park protection, they also support the further marginalization of the groups and the already-existing social or environmental injustice [59,88].

This finding interestingly contradicts the findings from other studies. While most of the respondents expressed various levels of discomfort from sharing the urban parks with the "Other", there seems to be evidence from other countries that this kind of sharing is beneficial for promoting social cohesion in cities [30–34]. In light of this, it is possible that this discomfort may be worth overcoming to avoid further social polarization in the city.

Moreover, there are likely some deep reasons for why some of the city dwellers became marginalized—either due to their ethnicity, lack of social background, illness, or just a lack of good luck in life. While their needs in urban parks may contradict with the needs of the majority, their needs should still be fulfilled. The attempt to remove these people from urban parks is neither a remedy to their situation, nor a prevention of the problem. From this perspective, discussion about the proper management of urban parks is one of the more vexing problems of sustainability [89]; it does not have a straightforward solution, and it cannot be solved without simultaneously addressing many of a city's broader social issues.

4.3. Good Prospects

Some of our findings may shed an optimistic light on the future of urban parks. As we could see, all of the respondents perceived the urban parks highly positively. None of them questioned their importance. For many respondents, the urban parks became a part of their identity, something worthy of their emotional reaction (when they felt their parks were at risk) or even help. The respondents' emotional attachment to "their" parks may consequently also support their connection with their community.

It may herald, despite all of the contradictions, a bright future for urban parks.

4.4. Limitations

While the study involved a broad scale of respondents representing various social groups, some of the groups were not adequately represented. As more females than males agreed to participate in the focus groups, the male perspective is clearly underrepresented. This might have influenced the flow of debates and the topics discussed.

In light of the emerging topic of social conflicts, some of the groups labeled as "others" were not represented at all. This comment is mostly valid for the marginalized social

groups, such as ethnic minorities (Romany), the homeless, or drug addicted people. The reasons lay in the lack of consent from representatives of these groups to participate in the research. Moreover, merging the members of these social groups with the respondents representing the "Us" group could be extremely difficult. As a result, their perspective is missing in the study.

At the same time, the study does not lack the perspectives of some of the other "Others" representatives, as was evident from some of the exchanges emerging in the interviews. Based on this, we believe that the essential level of polarity of opinion was represented.

Furthermore, as the incentive for participation was relatively small, it can be argued that the participation in focus groups motivated mainly those city dwellers who were interested in the topic. This could influence the overall positive evaluation of the urban parks in the city.

In addition, due to its qualitative nature and limited number of respondents, the study cannot be interpreted as a representative for the whole population. Similarly, the findings may be specific for its local context and not easily generalizable for urban parks in different cultural contexts.

5. Conclusions

Urban parks are essential but contested parts of cities. While the city dwellers seem to love their parks, they differ in their perception of what a park should be good for. As a result, they also differ in their preferences on how the ideal park should look.

As we believe, the differences reflect deeper unresolved issues of contemporary society. The clash between nature-focused versus social-focused park preferences may indicate the shifting understanding of the nature–culture difference. The perception of urban parks as something in-between (not entirely nature, but still something opposed to the urban) may mirror the perception of nature as something that is human-controlled, influenced, and managed.

The identified conflicts around park maintenance and management features may reflect some deep unresolved issues connected with marginalizing certain social groups and the attempt by the majority to remove them from the world that the majority inhabit.

Future research focusing on how marginalized groups perceive their urban parks could provide a vital perspective, which is missing here. Furthermore, case studies, providing in-depth analyses of specific parks and how their meaning is co-created by its visitors could further deepen our understanding of how parks should be managed.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Transcribed focus group records (anonymized) are available from the corresponding author (Bohuslav Binka). Transcribed focus group records are stored in encrypted form on a password-protected computer.

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