Making pocket parks work in dense cities: lessons from Bangkok

SEI brief
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Key messages

- **Dense cities face a growing gap between the need for nearby green space and the ability to deliver new large parks. Well-planned pocket parks can help close that gap by expanding access to nearby public outdoor space and nature where land is scarce.**
- **Pocket parks can provide real local value as everyday spaces for relaxation, exercise, exposure to nature, socializing and children's play, especially where larger parks are difficult to develop.**
- **In Bangkok, how parks are used and by whom varies sharply between sites, and design, location, maintenance and governance all shape who benefits and how much.**
- **The main policy challenge is not whether to build more pocket parks, but how to ensure they are well-sited, well-designed, inclusive, maintainable and properly monitored from the outset.**

1. Background and introduction

Dense, fast-growing cities face a practical green space delivery problem. Large urban parks remain important, but constructing new ones is often slow, expensive and difficult to site in already built-up neighbourhoods. At the same time, the need for nearby green space is becoming more urgent as cities face rising heat risk, unequal access to nature, and growing pressure to make neighbourhoods more liveable, inclusive and resilient. Over the last 30 years, urban green space has declined globally, and recent global analysis shows that many lower- and middle-income cities tend to possess substantially lower green-space cooling capacity than cities in higher-income countries, largely because of differences in green space quantity and quality. World Health Organization (WHO) guidance also stresses that well-planned, well-designed and properly monitored urban green space interventions can support residents' health, wellbeing and equity.

This is why building a network of small public outdoor spaces matters. Small neighbourhood green spaces are not a substitute for larger urban parks, but they can help close everyday access gaps, especially in dense areas where larger sites are hard to secure. Bangkok's 15-minute pocket parks program offers a useful case for other cities because it shows both the promise of scaling up small parks quickly and the practical problems that can undermine their benefits if implementation is weak.

Image: Jana Busch / SEI



Bangkok's official Greener Bangkok platform currently reports that 446 parks have been delivered through the city's 15-minute parks program since 2022. SEI's research examined how these parks are used, by whom, the benefits they bring and how this varies across sites. Research also explored community perceptions of the park design and implementation process and what district officials say is needed for good delivery.

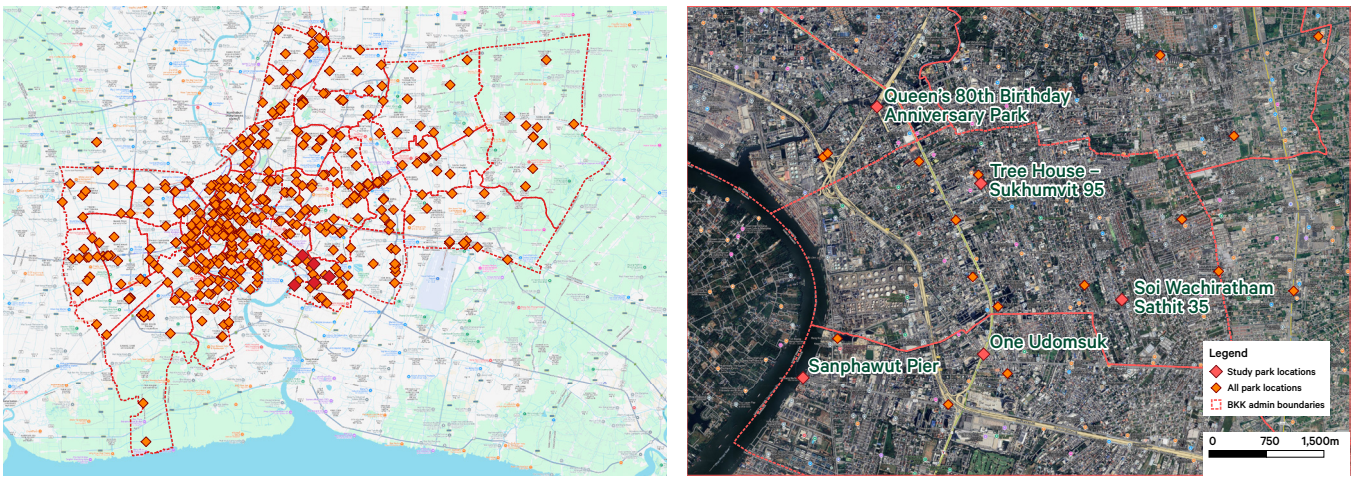
This brief draws on mixed-methods research across five pocket parks in three lower-income districts in Bangkok, including 100 hours of park observation, 500 questionnaires, focus group discussions with local communities, interviews with nine district officials, and air quality and noise measurements.

Our investigation indicates that for maximum effectiveness, policymakers everywhere seeking to build pocket parks should use a delivery framework that sets clear site selection and minimum design quality criteria; emphasizes inclusive engagement in park design; ensures clear governance of ongoing maintenance; and incorporates fit-for-purpose monitoring approaches.

WHAT IS A POCKET PARK?

Pocket parks are small neighbourhood public spaces that bring outdoor space and nature within a 15-minute walk of local residents, especially in dense urban areas with limited nearby access to public green spaces. Although there is no fixed size threshold, pocket parks are generally defined by their small scale and are often created from vacant or otherwise available urban spaces, such as empty plots or leftover sites.

Figure 1. Locations of pocket parks across Bangkok, with an enlarged view showing the five parks where the SEI team carried out in-depth research.



Source: Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and SEI

Figure 2. Snapshot of the five pocket parks studied in Bangkok, showing the wide variation in setting, design and use, from quieter residential and wetland-edge spaces to more heavily trafficked underpass and transit-adjacent sites.



Park 1 – Tree House
(Soi Wachiratham)



Park 2 – Shopping Mall
(One Udomsuk)



Park 3 – Wetlands
(Wachi 35)



Park 4 – Underpass
(Queen's 80th Birthday Anniversary)



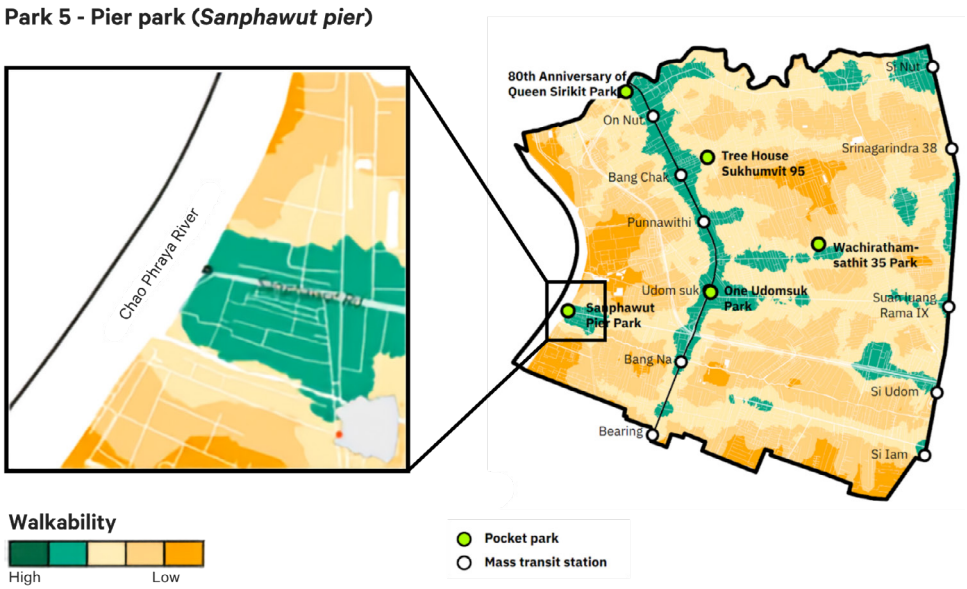
Park 5 – Pier
(Sanphawut Pier)

Source: SEI

2. What Bangkok shows

Bangkok and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration have shown real leadership by moving quickly from ambition to citywide delivery of neighbourhood pocket parks, making the program a valuable pathfinder for other dense cities. The research found that Bangkok's pocket parks are valued and regularly used as everyday spaces for relaxation, exercise, socializing and children's play for people living and working nearby. The walkability map (Figure 3) illustrates this local neighbourhood function by showing the relative pedestrian accessibility around the studied parks, indicating how easily nearby communities can reach them on foot. These findings are relevant to city goals to improve neighbourhood liveability and equitable access to public outdoor space, particularly in dense areas where larger parks are difficult to provide.

Figure 3. Pedestrian accessibility to the five pocket park case study sites. The map shows relative walkable catchment areas from surrounding neighbourhoods to each park, indicating how easily nearby communities can reach the parks on foot. The inset map shows the walkability pattern for Sanphawut Pier Park (Park 5) in more detail.



Source: Urban Design and Development Center and SEI

This is especially important in lower-income and underserved neighbourhoods, where local access to public outdoor space and nature may be particularly limited and where lower-income residents were found to be the most frequent users. Users reported benefits such as stress relief, improved community interaction and more time spent outdoors and in contact with nature. Park users showed slightly higher wellbeing than non-users, although the effect was modest. In dense urban areas where many people have little or no private outdoor space of their own, local pocket parks are especially valuable, offering places to sit, socialize and find shade close to home, with potential wider benefits for urban heat resilience and reduced reliance on indoor cooling. These everyday benefits link pocket parks to city policy objectives in areas of public health and wellbeing, social cohesion, equitable access to public outdoor space and neighbourhood liveability.

BANGKOK'S POCKET PARKS: KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Since 2022,
446 pocket parks
have been added in Bangkok.

Providing neighbourhoods with
local outdoor space and nature
within a 15-minute walk.

In Bangkok,
lower-income residents
are the most frequent park users.

Pocket parks are mainly used for
relaxation, exercise, socializing and children's play.

Frequent park users report
higher wellbeing
than non-user neighbours.

At the same time, the research showed that outcomes varied between sites and between different groups of users. Quieter residential parks with benches, shade, trees and visible entrances tended to support more lingering and more inclusive use, while some other sites functioned more as busy through-routes or as places used by workers, unhoused people and other highly mobile groups.

The research also identified recurring delivery challenges, including difficulty securing suitable land, short leases, no fixed design process, uneven community engagement, missed vulnerable groups, confusion over ownership and maintenance, and key performance indicators (KPIs) that do not suit very small parks. Conversely, Bangkok's experience also suggests that taking a relatively flexible and opportunistic approach may have helped lower the barriers to getting new sites started quickly. The lesson for other cities is therefore not that they need rigid rules, but that they need enough guidance to support rapid delivery while setting minimum expectations for quality, accountability and long-term value and still allowing flexibility to respond to local opportunities and conditions.

3. Policy recommendations for city governments

1. **Embed pocket parks in formal city planning, public-space and climate resilience policy, with priority for underserved neighbourhoods**

   Cities should formally recognize pocket parks as part of their open-space, biodiversity improvement, heat resilience and neighbourhood liveability strategies, rather than treating them as ad hoc beautification projects or short-term pilots. This should include explicit reference in urban plans, public-space guidance and annual investment priorities, as well as a clear prioritization process that directs investment first towards underserved, lower-income and heat-vulnerable neighbourhoods. Bangkok shows that small parks can scale quickly, but without a stronger policy basis, they risk becoming numbers-led and uneven in quality.

2. **Require a context-sensitive site selection, suitability and tenure assessment before approving new pocket parks**

   Cities should only approve sites after assessing land tenure, accessibility, safety, surrounding land use, and likely exposure to traffic-related pollution and noise. This assessment should use clear criteria while allowing the city to respond flexibly to local land availability, neighbourhood need and site conditions. Short-tenure sites should be governed by different design and investment rules from permanent sites. Bangkok's research found that short seven-year leases can make it difficult to justify more durable capital investment (e.g. long-term planting and significant site improvements), which in turn weakens long-term value.

3. **Adopt official standards for pocket park design and inclusive engagement**

   Cities should develop formal guidance for minimum design quality and repeatable community engagement. Minimum design standards should cover shade, vegetation, seating, accessibility, lighting and cleanliness. Community engagement should be guided by a clear, proportionate co-design process that enables local residents and community groups to identify site priorities and shape design choices, helping parks respond to different local needs while keeping participation accessible, meaningful and realistic within municipal delivery timelines and resources. Bangkok's evidence shows that design and placement shape who uses a park, while community engagement was often uneven and some vulnerable groups' input was missed, making some park designs suboptimal for residents' needs.

4. **Make maintenance responsibility and operating budgets mandatory from the outset**

   Cities should require every pocket park to have a named responsible operator, a clear maintenance arrangement and an identified operating budget before opening. Multi-agency sites should have formal written agreements, including a clear point of contact for residents and community representatives. In Bangkok's underpass pocket park, focus group discussions suggested that unclear ownership made it difficult for community members and local leaders to know who had authority over

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the site, who to approach with ideas or concerns, and how to secure follow-up. The example shows how unclear ownership and maintenance arrangements can leave communities carrying informal responsibility without the authority or resources needed to resolve issues.

5. **Replace area-based park targets with a monitoring framework for small parks**

   Cities should complement citywide green space targets with indicators suited to small neighbourhood parks, including accessibility, equity, use, quality, maintenance performance and pollution exposure where relevant. Research in Bangkok found that standard park KPIs do not fit pocket parks well and make it difficult to evaluate benefits properly, while WHO guidance also highlights the need for better monitoring of local green space management and related health and equity impacts.

4. Conclusion

Bangkok's experience shows that pocket parks can be valuable neighbourhood infrastructure, but only if cities treat them as more than a quick greening exercise. For city governments, the key lesson is simple: Pocket parks work best when policy, design, governance and monitoring are aligned from the start.

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