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PUBLIC SPACES IN HOSPITALS IN THE CONTEXT OF USER WELL-BEING – A STUDY FROM POLAND AND ITALY

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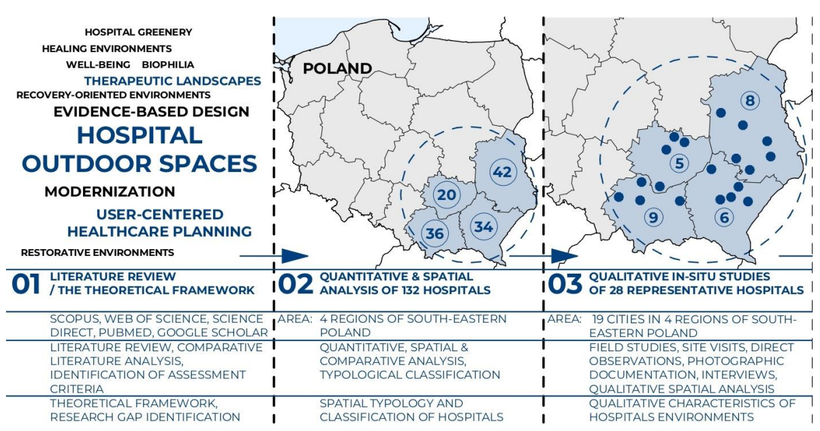
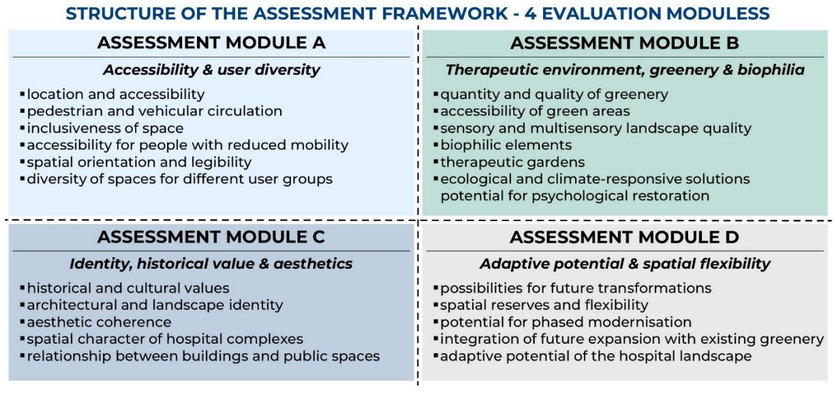
INTRODUCTION

Contemporary healthcare environments are increasingly perceived not only as medical infrastructure, but also as important elements of public health, well-being and urban resilience. However, hospital modernization processes usually focus on buildings, technical infrastructure and energy performance, while outdoor public spaces remain underused. Entrance zones, courtyards, green areas and spaces between buildings often still serve mainly circulation, technical or parking functions, despite their potential to support restoration, orientation, social interaction and users' well-being.

MATERIALS & METHODS

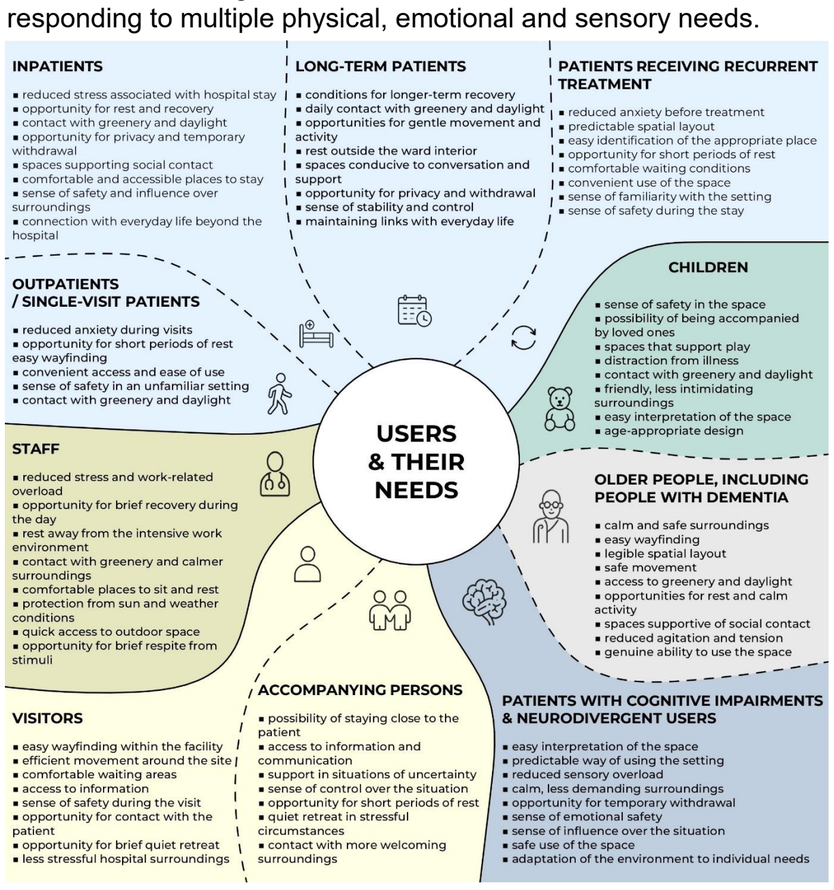


A multi-criteria assessment card was developed to evaluate the quality and adaptive potential of hospital outdoor spaces. It includes four modules: accessibility and user diversity, therapeutic environment and greenery, identity and aesthetics, and adaptive potential. The tool helps compare different hospital campuses and identify practical directions for modernization.



RESULTS 1: USER NEEDS

The study identified different hospital user groups and their specific needs in relation to outdoor public spaces. Patients, visitors, accompanying persons and healthcare staff require different spatial conditions for rest, orientation, safety, social contact and psychological restoration. Outdoor hospital spaces should therefore be designed as diverse and inclusive environments responding to multiple physical, emotional and sensory needs.



ABSTRACT

Contemporary hospital modernization processes focus mainly on internal infrastructure and buildings, while the external public spaces of hospital campuses remain a less recognized area and are less frequently subject to transformation. Meanwhile, their quality is of significant importance for the well-being of users and the functioning of the entire healthcare environment.

The aim of the study was to assess existing external hospital spaces in terms of their suitability for the needs and well-being of different user groups.

The study covered selected hospitals in Poland and Italy. A proprietary assessment card for existing hospitals was developed, taking into account the valorization of physical features in terms of their adaptability to contemporary standards. Qualitative research, in-situ visits, in-depth interviews, and participant observation were conducted.

The research defined different user groups and their specific needs. Meeting these requirements is important in order to ensure a therapeutic environment in the stressful hospital space. The results of the research made it possible to identify spatial patterns and directions for modernization that support the creation of more inclusive, flexible, and friendly hospital environments. Existing hospitals showed significant potential for modernization, but this depends on the spatial layout and the current state of the hospital campus.

KEYWORDS

Health and well-being; hospital public spaces; healthcare facilities architecture; inclusiveness; modernization

RESULTS 2: SPATIAL TYPOLOGY

The analysis of 132 hospitals in southeastern Poland identified four recurring types of hospital spatial composition. These types differ in building layout, open-space structure, greenery, circulation systems, and the relationship between pedestrian and vehicular areas. Campus and balanced layouts showed greater adaptive potential, while compact inner-city hospitals and parking-dominated layouts were more constrained. The typology helps explain how the spatial structure of a hospital campus influences the creation of accessible, restorative, and user-friendly outdoor spaces.

RESULTS 3: ADAPTIVE POTENTIAL

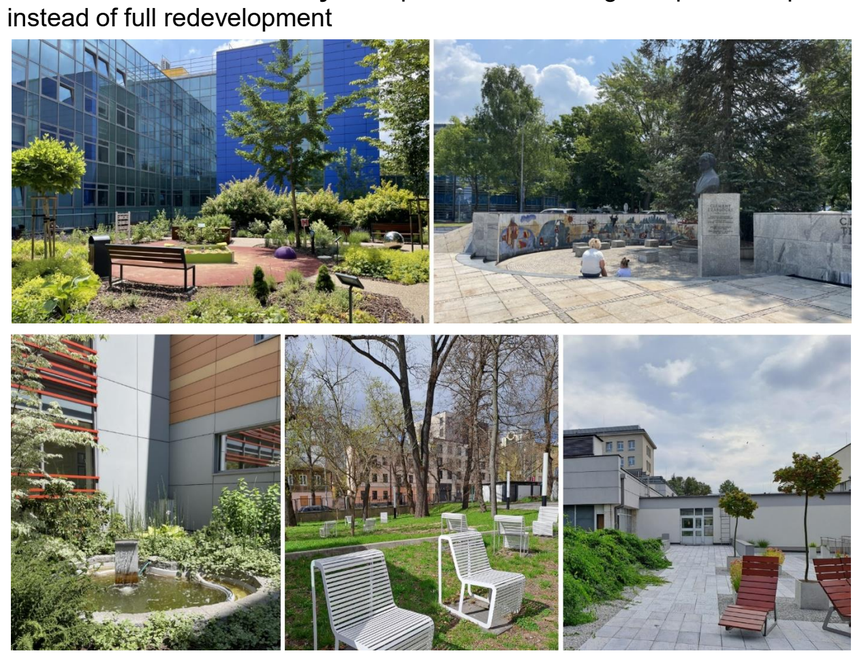
The therapeutic quality of hospital outdoor spaces depends less on the amount of greenery and more on spatial organization, accessibility, circulation legibility, and integration with everyday user routes. Type A campus layouts and selected Type B balanced layouts showed the greatest adaptive potential because they offer open areas, courtyards, and spaces between buildings. Type C compact inner-city hospitals and Type D parking-dominated layouts were more constrained and require targeted interventions, such as courtyard transformation, entrance-zone reorganization, reduced vehicular dominance, and strategic greenery. The assessment focused on actual usability rather than size or aesthetics alone, treating outdoor spaces as part of the healthcare environment that supports comfort, orientation, safety, rest, and contact with nature.

DISCUSSION

Hospital outdoor spaces can support different forms of use, from quiet restoration to social interaction and light activity. The Italian examples illustrate the importance of a gradient between intimate, calming areas and more open, social spaces, while the Polish examples show how gardens, terraces, seating areas and small public squares can improve everyday user experience. These spaces demonstrate that the therapeutic value of hospital campuses depends not only on greenery itself, but on its accessibility, equipment, spatial legibility and integration with users' everyday routes. Well-designed outdoor areas can therefore become practical elements of hospital modernization, supporting comfort, orientation, rest and well-being for patients, visitors and staff.

CONCLUSIONS

Hospital outdoor spaces should be treated as part of the healthcare landscape, not only as technical or circulation areas. Their therapeutic quality depends mainly on accessibility, spatial legibility, diverse resting places, and integration with everyday hospital use. Campus and balanced layouts offer the greatest adaptive potential, while compact inner-city and parking-dominated hospitals require more targeted interventions. The proposed assessment framework can support the modernization of existing hospital campuses toward more inclusive, user-oriented, and well-being-supportive environments.

CONTRIBUTION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

- **Social sustainability:** inclusive spaces for patients, visitors and staff
- **Environmental sustainability:** better use of existing green areas
- **Economic sustainability:** adaptation of existing hospital campuses instead of full redevelopment