CONFLICTS OVER THE CONDITION AND MANAGEMENT OF GREEN SPACES AND THEIR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Gábor Károly Eiselt
Mediator, Green Space Management Leader (Hungary)
Corresponding address: eiseltgabor@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-1798-5020

ABSTRACT
Green spaces play a crucial role in ensuring ecological sustainability, urban liveability, and public well-being. However, increasing urbanisation, land-use pressures, and conflicting stakeholder interests have led to a rise in disputes over the condition, use, and planning of these areas. This study explores the most common types of conflicts related to urban green spaces, including tensions between conservation goals and development plans, accessibility concerns, and differing community expectations. Drawing on case studies from Central and Eastern Europe, the paper analyses the root causes of such conflicts and categorises them by actor involvement, spatial scale, and legal framework. The second part of the study focuses on conflict resolution mechanisms. The findings underline the importance of transparent governance, inclusive dialogue, and adaptive planning in mitigating conflicts and promoting the sustainable management of green areas.

KEYWORDS

ARTICLE HISTORY

I. Introduction

The quality, accessibility, and sustainable management of green spaces have become among the most complex and pressing issues in 21st-century urban planning.[1] Green infrastructure represents not only aesthetic, recreational, or ecological value, but plays an essential role in urban quality of life, public health, social cohesion, and climate change adaptation.[2] Despite this, conflicts increasingly emerge in the maintenance, development, and use of green areas, often rooted in diverging stakeholder interests, competing interpretations, and disputes over the distribution of resources.[3]

Conflicts associated with urban green spaces can be highly diverse in nature. They may arise between local community needs and municipal priorities, among various professional actors (such as landscape architects, environmental experts, or public space managers), or from the tension between development goals and conservation interests. Community use, sustainable maintenance, biodiversity protection, and the pursuit of social justice often coexist—frequently in a state of tension.[4] These conflicts are frequently symptoms of deeper structural issues, institutional deficiencies, or communication gaps.

The aim of this study is to explore the typical nature of conflicts related to urban green areas, to identify the main actors involved, and to analyse the mechanisms through which such conflicts can be constructively addressed. Particular attention is paid to mediation techniques and participatory planning methods, which are presented as alternative instruments of conflict resolution.[5] Based on empirical experience, it is argued that green space disputes are not only legal or technical issues but often value-based conflicts that require mutual understanding, trust, and a search for common ground among stakeholders.[6] In this regard, the mediator plays a crucial role in facilitating structured dialogue and helping the parties arrive at constructive solutions.

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[1] Michael C Kondo, Jaime M Fluehr, Thomas McKeon and Charles C Branas, 'Urban green space and its impact on human health' (2018) 15(3) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 445 https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15030445

[2] Jennifer R Wolch, Jason Byrne and Joshua P Newell, 'Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities "just green enough"' (2014) 125 *Landscape and Urban Planning* 234–244 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2014.01.017

[3] Annegret Haase, 'Inequalities and Injustices of Urban Green Regeneration: Applying the Conflict Analysis Perspective' (2024) 13(3) *Land* 296 https://doi.org/10.3390/land13030296

[4] Christine Bertram and Katrin Rehdanz, 'The role of urban green space for human well-being' (2015) 120 *Ecological Economics* 139–152 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2015.10.013

[5] Yiwen Cui, Morten Gjerde and Bruno Marques, 'Mapping and Assessing Effective Participatory Planning Processes for Urban Green Spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand's Diverse Communities' (2024) 13(9) *Land* 1412 https://doi.org/10.3390/land13091412

[6] Haase (n 3)

This research starts from the premise that green space conflicts are not avoidable anomalies, but rather a natural consequence of a pluralistic urban society.[7] Instead of being dismissed, such conflicts should be approached as opportunities to foster cooperation, mutual learning, and the creation of more sustainable urban environments.[8] Accordingly, the study is structured around three main analytical dimensions: first, it examines the main types and causes of green space conflicts; second, it analyses resolution strategies, with a special focus on mediation practices; and third, it presents a case study to demonstrate the practical applications and insights of conflict resolution in the urban context.

The condition and use of urban green spaces thus constitutes not only a matter of environmental policy, but increasingly also one of social and legal relevance. Ensuring livable, healthy, and equitable urban environments calls for integrated approaches that are capable of addressing challenges not only on a technical but also on a societal level.[9]

II. The sources of conflict

Urban green spaces, as multifunctional and open-access areas, serve as mirrors of social diversity, where differing lifestyles, expectations, and values converge.[10] While in theory, the ecological, recreational, and communal functions of green areas should reinforce one another, in practice they often lead to tensions among users, developers, and maintenance actors. The sources of conflict can be understood along several dimensions, stemming partly from divergent needs and partly from value-based differences.

Identifying and systematically analysing these types of conflicts is essential for developing effective conflict resolution strategies, particularly if the goal is to achieve a sustainable, multi-stakeholder, and cooperative model of green space governance.

Urban green areas serve a wide variety of functions, which frequently gives rise to conflicts among stakeholders. These conflicts may be rooted not only in competing uses but also in conflicting values, legal interpretations, or environmental concerns, and they demand complex and context-sensitive solutions.[11] Demand for green space has significantly increased in recent decades, while the total area of such spaces has in many cases stagnated or declined. Consequently, various social

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[7] Koen De Ridder and others, 'An integrated methodology to assess the benefits of urban green space' (2004) 334 *Science of the Total Environment* 489–497 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2004.04.054
[8] Benjamin Daniels and others, 'Assessment of urban green space structures and their quality from a multidimensional perspective' (2018) 615 *Science of the Total Environment* 1364–1378 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2017.09.167
[9] Ibid
[10] Jasper Jan Schipperijn, *Use of Urban Green Space* (Forest & Landscape 2010)
[11] Shah Md Atiqul Haq, 'Urban green spaces and an integrative approach to sustainable environment' (2011) 2(5) *Journal of Environmental Protection* 601–608 https://doi.org/10.4236/jep.2011.25069

groups—differing in life circumstances, preferences, and values—often find themselves in competition over the use and control of green areas.

1. Users and citizens conflicts

The most common type of conflict occurs between different user groups whose activities disturb or exclude one another.[12] A classic example involves tensions between dog walkers and families with small children, or between those seeking quiet relaxation and those engaging in active sports. In such cases, the conflict often extends beyond mere physical space use, reflecting divergent behavioural norms and expectations. For instance, disputes between runners and dog owners are not only about who uses which path, but also about whether dogs should be leashed, whether they disturb runners, and who has priority on a narrow trail.

2. Functional conflicts

Functional conflicts arise when plans for future development or use of a green area clash with residents' expectations.[13] For example, a municipality may plan to develop a park into a venue for public events, while local residents regard it as a tranquil, nature-oriented space. These conflicts frequently result from a lack of public participation in the planning process; if the community is not involved in time and to a sufficient extent, resistance may surface in the form of protest or even legal action.

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3. Environmental and Value-Based Conflicts

Environmental and value-based conflicts represent another major source of tension.[14] These include situations where biodiversity conservation, ecological integrity, or environmental values come into conflict with recreational, economic, or urban development goals. In such cases, professionals (such as ecologists or landscape architects) and civil society actors often find themselves opposed to political decision-makers or investors. A typical example is the paving over or repurposing of ecologically valuable grassland for event infrastructure.

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[12] Alex YH Lo and Chi Yung Jim, 'Citizen attitude and expectation towards greenspace provision in compact urban milieu' (2012) 29(3) *Land Use Policy* 577–586 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2011.09.011

[13] Marthe L Derkzen and others, 'Shifting roles of urban green space in the context of urban development and global change' (2017) 29 *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 32–39 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.10.001

[14] Philipp Andreas Unterweger, Nicolas Schrode and Oliver Betz, 'Urban nature: perception and acceptance of alternative green space management and the change of awareness after provision of environmental information. A chance for biodiversity protection' (2017) 1(3) *Urban Science* 24 https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci1030024

4. Institutional and Legal Conflicts

Institutional and legal conflicts often underpin green space disputes. These occur when responsibilities for the maintenance, development, or governance of a green area are unclear or overlapping among institutions.[15] Protracted decision-making processes, opaque accountability structures, and regulatory gaps all contribute to public mistrust and exacerbate conflicts.[16]

Green space conflicts, therefore, are diverse and usually unfold on multiple levels simultaneously. It is important to recognise that such conflicts are not merely problems to be solved but also represent social situations that—if addressed constructively—can strengthen community ties and enhance the functional and ecological value of urban green spaces.

Conflicts surrounding urban green areas become particularly pronounced when the land in question is not officially designated as a public park or green space but instead appears as an abandoned, unmanaged, or weedy plot. These areas often exist as privately owned or corporate-held properties that are not actively maintained, yet the public frequently associates them with communal or aesthetic expectations. This mismatch can lead to highly polarised and emotionally charged conflict situations.[17]

Such conflicts are often situational and destructive in nature, fuelled by intense emotions, which makes them especially difficult to manage.[18] On-site mediation is one of the most challenging forms of intervention, as high emotional tension may hinder meaningful negotiation. Nonetheless, in practice, operational field managers—who may not be formally trained as mediators but have gained extensive experience—can often defuse tensions effectively and manage situations that the academic literature would classify as barely or non-mediable.

III. Fundamental Types of Conflict in the Use of Urban Green Spaces

Conflicts associated with urban green spaces are not only functional or role-based in nature but may also be rooted in deeper layers as described by conflict theory. The following section presents the main types of such conflicts in the context of urban green space use, illustrated with practical examples.

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[15] Anqi Wang and Edwin Chan, 'Institutional factors affecting urban green space provision – from a local government revenue perspective' (2019) 62(13) *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 2313–2329 https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2018.1541231

[16] Balázs Hohmann, 'Integrity Advisors and the Development of Administrative Communication Culture' (2019) 4(1) *European Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 29–33 https://doi.org/10.26417/ejms-2019.v4i1-527

[17] Bo Mu and others, 'Conceptual planning of urban–rural green space from a multidimensional perspective: A case study of Zhengzhou, China' (2020) 12(7) *Sustainability* 2863 https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072863

[18] István Bereczki, 'Környezetvédelmi közvetítés Németországban [Environmental Mediation in Germany]' (2020) 7(1) *Pro Futuro* 60–63 https://doi.org/10.26521/Profuturo/2017/1/4748

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1. Information-Based Conflicts

Conflicts often arise from the lack or distortion of information.[19] When residents are not informed about a planned tree removal, or if the justification is poorly communicated, this can lead to resistance and protest. Conversely, an overload of unstructured information—such as a lengthy municipal resolution written in inaccessible legal language—can result in misunderstandings.

Example: In a district park, three old trees were cut down. Residents perceived this as "yet another act of environmental destruction," even though the municipality had previously published that the trees were hazardous. Although the information was technically available, it had not been effectively conveyed to those affected.

2. Relationship-Based Conflicts

When parties have a history of negative experiences, personal grievances, or deep mistrust, communication often breaks down entirely.[20] These conflicts are typically long-lasting and may resurface regardless of the actual issue at hand.

Example: Years earlier, a conflict emerged between a local civil society group and the municipal maintenance department over decisions surrounding a community garden. Since then, every new green initiative is met with suspicion— even when it might otherwise be seen as beneficial.

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3. Value-Based Conflicts

Differing worldviews, upbringing, or generational divides often surface in how green spaces are perceived and used.[21] While some people prefer wild, natural landscapes, others favour orderly, "clean" parks.

Example: A group of residents opposed the transformation of a park section into a wildflower meadow. For them, the area appeared neglected and unattractive, whereas the initiators emphasized its ecological and conservation value.

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[19] Nicholas J Marantz and Nicola Ulibarri, 'The tensions of transparency in urban and environmental planning' (2022) 42(3) *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 401–412 https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X19827638
Balázs Hohmann, 'The Interpretation of Transparency from the Legal Point of View' in Tamás Haffner (ed), *4th Youth in Europe Conference – Proceedings* (Sopianae Cultural Association 2018) 155–163
[20] Madeleine Wagner and others, 'Conflicts about urban green spaces in metropolitan areas under conditions of climate change: A multidisciplinary analysis of stakeholders' perceptions of planning processes' (2019) 3(1) *Urban Science* 15 https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci3010015
[21] Kaiwen Su and others, 'Do value orientations and beliefs play a positive role in shaping personal norms for urban green space conservation?' (2022) 11(2) *Land* 262 https://doi.org/10.3390/land11020262
Justine Palliwoda and Janine A Priess, 'What do people value in urban green? Linking characteristics of urban green spaces to users' perceptions of nature benefits, disturbances, and disservices' (2021) 26(1) *Ecology and Society* 28 https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12204-260128

4. *Structural Conflicts*

These conflicts arise from systemic failures, power asymmetries, or institutional barriers to cooperation.[22] A typical case involves a green space owned by a private company that is used informally as a public park, even though the municipality lacks legal authority to intervene.

Example: A decommissioned industrial site that has spontaneously "re-greened" is regularly used by locals for jogging and dog walking. When the owner erects a fence, residents protest, but the municipality is legally unable to take sides.

5. *Interest-Based Conflicts*

This type of conflict stems from scarce resources, differing objectives, and incompatible usage patterns.[23] It concerns not values but concrete rights and functions.

Example: Joggers wish to create a circular running trail in a park, while dog owners are asking for a fenced dog run in the same area. The two functions are mutually exclusive, and compromise through spatial planning is required.

6. *Situation-Based Conflicts*

These are spontaneous, often unforeseen, and arise from momentary interactions between strangers. A typical scenario involves a verbal altercation in a park due to a dog being walked without a leash.

Example: An elderly woman becomes frightened by a large, playful dog running loose. A heated argument ensues between her and the dog's owner, drawing the attention of other park-goers.

7. *Needs-Based Conflicts*

Such conflicts arise when basic human needs—safety, rest, control—are in tension.[24] These are deeply rooted, often emotionally charged conflicts that are difficult to verbalize.

Example: Residents living near a playground complain that the noise prevents them from resting, while parents advocate for more benches, additional play equipment, and extended opening hours. Both parties seek to assert fundamental needs—rest and child development, respectively.

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[22] Viniece Jennings and others, 'The dynamic relationship between social cohesion and urban green space in diverse communities: Opportunities and challenges to public health' (2024) 21(6) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 800 https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph21060800

[23] Haase (n 3)

[24] Elizabeth A Schrammeijer, Žiga Malek and Peter H Verburg, 'Mapping demand and supply of functional niches of urban green space' (2022) 140 *Ecological Indicators* 109031 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2022.109031

IV. Stages of Conflict in Urban Green Space Disputes

Conflicts surrounding urban green spaces can not only be classified by type but also by their temporal development and dynamic evolution. Typically, conflicts unfold in several clearly distinguishable stages, each marked by different levels of tension, communication, and escalation.[25] n the context of green space governance, it is particularly important that each phase is matched with appropriate communication and intervention strategies. The success of conflict resolution often depends on whether the parties—or third-party facilitators—recognize which phase the dispute is in and whether they adopt methods tailored to that phase.[26]

1. Latent Phase

This is the early and often imperceptible stage of the conflict, in which parties have not yet recognized the disagreement. The origin of the conflict frequently dates back to the past and is difficult to trace.

Urban green space example: Residents observe the increasing deterioration of an overgrown vacant lot with growing concern but do not yet raise the issue with the property owner or the authorities.

2. Manifestation Phase

At this point, the parties begin to recognize the conflict, though their perceptions may be exaggerated or distorted. The elements of the conflict become amplified and emotional framing dominates.

Example: A resident posts on social media about "the most neglected site in the city," drawing broader public attention to the issue, despite the fact that the site is no more neglected than many other urban green spaces.

3. Signalling Phase

This marks the first communicative appearance of the conflict. The parties express their concerns, but the method of communication—such as a formal letter, public complaint, or media criticism—can significantly influence the course of the dispute.

Example: The municipality sends a notice to the owner demanding site cleanup, while residents submit official complaints or publish an open letter in the local press. The issue becomes publicly acknowledged.

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[25] Louis R Pondy, 'Organizational Conflict: Concepts and Models' (1967) 12(2) *Administrative Science Quarterly* 296–320 https://doi.org/10.2307/2391553

[26] Haoyu Chen, '"Conflict" or "Cooperation": A Study on the Spontaneous Order of Urban Public Space Development from the Perspective of Stakeholders' in *Proceedings of the 2020 International Conference on Materials Science and Engineering* (IOP Publishing 2020) vol 960, 042043 https://doi.org/10.1088/1757-899X/960/4/042043

4. *Articulation or Debate Phase*

This is the most intense phase of the conflict, where parties clearly articulate their interests and needs. Although rational discussion and solution-seeking are still possible, emotions often dominate the discourse.

Example: At a public forum, residents, environmentalists, and representatives of the property owner debate the future of a wooded private lot. Arguments and counterarguments are presented, but resolution remains open.

5. *Polarization Phase*

Positions harden, and communication deteriorates. Parties listen only for contradictions and rejections from the other side. Strategic "games" begin to emerge, and symbolic gestures or slogans replace constructive dialogue.

Example: Protests against any form of tree removal escalate, where stakeholders refuse to consider professional justifications and reject interventions on purely emotional or ideological grounds.

6. *Isolation or Separation Phase*

Communication ceases entirely, and each party relies solely on their own narrative, seeking solutions in isolation. Without external mediation, resolution in this phase becomes nearly impossible.

Example: The property is declared off-limits by the owner, while residents file a petition with the local council. There is no direct communication between the parties.

7. *Destructive or Hatred-Based Phase*

The conflict becomes toxic, aiming not at resolution but at discrediting or harming the other party—whether through legal action, public shaming, or physical acts. At this point, mediation is no longer a viable option.

Example: An environmental group files a legal complaint and mobilizes public opinion against the property owner, who in turn files a countersuit. The conflict devolves into personal attacks on social media.

8. *Exhaustion or Last-Chance Phase*

Parties become emotionally and mentally depleted, lacking the energy for further confrontation. If the conflict has not reached a fully destructive state, this stage may offer an opportunity for renewed mediation—especially if initiated externally.

Example: Months later, as part of a new urban development grant program, a fresh round of consultations is launched. After multiple failed attempts, the stakeholders are now willing to re-engage in dialogue.

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V. Case studies

1. *Storm Damage – A Constructive Response to a Crisis Situation*

A significant proportion of interventions concerning urban green areas are not the result of pre-planned actions but arise from sudden, crisis-like events that demand immediate response.[27] Among these, storm damage represents a particularly critical scenario—not only due to the physical harm it may cause to urban infrastructure, but also because it often brings underlying social tensions to the surface or creates new ones.

One case study illustrates a situation where a tree branch, broken off by a storm, fell near the fence of a local dog park. The need for immediate intervention was undeniable, as the incident posed a direct threat to human safety—particularly in a location that is used daily by local residents. Hungarian regulatory frameworks, such as Government Decree No. 346/2008 (XII.30.) on the planting and maintenance of woody plants, provide clear legal obligations for the removal of dangerous elements.

While the official notice issued by authorities referenced the property user's legal responsibilities, the situation in practice involved more than mere compliance. It presented a latent conflict potential that—if mismanaged—could have undermined public trust. This conflict can be classified as both interest- and needs-based, as it directly affected the perceived safety and environmental comfort of the community.

From the perspective of mediation, this case serves as an instructive example of how crisis situations can be transformed into opportunities for strengthening community relations. The municipality's swift and professional response not only addressed the immediate problem, but also helped foster a positive memory among residents: *"this time they really paid attention to us and acted quickly."* Such interventions can later serve as points of reference—success stories in community collaboration—to be recalled in future disputes or development processes.

At the same time, the incident revealed the sensitivity surrounding green space interventions. During the tree removal process, members of the public approached the on-site workers with concerns, interpreting the activity—based on prior experience and ingrained assumptions—as an act of environmental harm. Public resistance to tree cutting is not solely driven by ecological values but often stems from deeply emotional and symbolic associations—the "destruction of green" in the urban fabric. The conflict evolved into a situational dispute that unfolded during the articulation phase—residents posed specific questions and

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[27] Christoph DD Rupprecht, 'Informal urban green space: Residents' perception, use, and management preferences across four major Japanese shrinking cities' (2017) 6(3) *Land* 59 https://doi.org/10.3390/land6030059

expected clear responses. Fortunately, the escalation was effectively mitigated in time. The foreman's calm and detailed explanation, coupled with a thorough assessment of the tree's condition, helped reassure residents about the legality and necessity of the intervention. The dialogue that took place on-site, although informal, functioned effectively as a form of informal mediation. It helped re-establish communication and reinforce mutual accountability between stakeholders.

In sum, this case highlights how the constructive resolution of a direct hazard can enhance not only the physical safety of a public space but also long-term cooperative relationships between residents, municipal authorities, and operational service providers.[28] Lessons from such experiences can be intentionally integrated into local development and participatory planning processes—as shared narratives of successful collaboration.

2. Urban Aesthetics – Conflicts over the Appearance of Green Spaces

The second case study explores a conflict that emerged in relation to an unused urban green area, where the primary tension stemmed from differing expectations regarding visual appearance and land management between the local municipality and the property owner. A site inspection conducted by municipal representatives concluded that the plot was overgrown and neglected—characterised by excessive suckers, uncollected green waste, rampant climbers, fallen trees, and a general lack of mowing. As a result, a formal request was issued by the authorities, urging the landowner to restore and maintain the property, with the goal of establishing a more managed, bush-and-tree dominated aesthetic.

The source of the conflict clearly lies in diverging aesthetic and functional expectations.[29] While the municipality prioritises a uniform, well-maintained urban image, the landowner perceives no problem with the spontaneous vegetation—in fact, they may even value it as a form of low-intervention biodiversity, a "natural" green space. This constitutes a relationship- and interest-based conflict that remains in the signalling phase; no direct dispute has yet arisen, but the first formal expression of disagreement has occurred.

At this early stage, the potential for mediation is particularly important. Effective mediation would aim to establish communication between the parties before the conflict escalates. This is especially relevant, given that such recurrent notifications often become routine administrative practices—possibly evolving into a form of quasi-customary law in enforcement. The mediator's role would thus be

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[28] Adriano Bressane and others, 'Community Engagement in the Management of Urban Green Spaces: Prospects from a Case Study in an Emerging Economy' (2024) 8(4) *Urban Science* 188 https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci8040188

[29] Isabella M Mambretti and Isabella Margherita Mambretti, *Urban Parks between Safety and Aesthetics: Exploring Urban Green Space Using Visualisation and Conjoint Analysis Methods* (vdf Hochschulverlag AG 2011)

to initiate a dialogue that not only addresses the current issue, but also surfaces and addresses long-term differences in underlying perspectives.

However, during the actual site intervention, the conflict extended beyond the municipality–owner relationship to include third parties. The clearing work—pruning, thinning, and brush removal—elicited objections from two distinct groups. One was a homeless individual living among the shrubs, who had built a makeshift shelter. For him, the intervention was not simply a matter of landscape maintenance but a need-based conflict tied to his basic survival. Although his presence was unknown to the maintenance team prior to the intervention, the situation was handled with sensitivity: he was given time to relocate, and the interaction remained respectful and open. Here, mediation occurred implicitly and informally—and yet effectively.

In contrast, the response from residents living on the opposite side of the street was far more contentious. They viewed the intervention as an act of environmental destruction, even though it was legally justified and properly executed. This highlights how a value-based conflict can quickly become situational—and, in some cases, drift toward a destructive phase. The protesters attempted to obstruct the workers and even filed a complaint, although municipal enforcement officers confirmed the legality of the intervention. While tensions did not escalate irreversibly, the situation exposed a critical issue: the communication channels between residents and the municipality are weak, and preliminary information-sharing or participatory engagement is often lacking.[30]

From the mediator's perspective, one of the key takeaways is that interventions in urban green spaces related to aesthetics are never merely technical matters. Residents' emotional attachments, value systems, and sense of safety are all potential sources of tension if disregarded. Moving forward, these types of conflicts could be better managed through early and multi-modal communication—including visual cues (such as signage, maps, or social media updates), as well as participatory green space management programs (e.g. adoption schemes, volunteer pruning days).

Ultimately, this case exemplifies how what initially appears to be a purely technical issue may in fact reflect deep-seated structural and attitudinal divergences. The municipality's role must therefore go beyond enforcing maintenance obligations—it must act as a facilitator, interpreter, and conflict manager. In this, the methodology of mediation offers substantial support.

3. Invisible Conflict Behind Urban Green Space Management

The third case study addresses a particularly sensitive social issue: a municipal intervention, officially justified as a maintenance action on overgrown vegetation,

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[30] Balázs Hohmann, 'The Principles and Fundamental Requirements of the Transparency on the Public Administrative Proceedings' in Suresh P (ed), *Proceedings of the IIER International Conference, Dubai, UAE* (International Institute of Engineers and Researchers 2019) 1–4

ultimately masked an underlying social conflict—homelessness.[31] The formal notice instructed the land user to trim back excessive plant growth, citing urban aesthetic standards. However, both the mode of communication and the physical context of the conflict suggested that vegetation management was not the sole driver of the enforcement.

The actual catalyst for the intervention was the presence of a homeless couple who had temporarily settled on the site. While the formal grounds for action referenced disorderly vegetation that disrupted the visual coherence of the neighbourhood, the substance of the conflict was rooted in structural and need-based dimensions. During the on-site inspection, the maintenance team encountered a carefully arranged, makeshift shelter comprising a couch, basic furniture, and personal belongings, nestled in the shade of the overgrown shrubbery. The couple openly acknowledged their situation, explained they were unhoused, and had chosen the site as a temporary summer refuge. The atmosphere remained calm throughout the interaction; far from confrontational, the couple expressed appreciation for being heard and treated respectfully.

Although the conflict appeared in official communication during the signalling phase, the interaction on the ground reflected characteristics of the exhaustion phase. The couple had already begun preparations to relocate and had even started establishing a new temporary shelter elsewhere. This case illustrates the complex social and human factors that may lie beneath what appears to be a simple green space maintenance order.

Mediation opportunities in such cases are inherently limited. A mediator—especially in the context of spatial planning or aesthetic disputes—can only work with the information that parties are willing to disclose. Here, the official complaint made no mention of the homeless individuals; the actual goal was their removal from the area. For mediation to be meaningful, it is essential that underlying interests and needs are surfaced early, rather than obscured by formal rationales.

Nevertheless, the story also offers a positive example of how even socially sensitive situations can be addressed with dignity. The homeless couple were not forcibly removed, nor subjected to coercive policing. Instead, they were granted a grace period and chose to leave the site of their own accord. While this incident did not solve the broader issue of homelessness, it demonstrated that respecting human dignity during public interventions can make a tangible difference.

As a case study, this situation underscores that conflicts over urban green spaces often extend beyond questions of environmental protection or urban design. In such instances, mediators—if included—must be prepared to engage with complex social and ethical considerations. Some conflicts are not about interests in the traditional sense but reflect the visibility or invisibility of socially marginalised

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populations. The maintenance of public spaces must not become a mechanism of exclusion—and if it does take on such a role, this reality must be acknowledged and made visible to both decision-makers and the wider community.

This example highlights how unspoken intentions and the avoidance of direct confrontation can, in certain cases, create the space for a quiet, humane resolution. However, it also makes clear that the structural social tensions underlying such conflicts cannot be resolved without systemic, policy-level responses.

4. *Physical Sites and Sensitive Social Situations*

Conflicts concerning the condition of urban green spaces often do not stem from the actual physical state of the area, but rather from differing perceptions regarding its appearance, usage, and the underlying values and norms. Official notices issued by municipalities frequently reflect more than just the tangible reality of a site; they often convey expectations shaped by structural, relational, or status-driven motivations.

The first example illustrates how green areas located at intersections receive heightened scrutiny. Even a seemingly minor infraction—such as a few centimetres of overgrowth—may trigger an immediate enforcement response. On the surface, such swift and strict action may appear to support goals like preserving urban aesthetics or ensuring traffic safety. However, it also raises critical questions about proportionality and timing: does the intervention truly correspond to a genuine safety threat? Pre-emptive actions, especially when they precede any tangible risk, can generate unnecessary tension, potentially straining the relationship between the parties involved in the long term.

The second case unfolded during winter, a period outside the regular vegetation cycle. Here, the designation of the site as "weedy and neglected" was made when plant life had naturally receded due to the season. The notice issued in this context is questionable not only from a technical standpoint but also in terms of underlying intent. It raises the possibility that the complaint may have been driven by personal frustration, an attempt to assert power, or even malice. Formally, such a conflict may remain in the signalling phase, but in practice, it may already exhibit features of a destructive or separation phase—especially when the purpose of the notice is not to initiate dialogue but to suppress or punish the other party.

Both cases highlight the limitations of the current practice, wherein obligations are mechanically communicated through formal enforcement letters. This approach offers only the illusion of resolution. Conflicts of this kind are rarely resolved; rather, they are suppressed or delayed, only to resurface repeatedly. Therefore, there is a pressing need to develop and implement new mediation techniques and conflict management methods that enable genuine mutual understanding and foster sustainable agreements.

These scenarios point to the necessity for municipalities to go beyond compliance-based enforcement and adopt a more relational, communicative role. In doing so, public authorities would not only maintain urban order but also contribute to the social sustainability of urban life by recognising the emotional and symbolic dimensions embedded in public green spaces.

VI. Mediation techniques for urban conflict resolution

1. *Evaluative Mediation: Providing an Expert Framework*

When a conflict between parties—such as a municipality and a private landowner—partly revolves around professional or technical questions (e.g. what qualifies as a neglected green space), the application of evaluative mediation is particularly appropriate.[32] This mediation model entails the involvement of a neutral third party who, beyond acting as a facilitator, also possesses subject-matter expertise. The mediator is thus equipped to formulate informed opinions and propose technically sound and mutually acceptable solutions. In cases where environmental concerns, biodiversity preservation, or the timing of mowing activities are at issue, the complexity of these topics often exceeds the knowledge or interpretive capacity of the parties involved. Here, the evaluative mediator acts as a compass—guiding the stakeholders toward outcomes that are not only legally compliant and aesthetically acceptable in terms of urban design, but also environmentally sustainable.

This approach combines conflict resolution with expert consultation, allowing the process to address both relational tensions and factual uncertainties. The mediator's role therefore expands from mere facilitation to interpretation and orientation, offering a knowledge-based framework in which informed dialogue can unfold.

2. *Narrative Mediation Approach: Reframing Stories and Relationships*

As illustrated in the preceding examples, conflicts often stem from divergent worldviews and value systems. One party perceives an "overgrown jungle" as something that needs to be tamed to restore order, while the other views that same area as a symbol of naturalness, biodiversity, and non-intervention. The goal of narrative mediation is precisely to surface and articulate these differing stories and then reshape them into a shared narrative that redefines the relationships involved.[33] In this method, the primary aim is not immediate agreement, but rather to help the parties see each other—and themselves—from a fresh perspective, thus laying the foundation for long-term collaboration.

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[32] Bereczki (n 16) 65-70.

[33] Toran Hansen, 'The Narrative Approach to Mediation' (2004) 4(2) *Pepperdine Dispute Resolution Law Journal* 1–20

3. Transformative Mediation Tools: Reframing Relational Patterns

Transformative mediation goes even further:[34] it not only re-narrativizes the story but also rebuilds the relationship between parties. This approach emphasizes helping the parties recognize each other's communication styles and needs, and develop new interaction patterns that empower them to resolve future conflicts independently. For instance, in the case where the official objective was to manage the green space, while the real intention was to displace homeless individuals, transformative mediation can assist stakeholders (municipality, residents, landowner) to co-create humanely and dignity-respecting solutions—rather than addressing merely the symptoms.

4. Applying the Methods to a Case Study

In one particularly instructive situation, beehives were illegally placed in a mowed area. The workers—though they had every right to continue mowing—recognized the ecological and physical risk posed to the bees and refrained from intervention, reporting the issue instead. This instinctive cooperation, which we might call an implicit, situational mediation practice, exemplifies how conflict avoidance can also be a deliberate decision that preempts future tensions. Such an approach builds relational capital among the parties that endure over time.

Urban green spaces adjacent to major transport junctions often bear a dual character: they could serve important ecological and urban design functions, but when neglected, they become sources of social tension. This case study explores a currently unused and partly enclosed green space next to a heavily trafficked transport intersection in Budapest, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of conflicts, their root causes, and potential communal solutions.

The area, a disused plot encircled by concrete walls and overgrown with trees and shrubs, is perceived differently by residents, passersby, and homeless individuals. The vegetation's cover and secluded nature make it a makeshift restroom for some, and a temporary shelter for others. Meanwhile, residents complain about declining public safety, unpleasant aesthetics, and property value losses. Thus, the conflicts here arise not only from aesthetics or sustainability concerns, but also deeper social and economic pressures.

The issue can be understood on multiple levels: as a values- and interest-based conflict, where parties—including residents, municipality, landowner, and indirectly the homeless—prioritize differing concerns; and as a relational conflict driven by mutual distrust and poor communication. In this case, the conflict sits between the notification (jelzési) and articulation (artikulációs) phases: the issues are identified and voiced but not yet escalated.

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[34] Ibid

Narrative mediation offered one of the most compelling pathways forward. A widely promoted resident forum was organized, bringing together locals, municipal representatives, the landowner, and other stakeholders. The facilitator set an inclusive seating arrangement and began the session with a "opening circle" aimed at easing initial tension and establishing a safe space for diverse perspectives. Invoking "positive memories from the past" and sharing personal needs and experiences created a platform to envision a collective future.

Proposals raised—such as community gardens, flower beds, public toilets, mobile surveillance cameras, and less frequent but targeted maintenance—were captured by the mediator and examined in small-group discussions. This collaborative planning fostered a sense of ownership among participants, increasing their commitment to implementation. Indirect outcomes were also notable: communications between residents and the municipality improved following the forum, enabling conflict resolution at earlier stages. While the deeper issue—homelessness—remained unresolved (as it extends beyond a single site's redesign), the forum effectively reduced mistrust and seeded a shared problem-solving mindset.

However, another initiative by residents created new tension: the condominium residents requested trimming of trees shading their lower-floor apartments. This situation shifted from the articulation phase into a separation phase: frustrated by non-cooperative responses, the residents threatened legal action. The landowner, however, supported by independent diagnostics, confirmed that neither legal nor scientific grounds justified tree removal. This conflict was both values- and structurally-based: the shade's impact on property values conflicted with urban greening and environmental protection principles.

Evaluative mediation could have been valuable here: a specialist in urban green space management could have mediated the technical, ecological, and social aspects to guide the parties toward a mutually acceptable solution. Because mediation did not occur, the conflict escalated destructively when unknown individuals forcibly cut down healthy trees. This outcome highlights the necessity for mediation not only before escalation, but also afterward—either to redefine the relationship between the perpetrator and the community or to prevent similar future events.

Overall, this example demonstrates that even seemingly neglected urban green spaces carry layered significance and social roles. Rather than superficially addressing issues, long-term, sustainable solutions hinge on community-based, mediation-supported approaches.

VII. Conclusion

The case studies and analyses presented in this study clearly demonstrate that conflicts surrounding the use and management of urban green spaces are far more complex than surface-level phenomena—such as overgrown vegetation, the presence of unhoused individuals, or shading trees—might initially suggest. These situations are not merely clashes of interest; they involve intersecting needs, identities, values, and power relations. The way people relate to urban green spaces serves as a kind of social mirror, reflecting not only what we perceive as beautiful, natural, or valuable, but also who is entitled to shape the fate of a space, whose voice is heard, and who remains invisible.

All major types of conflict—use-based, functional, environmental, and value-driven—were present in the cases examined. Tensions between joggers and dog owners, between municipal maintenance goals and nature advocates, or between residents concerned about public safety and unhoused individuals, illustrate that green spaces are not neutral grounds. They are contested urban arenas saturated with meanings and expectations, where broader societal hierarchies and inequalities become visible.

The study emphasized the applicability of various mediation techniques—narrative, evaluative, and transformative mediation—as alternative conflict resolution approaches. These techniques foreground different aspects of the process: narrative mediation focuses on reframing relationships and stories between the parties; evaluative mediation relies on expert knowledge to support technically grounded outcomes; while transformative mediation aims to reconstruct the relationship itself, assuming that true resolution only becomes possible through re-establishing mutual understanding and communication patterns.

The individual cases revealed that conflict intervention is necessary not only when tensions have escalated into destructive or separating phases but also in early stages—when conflicts are still latent or emerging.[35] Recognizing the signs of conflict, opening communication channels, articulating divergent perspectives, and fostering an environment conducive to mutual understanding are essential components of successful intervention.

One of the shared characteristics of green space-related conflicts is that most actors involved do not perceive themselves as decision-makers, or are excluded from the decision-making process altogether. Dialogue between property

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[35] Tünde Ferik (ed), *Konfliktuskezelési, mediációs módszerek alkalmazása a településfejlesztésben [Mediation Methods in Urban Planning]* (Völgyzugoly Műhely 2014) 12

owners, municipal bodies, residents, maintenance contractors, and marginalized groups such as unhoused individuals is rarely complete—and even more rarely sustained. This highlights the importance of regular, pre-announced public forums which—when well-facilitated and supported by trained mediators—can serve as effective arenas for consensus-building, information sharing, and collective responsibility. Participation strengthens not only legitimacy but also fosters long-term commitment to implementation.

A central lesson of this study is that current practices in green space management—often reactive, sanction-driven, and focused on compliance—are not sustainable in the long term. Routine mowing, interventions triggered by complaints, or unilateral municipal decisions frequently fail to take into account the ecological, social, and emotional realities of a site. As the case studies have shown, such practices not only threaten biodiversity but also exacerbate social tensions. A multi-actor, collaborative model built on shared knowledge and co-creation would be a more viable and inclusive alternative.

In summary, there is no universal solution to urban green space conflicts. Different situations call for different mediation strategies. What remains essential in every case, however, is the uncovering of the true nature of the conflict, the cultivation of trust between stakeholders, and the establishment of a forward-looking, collective approach. Addressing green space conflicts is not solely a technical or legal task—it is fundamentally a social and communicative challenge. At the same time, it presents an opportunity to redefine the foundations of urban coexistence.