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Cognitive and Environmental Benefits of Blue-Green Infrastructure and Green Skills Training

Zuzana Vranayova[1*], Daniela Kaposztasova[2], Anna Lis[3]

[1]Institute of Architectural Engineering, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Technical University of Kosice, Vysokoškolská 4, 042 00 Kosice, Slovakia
[2]Center of Research and Innovation in Construction, Park Komenského 10/A, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Technical University of Kosice, 042 00 Kosice, Slovakia,
[3]Czestochowa University of Technology; Faculty of Civil Engineering, Poland, anna.lis@pcz.pl
*e-mail: zuzana.vranayova@tuke.sk

Abstract

As cities face escalating challenges related to urbanization, public health, and climate change, innovative solutions are needed to create resilient, sustainable urban environments. Blue-green infrastructure, which integrates green spaces and water management elements, offers significant cognitive, environmental, and social benefits. This paper explores how blue-green infrastructure, coupled with initiatives like the SECOVE project, can enhance urban resilience, promote community well-being, and reduce environmental impact. By fostering vocational training in green building skills, cities can support sustainable development, job creation, and improve quality of life for urban residents. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating ecological design with skilled labor to build urban environments that are healthier, more resilient, and aligned with sustainability goals.

Keywords: cognitive health, sponge city model, dementia prevention, sustainable energy, vocational excellence

1 Introduction

As cities expand and urbanization accelerates, the challenges they face grow increasingly complex and interconnected. Urban heat islands, for instance, can elevate city temperatures by up to 7°C compared to surrounding rural areas, exacerbating health risks and energy demands during heatwaves. Simultaneously, the global population affected by dementia—currently estimated at 55 million—is projected to more than double by 2050, raising urgent questions about public health in urban contexts. These trends underline the need for innovative urban solutions that address environmental, social, and health-related challenges comprehensively. This paper explores how blue-green infrastructure—integrating natural and water management elements—can mitigate these urban challenges while promoting cognitive health, environmental resilience, and social well-being. Specifically, it examines the interplay between green urban spaces, vocational training in green skills, and sustainable urban design. By reviewing global case studies, conducting environmental impact assessments, and analyzing the

outcomes of vocational training initiatives like the SECOVE project, this study highlights practical strategies for creating healthier, more sustainable cities.

The concept of blue-green infrastructure combines ecological, water management, and urban planning strategies, integrating green elements like parks, green roofs, and water bodies within urban settings. These features provide “ecosystem services” that improve air quality, regulate temperature, and mitigate flood risks, while offering recreational spaces that benefit mental health [2]. The sponge city model, for example, originated in China as a sustainable response to flooding and urban runoff. It utilizes permeable surfaces, rain gardens, and other water management features that naturally capture and filter stormwater. This model not only addresses flooding but also creates spaces that enhance urban aesthetics and promote physical activity, both of which are linked to better cognitive health outcomes [3].

In addition to infrastructure changes, addressing the growing demand for green building skills is crucial for the sustainability of urban spaces. Initiatives like the Sustainable Energy Centers of Vocational Excellence (SECOVE) are designed to cultivate vocational skills that align with sustainability goals, offering training in green building techniques and renewable energy systems. These vocational programs prepare a workforce equipped to design, implement, and maintain sustainable urban features, making them essential to expanding blue-green infrastructure and supporting the mental and physical health benefits it provides [4].

This paper argues that by integrating blue-green infrastructure with skilled green building professionals, cities can foster environments that support cognitive health and resilience. The interconnected benefits of blue-green infrastructure and sustainable vocational training extend beyond individual health impacts, reinforcing broader environmental goals such as biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation. It aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable urban planning by demonstrating how ecologically friendly design and skilled labor can create cities that are both healthier for residents and more resilient to climate challenges.

2 Methods

Green infrastructure encompasses a network of green and blue elements designed to support biodiversity, improve air quality, and regulate urban microclimates. Examples include urban parks, green roofs, permeable pavements, and water retention systems. Blue-green infrastructure specifically integrates water and green spaces, functioning as urban "sponges" that absorb rainwater, reduce flood risks, and contribute to the ecological balance within urban spaces [3]. Sponge city elements, inspired by traditional Chinese water management, use rain gardens, bioswales, and other permeable surfaces to naturally manage stormwater while providing aesthetic and recreational benefits to residents [5].

Green buildings are an essential part of this framework, constructed with materials and technologies that minimize environmental impact and optimize energy efficiency. In the European Union, green building certification systems like BREEAM and LEED are setting industry standards by promoting renewable energy, sustainable materials, and efficient waste

management. The SECOVE project aligns with these goals, emphasizing the importance of upskilling in green construction and energy technologies to meet evolving market demands.

We used the methods that collectively provide a well-rounded approach, combining quantitative, qualitative, and spatial data to support a comprehensive analysis of the cognitive and environmental impacts of blue-green infrastructure and the importance of vocational training in green building skills.

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to gather existing research on the links between blue-green infrastructure, cognitive health, and sustainable urban design. This review included peer-reviewed studies on ecosystem services, green infrastructure's impact on health, and the role of vocational training in sustainable skill development. The literature review provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how blue-green infrastructure and sustainable skills can contribute to cognitive health and environmental resilience.

To examine real-world examples, a case study analysis was conducted on specific cities that have implemented blue-green infrastructure, such as the sponge city model in China and green building initiatives in Europe. These case studies were analyzed for their impact on urban resilience, flood mitigation, and community well-being. Each case was evaluated on key indicators such as air quality improvement, temperature regulation, and mental health outcomes.

A survey was designed to assess the cognitive and mental health benefits experienced by individuals who regularly access blue-green infrastructure in urban areas. Survey questions focused on variables such as perceived stress levels, mood, and mental clarity. Statistical analysis was then used to evaluate the relationship between access to natural urban spaces and reported cognitive health benefits.

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was used to evaluate the effects of blue-green infrastructure on urban ecosystems, focusing on water quality, biodiversity, and air quality improvements. This method involved collecting data on pollutants, biodiversity levels, and heat island mitigation in areas with green infrastructure and comparing it to control areas without such features.

A comparative analysis was conducted on vocational training programs related to green skills, such as those provided by the SECOVE project. Training outcomes, employment rates, and skill proficiency levels of graduates were compared across programs to assess the efficacy of green skills training. This analysis helped identify best practices for training a skilled workforce that can effectively support and maintain sustainable urban infrastructures.

Focus groups were conducted with vocational trainees, urban planners, and residents to gain qualitative insights into perceptions of blue-green infrastructure. The focus groups explored participants' experiences with green spaces, attitudes toward sustainable urban design, and suggestions for improvements. The qualitative data collected provided additional context to the quantitative survey results.

2.1 Case Studies: Practical Applications of Blue-Green Infrastructure

Real-world implementations of blue-green infrastructure provide compelling evidence of its effectiveness in addressing urban challenges. For instance, Guangzhou, China, has significantly reduced flooding through its sponge city model, utilizing rain gardens and permeable pavements that doubled as community green spaces. Similarly, Copenhagen's Cloudburst Management Plan transformed urban landscapes with pocket parks and retention lakes, cutting flood risks while promoting biodiversity. Singapore's Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park exemplifies the dual benefits of flood management and public recreation by converting concrete canals into naturalized rivers. In Europe, Milan's Bosco Verticale integrates vertical forests into residential architecture, improving air quality and reducing energy use. These examples highlight how innovative urban design not only mitigates environmental risks but also enhances community well-being, biodiversity, and economic resilience.

3 Results and discussion

Ecosystem services in urban environments - especially those provided by green and blue infrastructure - play an essential role in supporting cognitive health and overall mental well-being. According to Kaplan and Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory [6], natural environments provide "soft fascinations," like the sound of water or the movement of leaves, which gently engage the mind and offer cognitive restoration by alleviating mental fatigue. This theory is supported by findings indicating that individuals who spend time in natural settings experience improved concentration, reduced stress, and enhanced cognitive performance [7]. Urban green spaces, such as parks and water features integrated within the sponge city framework, offer city dwellers opportunities for physical activities, relaxation, and social interaction, all of which contribute to mental resilience. The link between blue-green infrastructure and cognitive health benefits, with elements like parks, water features, and sponge city rain gardens that support mental well-being, reduce stress, and improve air quality. This clean and visually engaging design highlights the urban-nature integration and health advantages effectively (Fig. 1).

In urban areas where stress and mental fatigue are prevalent due to pollution, noise, and crowding, access to nature has shown measurable health benefits. For instance, research by Hartig et al. [8] demonstrates that people living near green spaces report fewer stress-related conditions and better overall health. Blue spaces - water bodies like rivers, lakes, and constructed water retention systems - also play a significant role in reducing stress, promoting physical activity, and enhancing social connectivity, all of which are beneficial for mental health and potentially protective against dementia and other cognitive impairments [9-11].

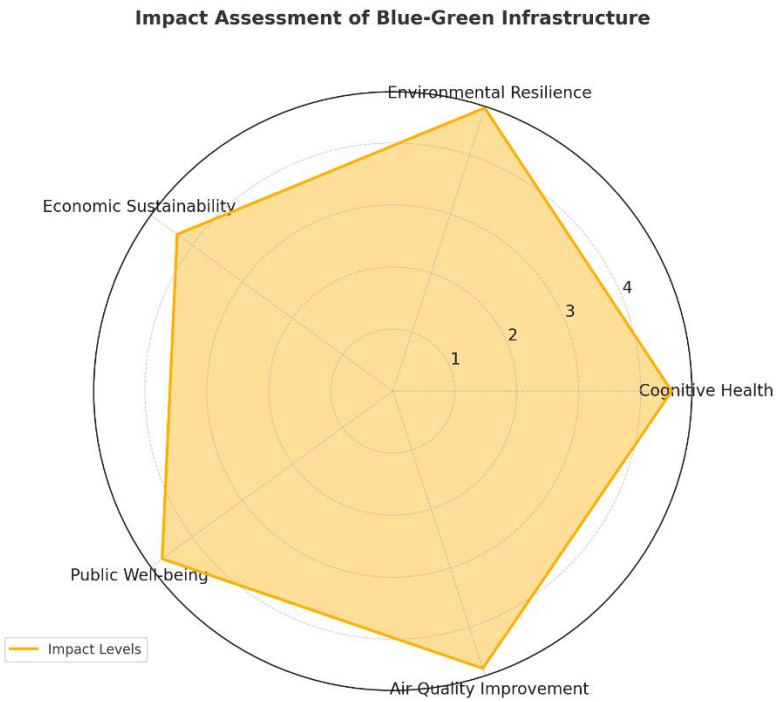

Figure 1: The radar chart that visually represents the impact of blue-green infrastructure across various benefit categories, such as cognitive health, environmental resilience, and economic sustainability

Green infrastructure and vocational training in sustainable skills contribute to cognitive health by creating a meaningful connection to the environment, enhancing community engagement, and providing career pathways in environmentally friendly fields. The SECOVE project exemplifies how vocational training in sustainable energy and green building practices prepares a workforce skilled in creating and maintaining these cognitively beneficial spaces [4]. Training programs not only address ecological needs but also enhance personal well-being, as individuals trained in sustainability roles report a higher sense of purpose and satisfaction in contributing to environmental and community health [4].

The connection between ecosystem services and cognitive health also extends to economic and educational dimensions. Research indicates that environmental literacy and hands-on training in sustainable skills can improve mental well-being by instilling a sense of environmental stewardship and personal efficacy. This vocational approach allows individuals to participate in the design and maintenance of green spaces, reinforcing the impact of these spaces on collective mental health. Additionally, creating job opportunities in green sectors supports cognitive health at a community level, as it fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among residents and professionals involved in sustainable urban development [12].

By equipping individuals with vocational skills to support and expand these infrastructures, projects like SECOVE contribute to a cycle of positive reinforcement: well-designed urban green spaces support cognitive health, and those working to create and sustain these spaces benefit from their effects as well. This comprehensive approach not only addresses public health

but also aligns with broader sustainability goals, thereby reinforcing the resilience of both individuals and communities in an increasingly urbanized world.

The successful integration of blue-green infrastructure and green building practices in urban areas relies on collaborative efforts across sectors. Health researchers, urban planners, and industry leaders must work together to embed these green elements into city planning policies. The SECOVE project exemplifies how partnerships between vocational institutions and industry stakeholders provide students with hands-on experience in green skills, reinforcing the workforce needed to sustain these infrastructures. Policy initiatives aimed at incentivizing green building certifications, sustainable energy adoption, and urban green spaces can help catalyze the widespread adoption of these practices [13].

Economic advantages are significant, with potential healthcare savings resulting from reduced pollution-related illnesses and lower dementia prevalence. A recent study by Marselle et al. [12] found that green spaces contribute to lower healthcare costs by reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline in urban populations. Additionally, green building practices offer substantial energy savings, reduce operational costs, and contribute to higher property values, making them economically appealing to developers and municipalities alike.

4 Conclusion

The convergence of blue-green infrastructure and green building practices presents an opportunity to address multiple urban challenges, from cognitive health and environmental sustainability to economic resilience (See Table 1).

Table 1: The Outcome Benefits of blue-green infrastructure

Benefit Category	**Specific Benefits**
Cognitive Health	Reduced stress, improved mental clarity
Environmental Resilience	Mitigation of urban heat effects, flood control
Economic Sustainability	Lower energy costs, increased property values
Public Well-being	Enhanced opportunities for physical activity, relaxation
Air Quality Improvement	Reduced pollution, improved overall air quality

Our review study underscores the potential of blue-green infrastructure to promote cognitive health, environmental resilience, and economic sustainability in urban settings. By integrating features like green spaces, water bodies, and sustainable building practices, cities can foster environments that enhance public well-being, mitigate urban heat effects, and improve air quality. The cognitive benefits of blue-green infrastructure, such as reduced stress and improved mental clarity, are particularly significant in urban areas where individuals face high levels of environmental stressors. Furthermore, the role of vocational training, exemplified by initiatives like SECOVE, is crucial in equipping a skilled workforce to support and sustain these green urban elements effectively.

The economic benefits extend beyond immediate cost savings on energy and maintenance. Investments in green infrastructure can also lead to lower healthcare expenses due to reduced pollution-related illnesses and mental health improvements. This dual impact of environmental and health gains suggests that blue-green infrastructure is not just an aesthetic addition to urban landscapes but a foundational aspect of sustainable urban planning. Additionally, the integration of vocational training programs in sustainable practices enhances community resilience by fostering local expertise, creating job opportunities, and promoting environmental stewardship among future generations.

However, successful implementation requires a multi-disciplinary approach. Collaboration between urban planners, policymakers, healthcare providers, and educational institutions is essential to realizing the full potential of these infrastructures. Policymakers can play a transformative role by providing incentives for green buildings, enforcing sustainable urban designs, and integrating vocational training into the educational framework [7, 8, 13, 14].

Future research could further explore long-term cognitive benefits of access to blue-green infrastructure in diverse urban settings, examining factors like accessibility, design quality, and social engagement [9, 11]. Additionally, studies on the economic impact of green infrastructure at various stages of urban development could provide valuable insights for regions considering its adoption. By continuing to investigate the comprehensive benefits of blue-green infrastructure, cities can better design, implement, and maintain resilient environments that promote well-being, sustainability, and equity.

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