

HEALTHY LIVING ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC PARKS: A CASE STUDY OF KUALA LUMPUR

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ABSTRACT

Providing a healthy living environment is one of the key issues for planners and designers. Various urban design and planning approaches have been debated worldwide to provide healthy living. Rapid urbanization impacts on social, environmental and health quality. These issues are more acute in developing countries than in developed countries. Urban public parks offer many opportunities for urban dwellers to achieve a healthy living environment. Thus, this paper investigates people's interaction with open space and the benefits of urban parks in Kuala Lumpur. Opinions of visitors from the nine urban parks in Kuala Lumpur were collected to address the aim of the research. Various levels of urban park such as the city parks, district and neighbourhood parks were investigated. The parks represent all five districts in Kuala Lumpur. Altogether, 47 respondents were interviewed at seven parks. Information collected through the interview survey was analysed using qualitative analysis techniques. The research indicates that people are interacting with active and passive activities in urban public parks. The result showed that 65.42% of respondents participated in active activities such as jogging and exercise. Meanwhile, 34.57% preferred to have passive activities such sightseeing, rest and relaxation. The results also indicated that, when people interact with nature, 39.08% agreed that the benefit of social integration is the greatest benefit of their urban living environment. Secondly, 28.74% on health point of view. Thirdly, 18.39% agreed that urban parks could provide environmental benefits and lastly was the benefits of parks management (11.49%). Finally, the study concluded that a healthy living environment can be promoted through frequent visits to urban parks by participating in activities and nature appreciation. Therefore it is important to enhance the green strategies within urban planning and design strategy to improve healthy living.

Keywords: Urban parks, Healthy living environment, urban & landscape planning.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is a major trend all over the world, and for the first time, about 50% of the world's population live in urban areas (United Nations, 2011). In 1900, just 13% of the world's population lived in cities and by 2000 this number had increased to 47% (Saier, 2007). In the coming decades, rapid urbanization will be one of the major challenges in ensuring human welfare and a viable global environment (Redman Jones, 2005). The world population is currently approaching 7 billion people and is predicted to reach 10 billion by 2100 (United Nations, 2011). Megacities with populations of more than 10 million are increasing in size around the world. According to the United Nations (2011), 1990 was the turning point for larger city increases. There were only two megacities in 1950 — New York and Tokyo with populations of 12.4 and 11.3 million respectively (Saier, 2007). Today, there are 19 megacities globally, and this number is expected to increase to 30 by 2025 (UN-Habitat, 2009) and most of the larger cities will be in developing countries such as India, China, Brazil, Peru and others. This increase in urban population will present a challenge for people to be part of sustainable healthy living. For healthy living, the community will need places for recreation, physical activity and social interaction. Other research in this field indicates that urban green space will be an important place for people to participate in social and nature interaction. For example, Chiesura (2004) states that from a survey in Amsterdam most people (especially adults and the elderly) have the motive of 'to be relaxed' in urban parks (73%) and 'to be in nature' (listen and observe nature) (54.4%) and meanwhile younger people participated in sporting activities and met others. The study also found that there were three major dimensions for people's motives in being in urban parks which were restorative, amenity and spiritual dimensions. Thompson (2011) concluded that 'open space in cities as places to celebrate culture diversity, to engage with natural processes and to conserve memories. And in all of this, the urban park will continue to serve a central function in society's self-definition'.

In Malaysia, there is a rapid increase in population: the current population is 27.73 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2008) and a substantial percentage of the population lives in cities (Jaafar, 2004). The current urban population in Malaysia is around 20.1 million and it is expected to reach 34.8 million by 2050 (United Nations, 2011). The current population of Kuala Lumpur is 1.5 million and it is expected to reach 1.9 million by 2025 (United Nations, 2011). This increase is due to the growth and development in newly built urban areas around the country. Urbanization in developing countries has resulted in environmental problems including traffic congestion, slums and informal settlements, air and water pollution, and health problems as well as resource depletion (Giok-Ling, 2009). The intensity and scale of the problem varies from city to city, region to region and country to country. The instruments and policy to deal with these problems are also context-specific because of socio-economic conditions, political will and wishes, and community behavior. However, Thompson (2011) believes that people and governance have been enhancing their knowledge about the importance of urban green space in improving urban health. Thus, Thompson (2011) suggests that 21st century demands need to be investigated in terms of cooperation in the planning and design of urban parks. The researcher strongly believes that easy accessibility to quality green space will benefit urban dwellers physically, emotionally and in their quality of life. Thus, urban parks and urban green spaces in the cities will play an important role in promoting healthy living by providing a place for the social and physical environment for the community. This leads to a question: what is the users' perception about the role of various levels of open spaces in promoting healthy living? Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate people's interaction with open space and the benefits of urban parks in Kuala Lumpur.

METHODOLOGY

The first part of the research reviewed the literature on urban green space planning and its impact on the urban environment. The second step of the research obtained input from visitors using interview techniques to investigate their opinions and understanding about urban green space. The survey aimed to investigate people's interaction with open space and the benefits of urban parks in Kuala Lumpur. The visitors' opinions were obtained using an interview semi structured survey instrument.

Firstly, the visitors in the selected urban parks were interviewed. Various levels of urban park such as the city parks, district and neighbourhood parks were investigated. The parks represent all five districts in Kuala Lumpur. The result (N=47) represents respondents who were willing to participate in the interviewed at seven urban Parks. Respondents were selected to represent each park and were interviewed on a random basis. The data was coded and analyzed using qualitative software – the QSR (NVivo). Qualitative research has provided a variety of data collection such as secondary data from reports or documents, observation and interviews. The sources range from videos, photographs, transcription, field notes, etc. The analysis depends on the methodology's goals, for example, a researcher can undertake interpretation through photograph analysis. The QSR NVivo software is used because it provides facilities for transcribing from the audio to text and storing the main data that can be utilized for detailed analysis. NVivo provides the opportunity to design coding, provide storage, produce summary results and develop the graphical outputs. This paper only presents some parts from phase 1 of the overall research which contains three phases: the interview, observation and questionnaire survey (refer to figure 1).

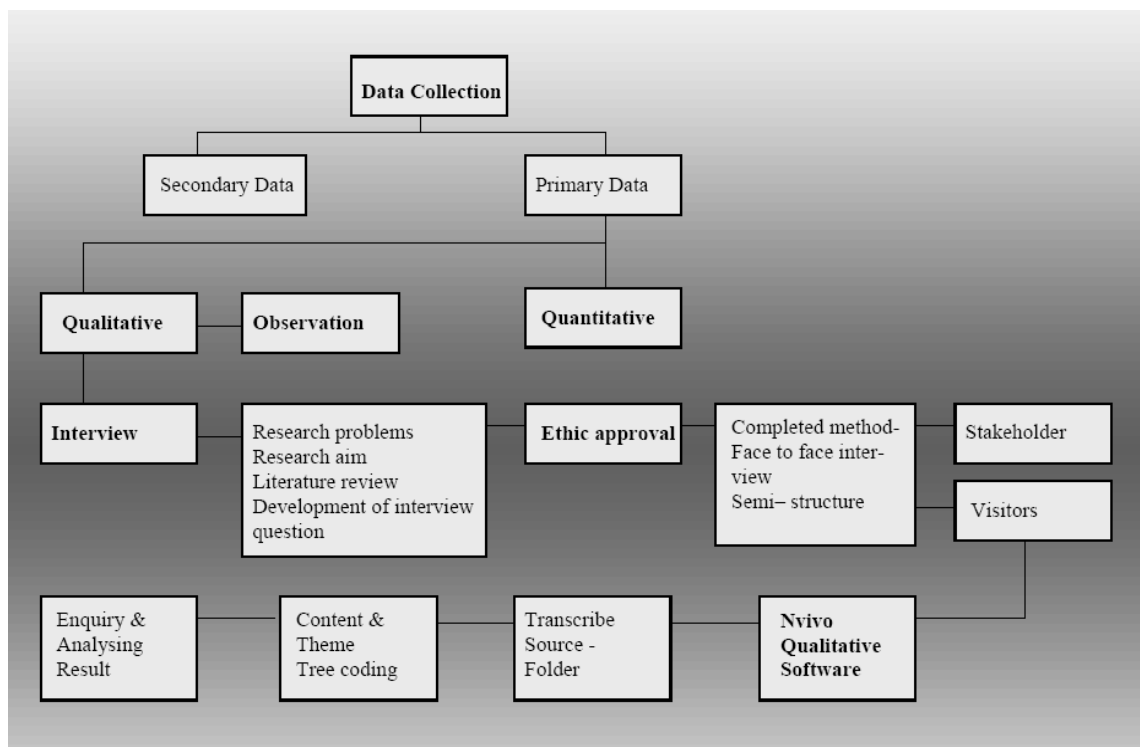


Figure. 1: Research process and approach

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results and findings are divided into two parts. The first part presents findings on activities in the urban parks and the second part explains users' opinions of the benefits of urban parks.

Activities in Kuala Lumpur Urban Parks

It is well established in the literature that to encourage people to visit and to participate in active or passive activities, urban green space should provide and/or enable physical and social activities to be held. The result showed that 65.42% of respondents participated in active activities and 34.57% preferred to have passive activities (refer to table 1) Good open space could increase the utilization and provide a platform for social interaction (Gehl, 1987) and physical activity. Parks are a space that provides opportunities for many activities. Most of those

participating in active activities were engaged with various types of activities: 28.97% of respondents jogged around the parks, 14.95% came to the park to exercise, 12.14% were at the children’s playground with their children and the remainder came for sports and cycling. The percentage of respondents who participated in various activities was identified through statements such as: *“Firstly, my children, they loved to play, in the park. So, in the park like this, there must be a place where the kids can have fun you know... the other one is, “I like photography, I like nature and it fulfills my hobby. The other thing is, as my children grow up, this place has got a wonderful set of play equipment, where you can do your physical things. And you can run around, when they are much older, I would like to take them jogging or running, you know exercise. That’s why it is important. Definitely, my children enjoy it, so I enjoy it, but I have to make sure my children could enjoy it”.*

Table 1: Activities in urban parks

Activities	Number of statements/ Percentage
Active activities	70 (65.42)
Jogging	31 (28.97)
Exercise	16 (14.95)
Children’s play area	13 (12.14)
Sports	<u>7</u> (6.54)
Cycling	<u>3</u> (2.80)
Passive activities	37 (34.57)
Sightseeing	14 (13.08)
Rest and relaxation	11 (10.28)
Picnicking	<u>5</u> (4.67)
Meeting and chatting	<u>4</u> (3.73)
Others	<u>3</u> (2.80)

Secondly, 34.57% of respondents used the park for passive activities. Most of the visitors agreed that passive activities such as sightseeing and relaxation in the parks after working hours and during the weekend were good for a healthy body. Some indicated that light activities could provide calm and harmony with nature such as in this statement: *“... then walk around, we can release stress by looking at a good environment”, or in simple statements*

such as: Picnicking, strolling and sightseeing around the parks... ”. People with families preferred to accompany and spend time with their children in the parks. The respondents strongly highlighted that it was very important to spend time with families during the weekend. This was identified by looking into the responses and picking statements such as “... many activities can be in the parks, especially for me the most important is family activities. Going strolling with children during the weekend is necessary”.

Benefits of Urban Parks

The respondents’ opinions were obtained on the benefits of their local urban parks. The results showed that 39.08% of visitors in Kuala Lumpur’s urban parks agreed that the benefit of social integration is the greatest benefit of their urban living environment. Secondly, 28.74% of respondents thought that these parks were of great benefit to them from a health point of view. Thirdly, 18.39% agreed that urban parks could provide environmental benefits to the people and surrounding environment and lastly was the benefits of parks management (11.49%). Visitors expressed the benefits of urban green space (refer to table 2) and it is clear that there was a strong relationship between parks and social benefits. A total of 39.08% of respondents agreed with the social benefits of urban green space. These places were considered very important for socialization, interaction with families and communities, and recreation and sports activities. For example, one respondent stated that: *“I think the benefits of urban green space are the citizens have a place to have recreation and spend some activities with family during the weekend.”* Being in the parks can encourage communities to participate in recreation and to be interested in the environment. This can be seen from opinions such as the following which agreed that the green space could: *“.....encourage people to have sports activities and jogging in the parks”* and *“It will be a place to have exercise and develop the community interest in the environment”*. Other respondents also indicated that being with family in the parks is necessary, whereby children need a place to have outdoor activities and can improve their social interest. This can be identified through statements such as: *‘I have an*

opportunity to be with families and accompany them to have recreation activities....’. Another respondent gave priority to children and said that: *“The first thing it is important to our children to have places to play around, then it can be a place to exercise.....”*

Table 2: Urban parks’ visitors’ opinions on benefits of urban parks

Benefits	Number of statements/ Percentage
Social	34 (39.08)
Recreation and sports	14 (16.10)
Family activities	10 (11.49)
Children’s play area	6 (6.90)
Community interaction	4 (4.60)
Health	25 (28.74)
Rest and relaxation	17 (19.54)
Healthy living	6 (6.90)
Health treatment	2 (2.30)
Environment	16 (18.39)
Air quality	10 (11.49)
Ecosystem	2 (2.30)
Education	2 (2.30)
Heritage	2 (2.30)
Park management	10 (11.49)
Aesthetic	5 (5.75)
Safety	3 (3.45)
Regulation	2 (2.30)
Economy	2 (2.30)

Secondly, 28.74% of respondents expressed the benefits of health in relation to urban green space. Rest and relaxation scored as having the greatest benefit as indicated by respondents with 19.54% agreeing that green space can provide a peaceful and contemplative environment for urban dwellers in which to have rest and relaxation away from work stress and cities. This was determined from statements by the respondents such as: *“...Greenery is important for health. It is a place to have relaxation. Viewing the greenery is required for release some stress.”*

Working at the office five days a week and arriving at home at night every day, people need more energy and are of course tired. Thus, people would like to have places where they can relax

physically and emotionally. This can be seen from statements such as: “... *to have rest for our physical body from daily works and we also can have rest for our mind*”. Other respondents agreed and claimed that: “*Benefit of green space is ... we can get better oxygen, our eyesight would feel very comfortable. We lose all the pressure, thus it will support long life.*”

Thirdly, 11.49% of respondents expressed that the benefits of urban green space were related to environmental benefits whereby most respondents highlighted the benefits of experiencing fresh air or air quality within the city environment. Most respondents indicated that green space should have vegetation which could balance the polluted air in the urban environment. These concerns can be identified through statements such as: “*As I said, it gives a good expression towards the air, I mean good for health. Because of that we can breathe well and can take out something that is not good to health*” and fresh air can be achieved through preserving and planting more trees in the green space. The respondent said: “*I believed that trees absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen and this oxygen is important for human....*”. Only 2.30% of respondents thought that other environmental benefits such as ecosystem, education and heritage were important.

Environmental education also had little attention from the respondents. However, some respondents believed that urban green space can provide environmental knowledge to people especially to children. They said that: “*To me, as for my children, so that they will know that green. I also make it a point that ... once upon time we have the village, when I had family there, I can take them there. Now we don't have, so, this is the only place where they can enjoy the nature. They like flowers, they like dragonflies, they like butterflies, which they can't see at home. Most people stay at the condo, in the condo there's no greenery*”.

Some respondents also agreed that participating with nature will increase children's knowledge: they will think about how living things interact with each other. Parents also can encourage, give guidance and be a role model to their children. One respondent said that: “*It is important to expose the children to greenery and they can have a look, observe and think about living*”

things.....and they can think it's important to preserve their natural surroundings”.

Lastly, in terms of the environmental benefits of urban green space, respondents expressed the value of preserving it as a heritage. They agreed that the preservation of green space can benefit future generations socially and environmentally.

Finally, two benefits of urban green space are the parks management (11.49%) and less significant were benefits to the economy (2.30%).

CONCLUSIONS

It is well understood from the literature that urban open spaces can assist city dwellers to improve their health. The results of this study indicated that active activities in Kuala Lumpur's urban parks can attract people to interact within the urban environment. On the other hand, some people prefer to experience nature by relaxation. These findings are also in agreement with Thompson (2002) who notes that the urban park is a place where people interact with nature and develop spiritual and metaphysical outlooks on life that are healthy. The motive for people to visit natural areas is to relax in order to escape the hectic environment of the cities and forget the 'daily grind' of work. People also want to listen to nature and spend their time in urban green space (Chiesura, 2004; Tinsley et al., 2002). The study indicated that respondents' preference for social and health benefits was viewed as the most important preference for Kuala Lumpur urban dwellers. Tyrvaenen et al. (2007) concluded that in eastern Helsinki, most of the local residents believed that urban green spaces were important in contributing to a better quality environment and the most important benefits were outdoor recreational opportunities, contact with nature, relief from life's stresses and aesthetic experiences. These findings showed that positive emotional experiences are very important to urban dwellers (Chiesura, 2004; Tinsley et al., 2002; Tyrvaenen et al., 2007) and generally the significance of environmental and social benefits increased with age. Thompson (2002) has suggested that the failure to provide green spaces within the urban environment will create an unhealthy environment for citizens in the future.

However, the results also indicated that the understanding of the benefits related to environmental and urban ecology was less important compared to other factors and this needs to improve. This result is very similar around the world. Even though the concept of sustainable development has been recognized as an approach in city planning worldwide (Potschin and Haines-Young, 2006; Antrop, 2004; Blaschke, 2006), environmental benefits were less appreciated by some of the stakeholders and the community (Loures et al., 2007; Clifton, 2011). For example, the study by Clifton (Clifton, 2011) agreed that most South Australian citizens' lifestyle practices high ecological footprint and that they live in an unsustainable lifestyle. Thus, public awareness has a significant impact on achieving sustainability. The public in Kuala Lumpur should be given the opportunity to increase their awareness about the environment and a healthy living environment by improving the green open space at every level of the city. Thus, urban green spaces need to be conserved and protected, and to enhance physical and social activities. This is required to ensure that the future generation can improve their paradigm towards being pro-environmental with support for the principles of urban sustainability.

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