

RETHINKING THEORY AND PRACTICES IN DEVELOPING URBAN OPEN SPACES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the nineteenth century, the provision of parks has been a major focus in promoting places for relaxation and recreation. In other words, parks were designed to promote public health and to give some aesthetic value to an urban setting. Urban parks therefore can be regarded as open spaces, which cater to the needs of urban dwellers and the community as a whole. Here, urban open spaces are seen as the alternative venues for urban gateway. The fundamental focus of this paper is to provide an increasing understanding of the research, within the underlining value, belief, attitude and lifestyle of park user as well as to know how outdoor recreational activities in the Malaysian urban open space area are perceived. With urbanization and social demographic in mind, Malaysia has become an urban community which has led to realize the serious needs for urban open spaces. This paper will help to clarify the theory and literature part of the developing and managing process of urban open space which attempts to establish a deeper understanding on urban recreational spaces design and the experiences in the urban outdoor recreation.

Keywords

Urban Open Spaces, Parks, Outdoor Recreation, Theory and Practices

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The fundamentals of urban open space management suggest that a thoughtfully implemented urban development should include more than just great buildings (Garvin, Berens, and Leinberger, 1997; Phillips, 1995). It should include parks and open space because both buildings and open space benefit from each other. As emphasised by McRobie (2000) and Christiansen, Conner, and McCrudden, SUPER group (2001), parks are designed for recreation and can give enormous benefits to the neighbourhood and community by improving health, social well-being and enhancing enjoyment of the local environment. Similarly, benefits of leisure also cover physical health, psychosocial well-being, self-actualization, spirituality and self-identity, family bonding, child development, environmental education and social skills development (Veal and Lynch, 2001). As mentioned by Ward Thompson in her paper indicating:

For many people in the cities, park today is a place which resonates with concepts of the original “garden” and where contact with the nature may have a metaphysical or spiritual dimension....at a different level, people’s well-being, social use of space interacts with the need for “natural” spaces is one which raises interesting challenges in terms of open space planning and quality of life.

(Cited in Ward Thompson, 2002, p.65)

Furthermore, Raynsford (2000) mentions that parks also make a valuable contribution to biodiversity within urban areas and provide important educational resources for many people. The important role of urban open spaces is recognized both in the character and the life they bring to towns and cities around the world. Today, all categories of open spaces have different kind of opportunities and constraints. May it be the location, design or the development and management of the spaces can mostly linked to various styles or design, cultural attitudes and social ideals of the community.

1.1 Significant of the paper

This paper is important in order to understand why park are used as a recreational option while there are always booming shopping malls and other attractions around Klang Valley nowadays. According to Ahmed, Ghingold and Dahari (2007), there is an up wards trend of Malaysians spending their pleasure and leisure time in shopping malls. Malls have become important meeting places for young people and seniors and also as community centres, offering common recreational attractions. As a tropical country, with temperatures tanging from 25 – 35 Celsius, with high humidity all year round, finding option for better and extensive park usage in the outdoor environment is very crucial. Perhaps people must realized that despite having ever-entertaining shopping malls, a physical and more natural way of recreation might lead to a better physical, mental health, well-being and the overall quality of life.

As a young country, the growth for future population will also increase tremendously, where it is estimated that in the year 2010, the population will be expected to increase to 26.2 million people and in 2025 will be 31.6 million people (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2005). As urbanization and population increases, this will mean more urban open space is needed to cater for the demands of the outdoor recreational needs. Hence, as suggested by Stewart, Parry and Glover (2008) mentioning that the value orientation of a research stems from the researcher – practitioner relationship, and function to frame the research problem which provides boundaries for needed user-based information and signifies the set of solutions and alternatives for management. Therefore, this paper which is a subset from a bigger research will aim to understand the theory and literature part of a process in developing and managing any development, particularly in this case, the urban open spaces and its outdoor recreation intentions.

2.0 THEORITICAL ASPECT OF URBAN OPEN SPACES

Public Park or urban parks are generally accessible to most people and offers free year-round opportunities with essential role in promoting physical activities and contributing to healthier lifestyle (Henderson, 2006). According to Hamilton-Smith and Mercer (1991), urban parks appear to have existed ever since people clustered together in cities. Pictures of formal gardens have existed for 3,500 years. Gardens were a feature of most religious and other mythical beliefs, and both public and private gardens are recorded in the earliest cities of Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Parks were designed and built to portray the greatness and civilization of the nations.



Figure 1. Urban parks today are seen not only as an alternative venues for leisure activities but also as the pride of a community and cities.

Source: Authors archive, Brisbane Parklands (2004).

Malaysia today is also undergoing what developed countries have experienced with regards to urbanization. Housing conditions that were adequate before are no longer acceptable (Ting, 2001). Malaysia has taken proactive measures by introducing more comprehensive national town and country planning policies and several relevant action plans in the country's development plans. The goal is to provide the necessary physical and social infrastructure to improve the quality of life (Ting, 2001).

The open space hierarchical approach according to Williams (1995) is a conventional central place theory which could provide a rationale for planned provision of recreational facilities. Based from figure 2 below, with the provision of open spaces, the next step is to consider how the open spaces could be used for recreational purposes. Theoretically according to Williams (1995), the pattern of recreational use could be determine by several factors, which includes the composition of the household, the value its user places upon the open space area,

the presence within the household of recreational interests that may be accommodated in the open space and probably the size and configuration of the plot area.

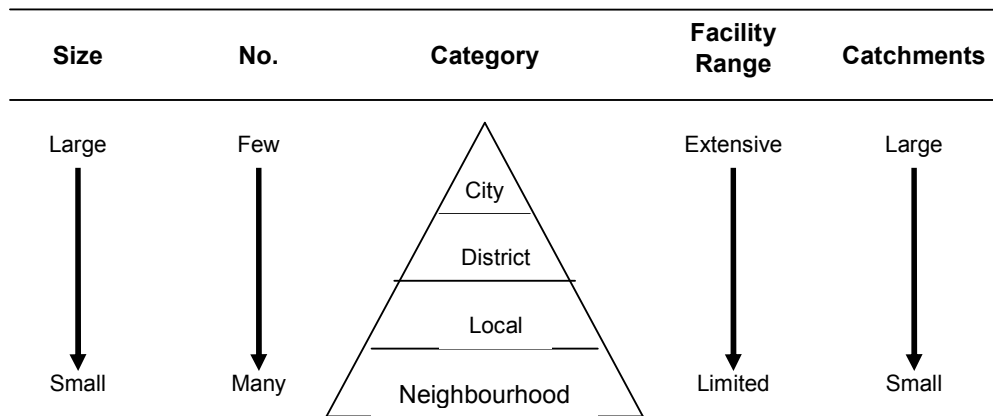


Figure 2. Theoretical open space hierarchy. Adapted from Williams (1995)

Therefore, the size and arrangement of the open space design could influence recreational activity in several ways. Firstly, the greater space available, the greater scope of that space to absorb a diverse range of recreations. Secondly, the arrangement of space is theoretically important. It actually influences recreational behaviours and patterns of activity where the arrangement of space is a significant factor in regulating layout and usage. Despite the developing conditions, urban parks remain valuable assets to the city landscape. They help bring communities together. They are also a place for recreation, relaxation, and spiritual peace, a place that makes cities attractive to residents and tourists.



Figure 3. Outdoor recreation was proven to improve quality of life. Source: Authors archive, Taman Bukit Kiara (2008).



Figure 4. Urbanites today are often promoted to spend their leisure time doing outdoor activities. Source: Authors archive, Taman Bukit Kiara (2008).

Today, outdoor recreation is readily available to more people than in the past. More people now live in metropolitan areas, whether it be a developed or developing country. The role of open space is to provide relief from problems of urban life and even as part of a wider approach towards social control through provision of recreation facilities (Walker and Duffield, 1983 cited in Williams, 1995). Parks according to Williams (1995) were originally designed to provide an experience of the countryside in the city, a version of rural landscape where recreation for the urban population at that time was limited. Generally the patterns of use in the urban open space were concisely summarized by Walker and Duffield (1983); Williams (1995) and Burgess et. al. (1988) as:

- Urban parks attracts visitors from the urban community;
- Usually, 60 to 80 per cent of users originating from within an area of 2 km of the park;
- Urban parks are use primarily for informal, passive recreations within an environment that caters quiet and restorative surroundings;
- Features of urban parks that are usually preferred are the ones with natural features, peace and quiet, and a sense of space and freedom;
- Although it is true that public open space draws usage from a wide spectrum of the community, however it does not draw evenly according to age, gender or economic status (adapted from a survey of park in Leicester (LCC, 1985);
- The behavioural patterns associated with parks and open space reflects a distinctive pattern of informality and engagement in casual activity such as walking, sitting, watching people or events and general relaxation;
- Urban open space also attracts incidental usage like forming a short cut or a more preferable routeway from a busy street.

The emergence of parks in Britain during the nineteenth century was an attempt to change the conditions prevalent in the cities as they were considered to provide a safety valve for the tensions and crowding of modern life. During that time, people believed that parks would improve the health of those living in cities by providing accessible open space for recreation. In the United States, parks were built to improve the cities on an anti-urban ideal relating to the perceived relief from the evils of the city by escaping to the country side. The park movement saw its origin in the concern expressed for public health and morale, aesthetic improvement and economic value. In a country like Australia, parks were used more for active

recreation purposes, especially for sporting recreation facilities. In Britain, United States of America and also Australia, parks were not regarded as public amenity only, but perceived as an important element for recreation and aesthetic value to the surrounding communities.

All these diverse linkages between different countries have somehow shown that parks were used for the benefit of the public while the beginning of park history in Malaysia indicates that they were built for the pleasure of the royal families only. Later, parks developments in Malaysia began to evolve into a desire to increase the quality of living among residents, realising the aspirations of the Garden Nation concept throughout the country today. Since civilization and urbanisation in western countries began much earlier than Malaysia, it is important to see how parks and open spaces were regarded before, and how long until that concept arrived in Malaysia during the 1980s. It is the hope of the Malaysian Government and also the public that open space management will be regarded as important as it is in other countries.

3.0 THE CONCEPT OF OUTDOOR RECREATION IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

Recreation can be described in a very broad philosophy which defers from author to author. Here, recreation is defined as *the natural expression of certain human interests and needs seeking satisfaction during free time* (Russell, 1982). Thus, Russell (1982) described recreation as an experience rather than a specific activity. Recreation is what happens to a person as the result of an activity, rather than the activity itself. Similarly, Williams (1995) in his work describing recreation as *active use of free time within an individual's lifestyle*. Hence, recreation should help each individual to extend his or her intellectual, physical, social and emotional well-being. In the other hand, recreation can sometime be interchangeable with the concept of leisure. Otherwise, recreation can have variety of functions and meaning but primarily focusing on the activity which the participants have chosen to be engaged in (Williams, 1995).

Outdoor recreation is a resource-oriented recreation. It is defined as those recreational activities which occur in an natural outdoor environment and which relate directly to that environment (Jensen, 1977, p.8 in Russell, 1982). According to Ibrahim and Cordes (1993), outdoor recreation can be defined as an organized free time activities that are participated in for the users own sake and there is an

interaction between the participant as well as the element of nature. Regardless of the level of recreation plans, these twelve principles in outdoor recreation should be observed (Jensen, 1985 cited in Ibrahim and Cordes, 1993, p. 250):

- i. Park and recreation areas should provide opportunities for all persons regardless of race, age, gender or economic status;
- ii. The design of outdoor recreation should meet the needs of the geographical area and the resources available such as lakes, streams, natural forest and mountains, historical and archeological sites, areas of scenic value and areas of special interest;
- iii. Multiple use of an area should be considered but with a very systematic approach to avoid over-use;
- iv. Early comprehensive recreation plan is essential to acquire in any early acquisition of land for development;
- v. Timely evaluation should be made of the current recreational needs to project accurate trends for the future;
- vi. Recreational areas and facilities should be properly plan, design and distributed in accordance to the population to have equal availability of recreational opportunities;
- vii. The overall design of any urban open spaces and recreational sites should be as flexible as possible to accommodate changing recreational patterns;
- viii. Design for easy access in any recreational areas should be considered for elderly, the handicapped and others with mobility restrictions;
- ix. In the early planning process, citizen involvement should be considered to allow good ideas and participation towards using and caring for the area once they are developed;
- x. Responsibilities among various governmental and private agencies should be defined to avoid duplication of areas, facilities, and services in order to provide for the best opportunity to the public;
- xi. Park and recreational land should be protected against encroachment and non-recreational purposes;
- xii. Park and recreation planning should not be isolated in the overall plan and detail design such as facilities and activities for the recreational areas and should be carefully integrated with the total Master Plan for any development.

4.0 THE EMERGANCE OF MALAYSIAN URBAN PARKS

According to Warren (1991), the royal palaces of Malaysia are the most important and dominant landscape elements of traditional settlements, being the largest residential unit and centre. The earliest gardens of the tropics were those planted in the compounds of religious complexes and around the palaces of local royalty and were not made public. However, due to the perishable nature of all timber constructions, the absence of written reports prior to the 15th century limits the knowledge of the Malay traditional architecture to the last 500 years only. The public or people around have no access to these gardens and were only able to admire from afar. It was long after the British arrived in Malaysia that the concept of park usage changed. Parks were given a new meaning where it is for recreational purposes and are able to be accessed and used by the public.

The design of public and urban park in Malaysia is experiencing an increase in its activity because of the Government's decision to develop new parks in order to improve the current health, well-being and the way of life of the Malaysian population (Abu Bakar 2002). Although the evolution of Malaysian landscape and park development is relatively new, there are traces of history along with verbal and written references that explains these pleasure and forbidden gardens during the time of the Malacca Sultanate*, and the ornamental gardens of the Kelantan Sultanate, which was known as *Tanah Serendah Sekebun Bunga* (The Flowering and Fruit Gardens). The description of the classical Malay garden and its remarkable setting was mentioned by a traveller named *Munshi Abdullah* (1796-1854), in his book, *The Travels of Abdullah*, 1848 cited in JLN, 1998; MARDI, 1993). Before independence, the British brought the concept of recreation and urban greens with them. The development of the public park and recreation in Malaysia started with the introduction of the first Lake Garden in Kuala Lumpur which was created in the 1890s as a utility and landscape parkland, for the recreation of the British officers at that time (Abu Bakar, 2002). Later, notable landmarks emerged like the Selangor Club Padang and Kenny Hill (Bukit Tunku) residential area. This

* Malacca was founded by a fleeing prince from Sumatra in 14th century; it developed into a major trading port for ships from India and China. As the Malacca Sultanate flourished, the Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511. Later the Dutch took over in 1641 and until much later, the British Empire ruled Malacca. The state finally obtained independence along with the Malay states in 1957. Today, one will find many remnants of the glorious past dated back more than 500 years ago.

was soon followed by the generation of public parks like the Penang Botanic Gardens in 1884, Lake Titiwangsa, a public garden in Kuala Lumpur, which was developed in the 1980s, and also the Taiping Lake Garden in Ipoh, Perak in 1910.

Soon, interest in gardening and beautification of the neighbourhood parks and the environment became the most important mission of the State Landscape Department in Malaysia. This situation was soon realized and was felt important for the need of more parks and public gardens, which were regarded as 'Recreational Greens' or 'Urban Renewal' for the public. To date, all parks and garden development in Malaysia is geared towards the Garden City Concept through the Garden Nation 2005 ideal which was the initiative of former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed. This new concept was widely seen in all recent and most important Malaysian urban parks and neighbourhood gardens such as the development of Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) Park.

5.0 CURRENT MALAYSIAN POLICIES AND GUIDELINE FOR PARKS AND OPEN SPACES

The implementation of recreation policy according to Stewart et. al. (2008), shifts the responsibility for social and human welfare to individuals themselves. They gave examples such as the *Active Living* policies (see www.activeliving.org) which were designed to promote physically active lifestyles among people. The *Active Living* policies intended to forward a social agenda of preventative health and have been adopted widely across North America as public health initiatives to combat obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and stress. Parks and recreation was forwarded as a significant platform in targeting individuals to achieve broader physical activity change in their lifestyle (Stewart et. al., 2008).

Sadly, this ideal outdoor recreational policy does not exist in the Malaysian context. The only related policy that introduces outdoor recreation option is the National Forestry Policy (NFP) under the National Forestry Council. According to Har (2002), the revised NFP in 1992 addresses and incorporated concerns relating to the conservation of biological diversity, sustainable utilization of forest resources, ecological and environmental stability as well as the role of local communities in forest development, no longer focusing only on timber production in forest management. The NFP also provides for the development of recreational forests for

ecotourism and could play an important role in increasing public awareness and appreciation of the multiple roles of forests to society.

Similarly according to Sharma and Leong (2008), under the National Urbanisation Policy (NUP) prepared by the Department of Town and Country Planning, is targeted for open spaces. One of the measures identified under the policy is to provide adequate public open spaces by the adoption of a standard of 2 hectares per 1,000 urban population. The policy also calls for recreational areas to be gazetted and for their development to be monitored, for environmentally sensitive areas to be protected and for green areas to be established as buffer zones to limit urban development.

The other relevant policy should be the National Landscape Policy which focuses more on building functional landscape development such as the greening of cities, development of public parks and recreational areas as well as the conservation and maintenance of natural assets. This is accordingly to the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) which is to emphasis on care and conservation of the environment while maintaining the beauty of nature as well as protecting landscape resources as invaluable national heritage and beauty assets for future generations (Daily Express Sabah, 2006).

The Government, had been serious in supervising developers to ensure that they followed planning guidelines requiring them to reserve 10% of their housing projects for green lungs. The local planning authorities will ensure that no part of the 10% open space is turned into something else. There should be no concrete structure built on it. The Government had spent about RM500mil since 1996 on landscape works, parks, recreational development and other programmes such as tree-planting and the hibiscus planting campaigns (Yee, 2006). Today, no one is allowed to undertake land development without first obtaining planning permission from the local authority (Lee, 2002).

Hence, Harnik (2003) has listed seven measures in achieving the best possible park system. These measures were the outcome of detailed surveys, which were sent to the park directors in the biggest cities in the USA. The results include: having a clear expression of purpose where it is important to have a mandate, mission and core values as well as having a comprehensive annual report; on-going and thorough planning and community involvement with many partnerships with other

organisations or non-profit providers as well as creating operational concepts for the park, such as 'friends of parks'; sufficient assets in land, staffing and equipment by increasing landholdings and assuring revenue; equitable access by assuring opportunity for low-income users; providing access for the disabled and having a park within close proximity of residential areas; user satisfaction by knowing more about park users; safety from physical hazards and crime by providing a security presence in the park area; conducting an inspection program that really works as well as helping young people to stay out of trouble; and finally, the benefits for the city beyond the boundaries of the parks by measuring property values and integrating an admirable level of stewardship. The main goal of the project was to create the kind of framework that sustained city parks as valued components of a vital urban community. It was the first step toward benchmarking goals to achieving the best possible city park systems. Only by doing this can the value of the outdoor recreation as well as a park experience as a whole continue to be realized.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned earlier, this paper is important in order to understand why park were use as recreational option while there are always booming shopping malls around Klang Valley nowadays. In other words, to understand everyday experiences in the urban outdoor locales or environments. At every level of the Malaysian government, recreation and park facilities have captured increasing interest and involvement from all parties and agencies. However, the contribution has not been documented properly. Hence, there is no listing of recreational park usage or any statistical data to support this research. Although leisure services administrators in Malaysia are currently positioned under every municipal or city council, there are no individuals or specific units or departments who have the full responsibility for developing policies, planning and executing budgets and implementing recreation programs specifically towards building parks and recreation services.

Malaysia need to consider serious aspect of outdoor recreation planning which should involve the public, park administrator, park designers, related government agencies (local, state and federal) as well as private organizations. The planning part should take into consideration the general purpose related to the kind of service being offered or suggested. There should be local outdoor recreational plans whether in the rural or urban context where the plan addresses the demand and supply for local recreational opportunities and prediction for future demands. As for

the 10 percent open spaces that are required in the Malaysian housing and planning guideline, there should be a seriously reconsideration to realized the true concept of having Malaysia as a Garden Nation. The percentage should not be the subdividing component, but it should be the minimum guideline for open spaces in all new development. According to Jensen (1985), in developing the plan, three major phases should be targeted which include the collection of data about past history and present status of recreational needs, the projection of future park and recreation needs and finally the formulation of a realistic proposals for both near and long-term future regarding the outdoor recreational needs. Therefore, it is the hoped that the findings from this study will be used for future park design and management in any current and future Malaysian parks.

Each of the literature presented above streams to characterise the potential of urban open space and what are practices and theory behind its development. Therefore, it is suggested that further research and study be made on cost implications to the councils and user behaviour. Obviously, there is a gap between theory and practices in developing urban open spaces especially in a developing nation like Malaysia. This paper does not intended to create a perfect solution to park design but it will be significant to help various professionals involved in all Malaysian development, including city councils, government agencies, private sectors and individuals in Malaysia into understanding the outdoor recreational needs and patterns to promote better quality of life among Malaysian.

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