Integrating the Community in Urban Design and Planning of Public Spaces: A review in Malaysian cities

Wan Azlina Wan Ismail*, Ismail Said

*Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, University Malaysia Kelantan Locked Bag No.01, 16300, Bachok, Kelantan Darul Naim
Faculty of Built Environment, University Technology Malaysia UTM Skudai, 81310 Johor, Malaysia

Abstract

Both disciplines of Landscape architecture and Urban Planning prepare a development plan for public spaces in cities and towns. Much of the design and planning of the spaces are done by the landscape architect and urban planners without community participation. This practice results in incompatibility of the spaces for the communities; underutilizing or abandoning the spaces, and worse vandalizing the properties of the spaces. This paper argues that community participation in the design and planning of urban public spaces can draw residents to establish a sense of attachment that may lead to community maintaining the spaces. A plethora of studies in human geography, urban sociology, landscape architecture and urban planning were reviewing the themes of community participation in the planning of public spaces. It is found that community participation needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that emphasises empowerment, equity, trust and learning. The quality of decisions made through community participation is strongly reliable on the nature of the process leading to them.

1. Introduction

Community participation is a central concern for urban planning process in landscape architecture. However, the challenge and difficulties for planners to implement such approaches to the preeminent...
inherent in the typical community involvement process become crucial issues. Community participation signifies the direct involvement of community members in the affairs of the overall development planning programmes and governance at the local level. According to Creighton (2005) and Sanoff (2000), the idea of public involvement is advocated to reduce citizen scepticism toward government, build stakeholder consensus in government, and enhance administrative decision making. These participation theories have been presented and examined in previous researches.

To illustrate the dynamic of sustainability, the Malaysian Government recognizes that public participation is an integral part of sustainable development and good governance. Through various efforts of government agencies, public participation becomes an important element in governmental decision making and planning processes (Mohamed Anuar & Saruwono, 2013). As supported by Omar & Leh (2009), who examine that the public participation is not just an alternative for better planning, but is a requirement as stated in the planning law. Furthermore, the community has the right to know and participate in decision-makings, particularly in issues which potentially affect the communities and the areas in which they live and work.

In Malaysia, public participation is compulsory in the process of preparing development plans both structural and local. In planning of public spaces, sustainable development encompasses social, environmental and economic issues which concern to present and future generations. Studies on the people’s perceptions and attitudes toward places began to explore the meaning of place in an effort to inform the planning process. In search of realizing sustainable development, the act of community participation has been observed as one of the way forward in achieving this endeavour. As described by Loures & Crawford (2008), public participation begins by laying the base for sustainable practices in planning and management of the physical environment as well as landscape architecture. In creating a sustainable design for communities, it involves local citizens by allowing them to analyse their own problems and fashion their own solutions plus by supporting community initiatives in which to allow them to be the instruments of their own change.

However, what is being questioned in this paper is that, given our knowledge that integrating the community in a Malaysian planning system is a crucial need, does the current approaches in urban design planning is adequate enough as they need and endeavour are not being addressed in decision making level? Therefore, this paper argues that community involvement and critical comparison between the practice of developed and developing countries in integrating the community in designing public spaces to Malaysian cities.

2. Literature review

Good governance requires better communication within a society. With the aim of achieving the sustainable development, the need for greater levels of public discourse and participation, common understanding of issues and general democratisation of planning and policy processes have become widely accepted. It can be argued that community participation needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that emphasises empowerment, equity, trust and learning. Therefore, an effective public participation programme will increase the level of co-operation between planning authorities and public to achieve a parallel planning goal, which will benefit all parties. The design of an effective public involvement programme requires both skill and effort. As such, it is important for this study to examine the effectiveness of the existing public participation programmes, in order to improve the public participation programme in the preparation process of the development plan.
2.1. Community participation

Public participation is the process by which the public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. It is a two way communication and interaction, with the overall aim of better decisions that are supported by the public (Creighton, 2005). According to the World Bank Participation Sourcebook (2003), participation is a process through which a community influences and shares control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them. Public participation can be seen as a logical extension of the democratic process in more local, direct, deliberative ways (Pimbert & Wakeford, 2001). Regardless, it involves citizens in the planning process which helps ensure a plan that will be more widely accepted by its future users (Burby, 2003; Brody et al., 2003; Miraftab, 2003).

2.1.1. Importance of planning process

The issue of political discordant among different groups motivates the government to involve citizens in decision making to reduce potentially unpopular or questionable decisions (Wang, 2001). Thus, in September 2007 the Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act 2007 [Act A1312] was again amended in which to confer the executive authority on the Federal Government over certain matters in relation to the control and regulation of town and country planning in Peninsular Malaysia. The Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172) and its subsequent amendments stated the provision of public participation in Sections 9 (1, 2 and 3), 12A, 13, 14 and 15. This ensures that public participation is mandatory in the formulation of development plans in the country.

2.2. The concept of planning system in Malaysia

Currently, in Malaysia community involvement is accepted as a crucial stage in planning especially the preparation plan. This is to ensure that the people are involved and have the right to be informed in planning their areas. As such, public participation is a vital factor to ensure that the local issues and the needs of the local people are being addressed.

Conventionally, participation from the citizens embrace various mechanisms which include public hearings, citizen forums, community or neighbourhood meetings, community outreaches, citizen advisory groups, and individual citizen representation. Citizen surveys and focus groups, the internet, and e-mail are also used. Apparently, in the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Act 172) Section 9 stated that in preparing for a state structure plan, the report of survey which contains key findings of the study area must be publicised. This is to give an opportunity for the citizens to make representations. After completion of the draft structure plan, it should be made available for public inspection. Notification to the public is done through local newspapers. The public is given no less than one month from the date of notice to review and can be extended upon request from the stakeholders. As for the local plans and special area plan the same procedure applies as stated in section 13 of the Act 172. There is an additional provision introduced by the amendment of Act 172 in 2001 (Act A1129), which requires publicity has to be given to a proposed plan even before its preparation. Section 12A stated that publicity should include the objectives, the purpose and matters in the proposed plan of a local plan or special area plan. The amendment is very vital because it allows public participation from the early stage of plan preparation. The need for public participation in planning is sufficiently provided for by the Act 172 and its subsequent amendments.
2.3. The issue and limitations

The effectiveness of these public participation methods is debatable and it is indeed the most rigid way of public participation. As examined by Innes & Booher (2005), the programme typically does not allow for interchange, although occasionally a board member may ask a question. Citizens have no entitlement to answers to their questions. The public compelled to know the details of the planning issues, scopes, constraints and detail information. The information related to the subject matter shall include any available information in writing, visual, oral or database form on the state of the environment and impacts of developments, as well as any available environmental management programmes and measures. In improving decision-making processes, planning authority should ensure the public access to relevant information, facilitate the reception of public views and allow for effective participation. Mohamed Anuar & Saruwono (2013) pointed that obstacles coming from issues such as timing of participation, the capacity of the public, interaction among stakeholders, transparency in decision making and cost could prove to be some of the major obstacles of public participation in the design process. The study has also revealed that public participation is seldom a requirement of the client. It means that landscape architects are carrying their duty just to fulfil the requirement of the clients. These limitations are often a result of factors such as misunderstanding, mistrust, intolerance and conflict (Madonsela, 2010).

2.3.1. Place attachment to community participation

To a certain extent, understanding how particular preferences, perceptions, and emotional connections to place relate to community social cohesion, an organized participation and community development is significant. The appreciation through the theory of place attachment and meaning that has been explored widely and aid us in environmental and community psychology. Often the focus in community development and planning is on economic, political, or social dynamics both within the community and between the community and public agencies. However, the unique qualities and meanings of the specific physical setting in which community planning and development take place can play a critical role in the process as well. The thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the local community places, in what psychologists call “intra-psychic” phenomena show the impact of our behaviours toward such places, thus influencing whether and how we might participate in local planning efforts (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

Place attachment is an affective bond between people and places (Altman and Low, 1992). It has also been linked to community cleanup and revitalization efforts (Brown, Perkins, and Brown 2003). Hence place attachment, in influencing individual and group behaviour, affect communities at large. Unfortunately, many studies have ignored this place-based psychological ties to the community, although it can be used to make a critical contribution to effective community development and planning efforts, hence provided as a source of community power and collective action.

3. Method

This study presents a review of integrating community participation in planning process carried out by non-governmental organizations. The review identified the effectiveness of particular approaches in dealing with public participation programs done by local governments. The strategies and approaches used in those programs were evaluated between system practises in Malaysia. In this paper, three examples of organizations based in New York City have been used to illustrate this contrast between what can be called a top-down and a bottom-up urban approach.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project for Public Spaces (PPS)</td>
<td>Place-making-</td>
<td>Beginning with small- scale, do-able improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Involves looking at,</td>
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<td>• Listening to,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To discover peoples' needs and aspirations. The information is then used to create a common vision for that place.</td>
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<td>URBAN SPACEship</td>
<td>The goal is</td>
<td>Implements small-scale projects, for instance at the level of the neighbourhood, they can collaborate and share their thoughts and ideas for improving the city they live in.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• To network,</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Exchange thoughts and ideas,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Collaborate on projects, and turn fascinating ideas into concrete initiatives.</td>
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<td>Believes in the concept of tactical urbanism which is the principle that citizens can undertake direct low-cost, high-reward actions that immediately improve some aspect of a community’s public life and demonstrate to city leaders that there are opportunities for easy, successful changes to the status quo.</td>
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<td>GREENSPACENYC</td>
<td>It develops</td>
<td>free events, discussions and projects.</td>
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<td>• Hosts, and</td>
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<td>• Curates participatory events, classes,</td>
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<td>• Workshops, and installations regarding sustainability studies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>To build a network of committed participants interested in sharing information to the broader public for free or little cost.</td>
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4. Results and discussion

When it comes to planning of urban public spaces, it must be associated with the concept of social function. The community role and contribution of the public space today is a growing concern within urban areas. Through urban design and planning, public spaces are indeed often meant to improve social life, enhance the social interactions between urban dwellers, and therefore build stronger communities within the city. It is believed that community participation is a crucial part in the improvement of public spaces and consequently the quality of social life within the city. In order to improve the social life within an urban area, without input from the public, relying only on designers and urban planners as well as landscape architects are not enough to build a good public space. Increasingly, what is decisive in the creation of a good public space is the vision of the urban dwellers themselves and their own needs and preferences regarding the spaces they live in. Through community participation, in contrast with decision-making at a higher level without co-operation, the overall quality of life within an urban area can be better improved especially with regards to the design of public spaces.

The three examples of organizations based in New York City have been used to illustrate this contrast between what can be called a top-down and a bottom-up urban approach.

- Project for Public Spaces (PPS) is a well-known organization within the city of New York. PPS is a non-profit planning, design and educational organization dedicated to helping people create and sustain public spaces that build stronger communities. Their innovative approach known as ‘Placemaking’ perfectly illustrates the crucial importance of community in building better public
spaces and consequently better cities. Indeed, it involves looking at, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work and play in a particular space, to discover their needs and aspirations. This information is then used to create a common vision for that place. The vision can evolve quickly into an implementation strategy, beginning with small-scale, do-able improvements that can immediately bring benefits to public spaces and the people who use them. PPS worked on and contributed many projects within the city of New York such as the Rockefeller Plaza, Bryant Park or Williamsburg Walks.

- URBAN SPACEShip is a group that is meant to bring together urbanists, planners, designers, environmentalists, artists, developers and anyone else interested in infusing their streets, neighbourhoods and cities with innovation. The goal is to network, talk, interact, exchange thoughts and ideas, collaborate on projects, and turn fascinating ideas into concrete initiatives. This organization strongly believes in the concept of tactical urbanism which is the principle that citizens can undertake direct low-cost, high-reward actions that immediately improve some aspect of a community’s public life and demonstrate to city leaders that there are opportunities for easy, successful changes to the status quo. This organization implements small-scale projects, for instance at the level of the neighbourhood, in order to get in touch with the urban dwellers and make them feel concerned about their neighbourhood, the point being that they can collaborate and share their thoughts and ideas for improving the city they live in.

- GREENSPACENYC is a New York based NGO whose goal is to build a sustainable community within the city of New York. It develops, hosts, and curates participatory events, classes, workshops, and installations regarding sustainability studies in order to build a network of committed participants interested in sharing information to the broader public for free or little cost. The group is committed to the goal of facilitating a green community in the city through free events, discussions and projects. They have done all of their work only with the help of volunteers, demonstrating again the crucial role of community in building green public spaces within the city. The factors that contributed to the effectiveness of the programs organized by those NGOs are:
  - The strategies and approaches used are very closely related and directed to the community and were carried out in small scale rather than involving the large scale of the community. It is easier to draw near and listen to their feedback and opinions.
  - The local citizens can collaborate and share their thoughts and ideas for improving the city they live in through two way communication with representatives.
  - Community were guided by the consultant (planners, designers, environmentalists, artists, developers etc.) to give ideas on their streets, neighbourhoods and cities with innovation.

To examine people-place attachment and relationships at the individual level analysis, largely because of the focus on subjective experience. While this study understands how integrating the community in urban design and planning of public space affect the individual perceptions and feelings while at the same time impact community members’ actions toward their local environment. Given that conflicts among various community members can sometimes emerge in the planning process, exploring how place attachments influence people’s motivations and behaviours in the community planning and development process is an important goal. For example, proposed development projects can be perceived by some community members as a threat to place attachments because they will change the physical fabric of the neighbourhood. Those who feel their relationships to their community places are threatened by redevelopment may consequently resist a proposal regardless of its potential value. To adequately understand and respond to such reactions, it is critical to uncover and address these covert place attachments. Conversely, if such feelings and experiences are not well addressed, disruptions could divide a community.
The analysis also compared the less effectiveness of the local government approaches in gaining public attention into participation of urban planning. This is due to unclear content being delivered to the community. For instance, a study by Omar & Leh (2009) stated that 23.3% of respondents felt that the programme was ineffective while another 73% response were moderate. The approaches that used included banners and presentations. The public participation program also faced weaknesses when 50% of respondents felt that the program failed to deliver enough information on the future development of the area. The public were expecting more details or comprehensive information on the future development for their areas. The finding is supported by another result from another research done by Mohamed Anuar & Saruwono (2013) which pointed out that obstacles coming from such issues as (i) timing of participation, (ii) the capacity of the public, interaction among stakeholders, (iii) transparency in decision making and (iv) cost that could prove to be some of the major obstacles of public participation in the design process of public parks. Therefore, the issue of public participation as not a requirement by the client as a major barrier.

Organising the public participation programme to the local citizens should consider the needs and rights of the community as a stakeholder. The approaches delivered to the community ought to ensure that the community received the ample information on future development in their specific area. The information and approaches must be understandable.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The local planning authority is the proper agency to act as an organiser for the public participation programme as agreed by a majority of local citizens of certain area. However, the organiser of the public participation programme should consider better actions to increase the public trust. There are few ways to improve the effectiveness of the public participation programme. This includes the decision making process, whereby the government especially the town planners should always provide the best mechanism for more effective public participation in the local planning process. The whole community should be accommodated to take up the challenge for a sustainable growth of development. A holistic approach to decision making bringing together the social, economic and physical environmental issues to ensure that the environment is being developed to benefit the present community and the future generation. It means providing for effective participation at all levels of strategic planning, providing clear, comprehensive and effective community involvement in local decision-making and providing a robust regulatory framework on which the public and local government can rely with some certainty.

The public participation should be considered as one of the guidance in the implementation of district local plan. The content of the plan is very important as an evidence of the community representation to fulfil their right in the local plan.

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