What Makes People Use the Street?: Towards a liveable urban environment in Kuala Lumpur city centre

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors that make people used the street in Kuala Lumpur city centre. The study employed a mix-methodology method. The results suggest that the needs of users on the street depend on various factors, such as attractions; activities and reasons for using the streets; proximity, lack of congestion; and familiarity and length of engagement with the place public space, greenery, public amenities, maintenance and freedom of action. The findings show that, in general, the factors that make people use the street are mostly similar with previous theories. However, the attributes that contribute to the factors vary for each context.

1. Background and Issues

Streets are an important component of the urban form and the most public of the urban spaces in the city. Lack of understanding in urban design and peoples’ need in urban space development in the city had led to a reduction in public spaces and resulted in urban spaces not being friendly to their users. The rapid growth and the construction in the cities have a tremendous influence on the relationship between the urban users and the social spaces. This issue constitutes one of the most important concerns in Kuala Lumpur city centre. It was highlighted that the increase in population has contributed to the decrease in the quality of the urban environment and the quality of life of the inhabitants, particularly in major cities.
Like Kuala Lumpur. It, therefore, the streets will become a vital space for the public and need to be
governed effectively and efficiently to promote an environment that is conducive, sustainable and friendly
to all (Rahman et al., 2012). This paper examines the factors that make people used the street that lead to a
liveable urban environment in Kuala Lumpur city centre. It seeks to examine the factors that make people
use and do not use the street.

2. Literature Review

Liveability is the physical quality that is required in order to make a great street and does affect the
uses of the street (Jacobs, 1996). In Malaysia, when talking about public open spaces in the city centre,
streets, especially urban commercial streets, play an important role due to the lack of other types of urban
spaces. However, currently, in Malaysia one cannot find many examples of street environments that are
friendly and accommodating to all users (Rahman, 2013). A review of the literature on liveable streets
indicates that the degree of liveliness and form is influenced by many factors. The character of the street
varies according to the purpose and function of the location, physical form and appearance,
socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the user as well as the inhabitant. This may affect the needs
and perceptions of the users that might be different from other street users in other countries. The presence
of people and activities on the street affect the liveability of the city (Appleyard, 1981; Wan Ismail, 2010).
Therefore, a well-designed roadside is important to the street as a ‘public place’.

The role of human aspects is established as an important framework for good urban space. Therefore, a
good or bad of the urban space can be judged by the people who use and are involved with the space.
Nowadays, the human dimension has been overlooked and not seriously addressed in urban design
compared to other issues, such as accommodating the increase of cars in urban areas (Gehl, 2010).
Rapoport (1986) stressed that many designers believed that they knew what the user’s need in the space
was, but they did not because there was no research. He also suggested that designers must get away from
the normative approach in which the space must be used in such and such away and need to approach the
problem differently according to the desire of the users and that things should be done to achieve
supportive characteristics of these desired uses and activities.

Pedestrian activities on the street do affect the liveliness of the street. Pedestrian activities on the street
are important to review because the need of users in the street depends on their activities and reasons of
use. Outdoor activities in public space can be divided into three categories: necessary activities (going to
school or work, waiting for a bus or a person, shopping, etc.), optional activities (taking a walk, standing
around enjoying life, or sitting) and social activities (children at play, greeting and conversation, seeing
and hearing other people) (Gehl, 2010; Turel et al., 2007). Gehl (1987) argued that the categories of
outdoor spaces are influenced by the quality and the character of the outdoor space. He adds that the
activities and functions will be developed when the qualities of the space are improved. According to
Rapoport (1986), these activities vary greatly by culture, where some activities in some countries would
not be acceptable in another country. As supported by Shamsuddin (2011), cultural values affect the
behaviour in the streets and reflect the direct pedestrian response to the environment. It shows based on
previous authors that, in order for the street to be used by people, the street should be designed to suit the
activities. Davies (2000), suggested that if the street is a commercial street, the design should enable the
users to get to the shop, to cross the road and have other static and leisure activities, such as chatting and
lingering in front of the shop windows. A mixture of activities and use can create a successful community
and public space that enables the street to attract more people to come (Shamsuddin, 2011).

It is important to note that most of the attractive recreational and social activities that are associated
with walking depend on the good quality of the physical environment. The physical design of the street is
the actual structure of the place, which include buildings, landscape, climate and aesthetic quality
(Shamsuddin et al., 2004; Carmona, 2003), it is the objects in the setting (places); natural elements, manmade features and climate; relation between places created by walls, distance, windows, barriers; and qualities of setting (Rapoport, 1977). The most important design criterion for a liveable street is comfort which is one of the basic human needs in urban spaces (Carr et al., 1992; Jacobs, 1996; Carmona et al, 2003). In order to create comfortable street, the design decisions play an important role in modifying the impact of microclimate (Carmona et al., 2003; Mofidi, 2009). Microclimate of these spaces is influenced by several Parameters, such as the urban geometry, the vegetation, the water levels and the properties of surfaces (Mofidi, 2009). In a hot and humid country like Malaysia, environmental conditions in public spaces and around buildings, such as microclimate, sunlight, shelter, air movement about buildings and lighting, play a vital role in creating a comfortable space.

3. Methodology

The research involves a mixed method approach where analysis was done on both the quantitative and qualitative data. The street environment is examined in respect of the physical qualities through the analysis of questionnaire surveys, interviews and observations of the users’ activities and physical environment of the street. The analysis of questionnaire surveys of 340 respondents selected using quota sampling. The respondents were broadly divided into daily users (those who are constantly engaged with the street) and occasional users (those who are not dependent on the study area). The criteria for selecting the survey area will be based on its location within the urban centre as well as their social demographic backgrounds.

An interview with a small group of urban users was conducted to probe on issues highlighted in the survey in order to determine the influence of the outdoor environment on the pedestrian behaviour. A convenience random sampling of 20 street users was interviewed. The in-situ interviews will assure that the respondent’s phenomenological observations are recorded and that the perceptions while moving could be considered in the final outcome. In this study, structured observations of the users’ activities and physical environment of the street was conducted as part of the multi method approach to record the physical characteristics and the qualities in urban pedestrian environments and to study human activities on the streets. Field observations and documentation of the quality of the site in the form of maps and photographic records were conducted for each sub-area of the case study. Field notes and related photographs were taken to examine the users’ interactions with the physical settings, features and others.

A triangulation method and cross analysis between different techniques and the literature review was done to identify the problems relating to outdoor urban environment that influence the pedestrians’ behaviour. The data were processed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches and tabulated to find potential patterns and connections. The data collected (quantitative and qualitative) are independent of each other and were analysed concurrently to allow the general patterns and the causal factors to emerge.

4. Case Study

The study area, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman is located within the core of the Central Business District (CBD), of Kuala Lumpur. Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman (JTAR) is identified as one of the main traditional streets in the city centre due to its inherent socio-cultural stronghold and historical significance as being among the earliest high streets in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur. This street receives the highest concentration of shoppers, visitors and pedestrians and located in the area, which has been dedicated for urban revitalization initiatives.
5. What Make People Use the Streets

Based on the result from the survey towards urban commercial street JTAR, there are five (5) main factors that make people use the street; attractions on the street, activities on street, commute distance (proximity), congestion and other supportive factors (public space, greener/trees, public amenities, maintenance and cleanliness and freedom of actions).

5.1. Attractions on street

In this research, attraction was shown to be an important factor that can persuade people to use the street. Attraction or desirability is related to the qualities engaged with by the eyes, aesthetic values and entertainment quality. Users of all ages do not always simply choose the most obvious route to reach their destination; they are also influenced by how interesting or dull each route is (Gehl, 2000). This is also supported by Tibbalds (1992), who stressed the importance of attractive public spaces in urban areas in producing a feeling of comfort or well-being to the users. The results from this study show that functional factors were the strongest form that contributed to the use of the street rather than physical factors. Based on the survey, the functional attractions according to the occasional and daily users in JTAR were shopping centres and the best place to earn money. It was proven in the results on occasional users’ and daily users’ feedback that the main attraction of JTAR that make them use the street, especially for occasional users, was the shopping centres, which tallied with the main role of the street as a shopping and commercial street (Table 1). The finding also supported by the feedback from gender, age and ethnicity group who also indicated that the shopping centres as the main attraction for them to use the street (Table 7.1).

Table 1. The main attractions in JTAR by different groups of users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main attraction</th>
<th>Type of use (%)</th>
<th>Gender (%)</th>
<th>Ethnicity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopping centres</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>43.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best place to earn money or income</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public facilities</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public spaces, buildings and landscapes</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Based on previous research in JTAR, they also found that the activities along the street were mentioned as the most distinctive feature of JTAR (Rahman et al, 2010; Ujang; 2010). The results from the survey indicated that the Indian and Malay groups of users were the groups who mention the shopping centre as the main attractions of JTAR. This is proved by the result from observation on site where most of the people, especially the Malays and Indians, came to this street for shopping. The numbers of Malays and Indians will increase during festive seasons, especially for preparing for the Eid festival and Deepavalii. Consequently, when the time of these festivals is approaching, JTAR will move into high gear with lots of people on the streets and many trade activities.
The second attraction of this street is as a place to earn money. The result shows that ‘the best place to earn money or income’ is the main attraction for daily group of users. This activity is a necessary activity (Gehl, 2010). Apart from shopping and being the best place to earn money and income, the physical environment, such as the public spaces, buildings and landscape also contributes as one of the attractions in JTAR. The results show that main physical attractions in JTAR to the users are public facilities and public spaces. These kinds of attraction are relate to ‘the feeling of relaxation’; leisure and aesthetic value (Jacobs, 1996). It was found in the survey that different groups of user are attracted to JTAR for different reasons. This is because their intentions and reasons for using the street, as well as their activities and how they use the street may affect their attraction to the area. However, there are certain factors that make it attractive to certain groups but not to others. The familiarity, time spent, and frequency of visits to JTAR were different between the occasional and daily users, which meant that their criteria of attraction towards the place were dissimilar between each group.

In summary, in urban commercial street, the shopping centres and places to earn money are the main attractions that make users used the street, however, physical structures such as buildings and public spaces and public facilities and landscape elements were the supportive attraction to them. In this research it was found that, the users were more attracted to functional elements rather than physical elements. Familiarity, time spent, and frequency of visit in JTAR were different between the occasional and daily users, which mean that their criteria of attraction to the place were not similar.

5.2. Activities on street

Users’ activities on the street were very much dependent on their reasons for using the street and also concerning the quality of the environment (Gehl, 2010). The reasons for use may affect the activities on the street. The results from the surveys and in-depth interviews indicate that in the context of JTAR, the functional factors were the main factors that influence the use of the street. This street indicates a significant function in supporting the economic and social activities. Based on the questionnaire survey of the users, the most frequent reason they use JTAR is for shopping. This can be associated with JTAR as a shopping street and shopping was the main attraction in the city centre. Based on observations on the site even though there are different types of development, the most vital generators are business and commercial activities. The results from the observations survey on the activities in JTAR found that nodes of activities were more focused around shopping areas. It was found that during the observation, shopping activities were more during weekends and the intensity of people was very high. Responses from the interviews indicate that a variety of choices, diversity of products and distinctive products that they can get from this street make them love to shop here.

The second significant purpose for being in JTAR according to the respondents was meeting friends. Meeting friends and enjoying food were also mentioned by the respondents in the interviews. Based on the observation on site, people met friends together enjoying food in restaurants or shopping together. The presence of outdoor cafes and restaurants that provide wireless Internet and air conditioning make the place suitable as a meeting place for people. Other activities such as visiting, relaxing and entertaining were optional activities that were present in JTAR. Although ‘hanging out’ or leisure activities were not the main attraction in JTAR, the users still used the street during their free time. However, in the case of JTAR it was found that most of the social activity appeal was passive contacts like seeing and hearing as Gehl (1991) said as ‘superficial’.

A pleasing environment is one of the sub factors that can attract activities onto the street and one of the criteria that support liveability. The results of the survey concerning the degree of visually pleasing places in JTAR show that there was a positive response from users’ perceptions concerning the quality. This shows that visually pleasing place is one of the factors that can attract people to use the street. This was
proved by Gehl (2010) in that there is a strong connection between the qualities of the physical environment on site. He in his research found that an increase in environmental quality will give a boost to optional activities and at the same time will increase the social activities.

Based on the reasons they used the street we can say that most of the activities in JTAR were among the necessary activities such as shopping, working, living there and studying. The others come for ‘optional activities’, such as visiting friends, relaxing and entertaining. This result supports the theory from Gehl (1991) that the necessary group constituted the majority related to walking. That was also the reason why the daily group was more concerned with the environmental condition compared to the occasional users. For the group doing optional activities, they used the street because the exterior conditions are optimal for them, when the weather and place invite them. These activities are dependent on exterior physical conditions. The understanding of the activities that occur in the street is important to generate new ideas and also for proposing new development that is friendly to their users. This is in line with Shamsuddin et al (2010), who stressed that the designers are highly recommended to look into the activities in the urban spaces in order to exploit for future design.

5.3. Proximity (commute distance)

The proximity or commute distance from the user’s place of work and home is one of the most important factors influencing the use of the street. The nearer the place with their residence the more they visit the street. The results from the respondents indicated that proximity was one the reasons they used the street in Kuala Lumpur city centre. Distance from residence does affect the respondents’ frequency of a visit to JTAR. Result from survey shows that the shorter the distance the often they used the street. People are much more likely to walk to a given destination if they perceive that the distance is not too far. The perceived distance can be influenced by the right type of land use and design characteristics. Based on observations it was found that design element such as continuous walking systems that connect door fronts with transit stops or other destinations can create good connections. Results from the interview show that most of the respondents mentioned that they managed to walk around 1 kilometre length. This supports the statement from most of the authors in the literature review that people choose to walk approximately 1 kilometre. The proximity of public transport and shopping spots make this street highly accessible for pedestrians.

The presence in proximity in JTAR contributes to accessible street that gives pedestrians comfort of the street. This aspect will help the street users to move between and within the zones (Anderson, 2006). Burton et al. (2006) noted that ten minutes (about 800 metres) is a comfortable walking time for people to reach services and facilities. Therefore, the locations for the services and facilities, such as shops, public transport and other facilities should be located or situated within a 10 minute walking distance (Burton et al., 2006). However, in some situations even though pedestrians aim to use the shortest route, due to encounters with other pedestrians and obstacles on the street they might not be able to do so. This finding was supported by Al-Azzami (2004) in his research study. Based on the interviews it was found that the appropriate surface sidewalks also affect the comfort of using the street.

5.4. Congestion

The street environment plays an important role that makes people use the street. Congestion in this research can be divided into traffic congestion and pedestrian congestion, which contribute to the reasons why they avoid using JTAR. It was proven by the result from the questionnaire survey that indicates that congestion as one of the factors why the users do not use the street. This is also supported by the results from the occasional users in that one of the main reasons they did not like to come to JTAR during their
free time is because the street was too congested. Based on the survey concerning improvements needed to JTAR, all types of user suggested reducing congestion on the street as the highest priority (Fig.1). People congestion makes people feel uncomfortable and unsafe to use the street which contributes to the feeling of stress (Krupart, 1985). This is proven by the respond from many respondents in the interview who mentioned that the people congestion contributes to the feeling of being uncomfortable and unsafe. Some of the respondents in the interview stated that the presence of people can increase their feeling of safety in using the street, however, if there are too many people it will became an unsafe environment due to the possibility of crime such as pickpockets, beggars and sexual harassment, especially for women. In JTAR, the feeling of crowding was also caused by the speed of the pedestrians. People who walk along this street tend to walk much slower for the purpose of shopping. Pedestrians walked much slower when shopping than for other trip purposes. This was because the shoppers tend to stroll, stop to look in windows, travel with children and carry luggage (Al-Azzami, 2004).

Fig. 1. Respondents’ suggestions concerning the most needed improvements in JTAR

Based on observations on site, the street was not only crowded with pedestrians but was also dominated by motorists on the road, especially in the Chow Kit area where there is a four lane road. The high use of private cars also contributed to congestion in JTAR.

In summary, crowded streets and peoples’ eyes produce a sense of belonging and turn the cities into stages; however if they were too congested people may feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Street users will avoid using streets that are too congested. However, the feeling of crowding is different for each of the user. If we look and compare the street with other commercial streets in other countries like Indonesia, China and India, the street does not look too congested and not overcrowded. This may be related to the culture of Malaysian street users who are very sensitive on the busy environment.
5.5. Familiarity and length of engagement

The more familiar people are with the place the safer they feel with the environment. Familiarity with shopping streets closely reflects the user’s ability to identify locations and elements associated with it (Ujang, 2008, 2010). Based on the feedback from the respondents who did not use (non-user) JTAR, one of the significant reasons they do not use the street was because they were unfamiliar with the street. Familiarity is related to their length of stay and how long they are involved with the street. Users who are more familiar with the street feel safer to use the street alone compared to the group of users that not familiar with the street studied. The results from the daily users show that the majority of users who engaged with JTAR for more than five years feel safe to use the street alone. Most of the respondents that said ‘yes’ to use the street alone in JTAR were the group of users who had been engaged with JTAR for more than 15 years. Frequency of visits increases the level of familiarity with the people and setting in JTAR. The results from the interviews reveal that users who use the street more often tend to indicate more positive feelings concerning safety and security, and have a less positive feeling for satisfying the environments. It was also proved by Ujang (2008, 2010) that the respondents who have been engaging with the streets for a longer period felt an increased level safety of and comfort towards the street. This shows that familiarity and frequent engagement with the street make the street friendlier to users by developing a greater sense of belonging and strong emotional feelings about the place.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to determine the design criteria of a liveable street. In this research it was reveal that the design criteria that contribute to liveable street in Malaysia context were mostly similar with the previous theories. It was also was not much difference between the user needs of a user-friendly street with the needs of users of other urban spaces in previous theories. However, the attributes that contribute to the factors vary for each context especially countries with a different climate and economic level (between developing and developed countries). This may relate to the environment, climate or culture of the place, which is different from previous studies. This identifies the factors that need to be considered in future guidelines and policies for planning and design in urban spaces especially streets. It is hoped that these factors will be taken into consideration by those involved with decision making in respect of urban design, as a guide to create a friendly street environment for the users that is generally lacking in our urban streets at present. It is hoped that findings from this research will guide future development planning and design of urban streets and that repetition of the mistakes from the past can be avoided.

References


