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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 201 (2015) 360 – 367

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Asian Conference on Environment-Behaviour Studies, AcE-Bs2015, 20-22 February 2015,  
Tehran, Iran

## Revitalization of Urban Public Spaces: An overview

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### Abstract

The recent trend indicates that urban tourism gives a priority on urban public spaces. In addition, urban public spaces have been involved in urban revitalization projects to a create symbol of the city and have been proved to be useful for urban revitalization. In line with this trend, this paper is to discuss issues related to the revitalization of urban public space. The study reveals the terms referred to the revitalization process. Apart from that, the elements of public space are also applied to the area better known as open space and can be used in a meaningful way to the public.

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Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies, Faculty of Architecture, Planning & Surveying, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia).

*Keywords:* Urban revitalisation; regeneration; redevelopment; public space

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### 1. Introduction

The city is the result of well-developed civilization, people living and as a working space. According to Rong (2010:1), “it is predicted that in 21st century, the city will face unique period of rapid economic growth and technology, and to encourage urban community to re-examine the depth and breadth of content, research and respond to changes arising from the new with the new challenges series of practical problems”.

In the democratic society, urban public spaces are for people to enjoy nature and provide a gathering place for a social event is to demonstrate the characteristics of an urban landscape and real life scenarios stages. It is to improve the quality of urban environment, promote people exchanges, reminiscent the urban history and culture, as well as to arouse people's sense of identity and belonging to all and it play very important role. According to Town and Country Planning Act 1976 Act 172 (2006), open space means any land whether enclosed or not which is laid out or reserved for laying out wholly or partly as a public garden, park, sports and recreation ground, pleasure ground,

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walk or as a public place. Contemporary urban public space and environment are facing a significant shift from the comprehensive range of political, economic, technological, social and cultural brought.

Recognizing the importance of the role and function of urban public spaces, this study will describe the criteria/qualities and elements that affect the success of the revitalization program to attract visitors to the urban public space. According to Holland (2014:2), revitalization means to give new life, strength, vitality to an area, meanwhile urban revitalization means to impart new life or strength to a neighbourhood and (it can include efforts to) revitalize a flagging economy. Rashid et.al, (2013:1), argued that the concept of urban regeneration in Malaysian cities is to promote a “return to the city”, revitalize the city centre, restore activity and implement initiatives to improve the quality of the environment.

Thus, this research will focus on urban public space in which the criterion of success in attracting visitors also will be determined based on user perception. The term "success" that attract visitors include various aspects of the motives and purposes, perception and aspects of diversity and differences in activity with its background and character that create "local feeling". This study is vital in efforts to revitalize of urban public spaces in order for it to survive and can be applied in new developments.

### 1.1. Research objectives

In order to achieve the research aim, the objectives are to:

- Define the theoretical or scientific research on the revitalization of urban public space in term of definition, concept, types and programs.
- Evaluate the public spaces that need to be revitalized.
- Propose alternative ways in planning for revitalization of urban public space.

## 2. Review process

The review process based on the meta-analysis involves journals, articles, research papers and PhD/MSc dissertation from five databases using similar terms and keywords. The journal search process using a combination of keywords: urban revitalization, regeneration, redevelopment and public space.

The references list of the studies also used to re-examine and extend the search covers thesis, journals and articles published between 2000 until 2014. Once the criteria have been identified, the code for studies was done to facilitate the distribution of these findings. Here are the variables that have been set, urban revitalization; public space; research method, and results. From the outcome of the search, a total of 31 journals, articles, Research Papers and Ph.D./MSc Dissertation that are relevant and fulfill the research questions conducted. The journals and articles were selected from the literatures that were pertinent to the purpose and study area of the research.

This research is done by literature studies of meaning of public space, urban revitalization, successful of public space/square and government policies and program. Theory and perspectives of public space and urban revitalization also included in this research to be a reference. Some different factors such as motives and purposes, activities and perceptions on urban public spaces are identified to determine the involvement and interaction of visitors in urban public space towards success of urban revitalization program. Thus, this study is undertaken to fill this knowledge gap. It is vital to study how urban public space will then help in the revitalization of the city. It would then contribute to identify the public spaces that need to be revitalized. Thus, it will then help to identify the suitable revitalization program of urban public spaces.

## 3. Urban revitalization

Various terms were referred to these revitalization processes that are commonly used interchangeably. Spandou et.al, (2010:2), identified the terms such as:

- Regeneration
- Renewal
- Redevelopment

- Rehabilitation
- Conservation
- Restoration
- Reconstruction
- Refurbishment
- Renaissance

On the other hand, (Vileniske, 2014:2), stated that the term of revitalization can imply physical and social, cultural and economic dimensions. The idea of revitalization is to balance the current rapid development in urban areas through the conserving urban identity, culture and traditions. Furthermore, the revitalization program can create job opportunity to increase peoples' income, preserve natural resources, provides suitable urban amenities and facilities for the user. By referring to the term of regeneration, it also deals with issues similar to revitalization. According to Ntshona (2013:22), regeneration encompassing addressing issues like economic restricting, unemployment, social deprivation and exclusion, contaminated land and environmental pollution. It is also a wise move in considering the urban sustainable development and regeneration as well as given rejuvenate and should be fully utilized. In addition, conservation commonly uses for revitalization. Samadi et.al, (2011:71), state that “conservation is considered as the most commonly practiced approach to most heritage development. The heritage revitalization arises from the issues of generalization due to globalization in the early decade of the millennium”. Conservation is also physical intervention in the fabric of the building to ensure its continued performance (Baroldin et.al, 2013:81).

Globally, few researches have been carried out in relation to the urban revitalization. Urban revitalization as a process that comprises of a set of urban management strategies to facilitate economic, social, environmental, cultural and historical (re)development of problematic, deprived and derelict urban areas (Spandou et.al, 2010:3). Based on urban revitalization process, the targets to be achieved is to rebuild the city in which people work and live, good environmental quality; adequate social, cultural and recreational facilities, and to improve the quality of life of local residents.

There are lots of terms for urban revitalization. Thus, the researchers used words that have the meaning similar to urban revitalization such as urban regeneration, urban redevelopment, urban renaissance and urban renewal. Today, the term “urban conservation and regeneration” is widely used to express the inclusion of economic and social dimensions in urban conservation planning and to reflect the significance of integrative planning (Peerapun, 2012:36). In other study, urban regeneration also called urban revitalization, urban renewal and urban renaissance, is the field of public policy that comprehensive, integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban issues as economic decline, environmental decay, community dereliction, growing unemployment and some social problems caused by these urban issues that has been subject to change (Li, 2003:5; Mehta, 2008:2; Rashid et.al, 2013:5; Couch et.al, 2011:4).

Therefore, actions and strategies had taken to address the problems in urban areas, especially restructuring urban economic, social reaction and rehabilitation the environmental destruction. So, physical activities will help to improve the quality of life and creating sustainable communities.

Concurrently, Malaysia is in an effort to revitalize the degradation and neglect of the cities centres. Malaysia's population in mid-2009 stood at 28.3 million and the United Nations projects the nation's population to grow to 40.4 million by 2050 (Rashid et.al, 2013:2). As an effect, cities and towns will grow and plays a significant role in urban growth. Due to the impact of urban growth, there were excessive industrial growth, increased motorized transportation movements and social lifestyle expectations, contribute to the expansion and continued sprawling of cities' (Rashid et.al, 2013:2).

Therefore, the cities and towns in Malaysia need for urban regeneration by considering the effect of urban decay. This is supported by Li (2014:299), that urban redevelopment (regeneration) has been a vital component of the urban development process just because cities do tend to age and become obsolete physically and functionally (and hence economically). Hence, urban redevelopment are targeted to eradicate slums and unhealthy area to live in the city, create better scenery and image of urban areas, increase economic in urban area, create comfortable and safe neighbourhood, increasing property value in the future; and restructure society in poverty eradication.

#### 4. Urban public space

Literally, public space can be defined as a space for the public. However, the different definition of both ‘public’ and ‘space’ can be identified in a multicultural context. For example, Hong Kong Public Space Initiative (2012), pointed out “public may refer to every single individual, the entire population as a whole and the majority”. According to Bassett (2013:3), space is ideological, socially produced, disputed and always changing among social, political, economic and geographic territories. Space (especially public space) becomes a commercial commodity because of the activities generated by tradition (Puspitasari et.al, 2012:36).

The concept of what public spaces change over time. The concept of public space can be interpreted differently by communities, according to each culture and its emphasis on public space. In addition, the public spaces also used and owned by all people, no matter how we choose to define ‘the public’ (Al-Shams et.al, 2013:79; Kurniawati, 2012:3) where one can see the relationship between the individual and society (Okolo et.al, 2010:125-126). Hence, public spaces should accommodate change and people from all sorts of background should be accessible to public spaces with the right to variety and flexibility of (Qamaruz-Zaman et.al, 2013:90). Currently in Malaysia, the concept of ‘public space’ is illustrated by the term of ‘open space’. According to the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 (Amendment) 2006, Act (172) in Section 2, stated that open space is “open space means any land whether enclosed or not which is laid out or reserved for laying out wholly or partly as a public garden, park, sports and recreation ground, pleasure ground, walk or as a public place”.

Generally, the significance of public space can be seen from the perspective of individual, community and city. Public space is a space with feature that allows the people to spend time and enjoy their life as a public regardless of their differences. In addition, public spaces can be viewed as ‘locales’, settings in which social relations and a sense of place are constituted (Ramezani et.al, 2009:2) and contribute to the creation of the sense of continuity for a group, or a society (Ercan, 2007:119). These will ensure people are not isolated when they are in a group of people. Usually, the activities will be carried out in the form of community events such as the water festival, floral festivals and cultural performances. Figure 1 below shows the community and group activities that take place in public space and create social interaction with each other. It is supported by Sangar (2007:10), “despite the changing nature of modern neighbourhoods and communities, public spaces are still an essential part of life because they provide opportunities for different people – young, old etc, to experience a variety of human encounters”.

In the city dimension, the public space is important in the aspect of the environment, culture and economy toward the improvement and balancing the city. Therefore, in the high-density development of urban areas, public spaces as a buffer zone as well as the lobby of the city centre. In addition, public space also as a significant space for penetration of air and sunlight to the city so that the city can have a healthy environment.



Fig. 1. The community and group activities that take place in public space.  
(Source: Penang State Tourism Development and Culture, 2014)

Public space is one part of the development of a city; yet public spaces play an important role in the public life and enhance the quality of life. According to Ercan (2007:115), pointed out that public spaces play a broad range of

roles, which can be classified as physical, ecological, psychological, social, political, economic, symbolic, and aesthetic roles. In the context of Malaysia, Federal Department of Town Planning (2005:5), stated that “in the global environment, open spaces play a pivotal role at the time of declining natural resources, increasing pollution, destruction of ozone layers, and fear of greenhouse effect. Without open spaces, the long-term sustainability of our cities is in some serious doubt”. If the public space plays a significant role in a few matters involving the public and urban areas, public space becomes inevitable components in urban areas.

Generally, public space can be seen in various forms, such as streets, plazas, parks squares and market places (Al-Shams et.al, 2013:78; Harun et.al, 2009:2) which is a public space and play a number of physical role. The openness, enclosure; links, nodes; squares and streets; are urban fabric components that referred to distinguish spaces that may express visual sequences of ‘static and dynamic’ in a city (El Husseiny et.al, 2013:135). Without such, the objects, people and information cannot make a movement or exchange from one area to another. In addition, there are also facilities such as traffic signs, street light, public toilet, parking areas and information signage to facilitate user communication. This facility is part of the necessary infrastructure of a successful public space (Ja’afar et.al, 2013:88).

Parks are public spaces that should provide opportunities for physical activity, social interaction and escape from urban living for people of all walks of life (Bagwell et.al, 2012:25). This is supported by Greaves (2011:38), the social interaction typically occur in commonly used public spaces such as on sidewalks or small local commercial establishments such as butcher shops, hardware stores, cafes and pubs. In other perspective, Mehta (2007:2), mentioned that street and their sidewalks, the main public spaces of the city, are its most vital organs. The street used as an extension of shops and cafes (El-Husseiny, 2013:155). These dynamic spaces are an essential counterpart to the more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, nodes for communication and common grounds for play and relaxation. Besides that, the natural elements are important factor in public open space that improve comfort, relaxation, pleasant experience and anticipate unpleasant climate by placing trees along pedestrian path and sitting area (Nasution et.al, 2012:61).

Throughout history, many economic activities carried out in the city centre surrounded by public space as a focal point. In the context of Malaysia, during the Colonial era, public space was created not for leisure but to serve an economic purpose such as fruits and spices were important commodities and as a result, the plant stocks had to be controlled for commercial needs, leading to the establishment of the Botanical Garden, Pulau Pinang (Federal Department of Town Planning, 2005:15). Therefore, commercial activities moved to the city centre, to keep its close relation with public space for the benefit of the visitors who coming and going. In Malaysia, the waterfront development has created the opportunity to attract more foreign investment in the commercial project.

The importance of public space has been widely recognized, mainly from the perspective of improving quality of life through comfortable environment and abundant public life; enhancing urban image through urban vitality; and impelling economic development through investment which is attracted by good image (Li, 2003:10). Therefore, the changing nature of public space and the emergence of new public spaces can beautify the urban environment and pleasant for the human being to work, dwell, and relax in.

## **5. Relationship between urban revitalization and public space**

The revitalization program of public space has been designed to bring intercultural communities together (Bagwell et.al, 2012:37). Therefore, urban public spaces should become the symbols of the contemporary city and tools in the revitalization of cities, thereby recreating the lost identity of a given city. These public spaces reflect the social life and interaction of a people (Okolo et.al, 2010:126). Paigo (2012), examined the relationship between public spaces and city’s development as shown in Figure 2 below. He found that the event and activity shape the place and allows the direct relationships between visitors and public spaces.

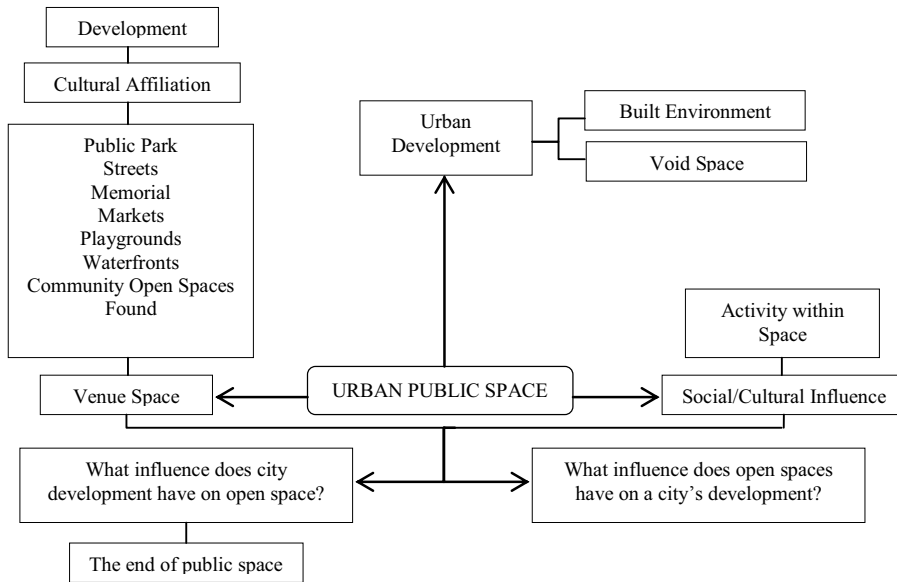


Fig. 2. The relationship between urban public spaces and city's development.  
(Source: Adopted from Paigo, 2012)

Ramezani et.al, (2009:2), stated that the importance of public space in revitalizing the city in that it generates a sense of palace, as well as a sense of community, by encouraging local activities and special events that are integral part of urban heritage. On the other hand, Li (2003:1), mentioned that “although the details of urban regeneration policies designed to improve the quality of life and to enhance the urban image have varied from nation to nation and city to city, they have one thing in common, that is they involved the use of urban public space in urban planning. According to Lim et.al (2013:193), public spaces function as useful components of urban regeneration strategies by improving the image of the city and thus a regeneration site's attractiveness to potential inward investors.

In other perspective, urban regeneration involves the distressed urban areas revitalization, through actions such as revitalization of historic areas; improvement of living conditions in residential districts; redevelopment of public spaces, squares, parks, urban furniture and so on; modernization of urban infrastructure: water, networks, gas, electricity, transport infrastructure (Alpopi, 2013:179). This statement is supported by Samadi et.al, (2011:71), that urban heritage street revitalization is defined as rejuvenation of culturally significant outdoor space in between heritage buildings. In addition, Samadi et.al, (2013:938), stated that the research also create a new interpretation of the heritage street's revitalization.

Another significant role of public spaces is economic and commercial which is the focus of regeneration program (Ercan, 2007:118). Farzaneh (2011:103), in her studies stated that “good public space and good design is therefore both the outcome of a successful urban renaissance as well as a tool for mobilizing communities to deliver this urban renaissance”.

## 6. Conclusion

The effort in furthering the knowledge about the topic of revitalization of urban public space theory is important because it can help governments, planners, developers and public organization to generate greater awareness and more strategies framework for urban public space. Furthermore, the effort to improve the urban planning quality towards urban public space is vital in order to survive and can be applied in new developments.

Besides that, the government will be more sensitive to the direct involvement of publics to ensure that the urban public spaces do not disappear with modernization. Without the proper revitalization strategy to uphold those



qualities, urban public space deteriorated due to natural and time factors. When this happens, the urban public spaces will lose its attraction and the activity of visitors. In order to remain relevant to the current urban environment, a proper program of revitalization of urban public spaces is urgently in need. So, this article suggests a study on the success of urban revitalization in public space in Malaysia UNESCO City.

By urban revitalization program, it can improve the area and give it more functional than the previous situation. Urban revitalization also concerned with the physical, economic, social, environmental, cultural and historical of the urban area. Apart from that the elements of public space are also applied to the area will be better known and can be used in a meaningful way to the public.

## Acknowledgements

The authors of this study are would like to acknowledge to supervisor and co-supervisor in supporting and professional guidance throughout the success of this study.

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