

The Influence of Physical Environment on the Character of Youths

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of the physical environment (PE) of urban neighbourhoods on the character of youths. The outdoor features of a neighbourhood are often related to the physical environment and social interaction among the people living in the urban community. This study was done to gather data through focus group discussions, observations and interviews with youths, parents and stakeholders to examine the effect of PE on the character of youths. The results showed that outdoor features do influence the character of youths in an urban neighbourhood community. Neighbourhood community should play an important role in providing youths with proper outdoor features and providing opportunities for them to become more productive and innovative.

Keywords: Character of youths, outdoor features, physical environment, social interaction, urban neighbourhoods

INTRODUCTION

The environment is categorised into three groups i.e. natural environment, artificial environment and social environment. Physical Environment (PE) belongs to the

artificial environment formed by people with the intention of meeting their needs as those needs change through time (Alemdar, 2010). This space allows for communication between individuals in the community. According to Aydin and Siramkaya (2014), a community is influenced by its artificial environment, which encompasses environment condition, building design, connecting roads and settlement style.

Personal and social character is determined by structural identity or the physical criteria for sheltering or living.

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One of the major factors in defining urban community is the identity of settlements (Wiberg, 1993). According to Alemdar (2010), understanding urban environment requires a holistic approach as each of its elements protects its own values and has a relationship with other elements, making each element more apparent. PE reflects the atmosphere of each era, which completes one another and it gives a new meaning to the whole atmosphere. Residential areas determined the physical environment as wide connection consist of styles and content of the architectural environments, cultural, social perception and intellectual behavioural of the environment (Hashim et al. 2015). Cradock et al. (2009) in their study stated that neighbourhood social interaction was connected according to participation in a recreational activity in the PE, services and individual communication during outdoor activity.

PE includes neighbourhood parks and green spaces built up by people for encouraging a variety of outdoor activities and human behaviour (O'Reilly et al., 2015). In the last decade, there has been a growing number of research works examining the influence of PE or public open space on human behaviour based on physical activity. They have shown diverse relatives between different aspects of the physical environment in terms of proximity, size, quality and availability (Koohsari et al., 2015).

This paper aims to take the hypothesis that the character of youths is manipulated by

changes in physical environment change to the next level using interpretation of human thought and qualitative methodological schemes. The main characteristic examined in this study is youth participation in outdoor activities related to the types of physical environment. This research contributes to existing work on the relations between PE and the character of youth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The measurement used in this research was based on focus group discussion (FGD) sessions with two main target groups consisting of 12 participants in a youth group and six in a stakeholder group. The first group represented marginalised youths and was made up of youths living in People's Housing Programme, a low-cost housing development project (PPR), in Kerinchi, Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur. They were selected from each block of the PPR, and they were keen to share their opinions and express their feelings regarding their physical environment. The youths, both females and males, were selected randomly and were aged between 15 and 24 years old and represented the three main ethnic groups of Malaysia, Malay, Chinese and Indian. They also represented the student, employed and unemployed and married groups. The second group represented stakeholders and included PPR Residents' Committee members (2 participants), a Town Planner from Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), a Town Planner from the Federal Town and Country Planning Department in

Kuala Lumpur and two members from the Malaysian Youth Council Committee.

The FGD were held at different venues between September 2014 and November 2014. The first session was held in the community hall of the PPR in the afternoon between 3.00 and 5.00 pm. The time was appropriate for the youths as most were back from morning school. The other FGD group was held from 10.00 am to 12.00 noon at Armada Hotel in Petaling Jaya, a location that was accessible for all the participants.

The FGD used a different set of questions focussing on related issues, highlighting the question 'the influence of PE on the character of youths'. Using semi-structured interview questions, the speaker, who was also a member of the research group, conducted the sessions smoothly, and clearly explained how the session was to run so that all participants could share their opinion and express their sentiments.

Both FGDs were recorded using several tape recorders and a video camera while other members of the research team noted down keywords used by the respondents. The session lasted for about two hours. The dialogues were transcribed manually for further analysis.

The main objective of the FGD was to extract information on issues related to the youths' physical environment that contributed to the marginalisation of the youth community of such PPR housing projects developed by the government. This paper discusses some of the findings observed from the FGD.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The PPR was observed to consist of six blocks of multi-level housing, with each block having 17 floors. Each floor contained 20 houses and the total number of houses was 2040. The open space provision consisted of one football field and two multi-purpose courts for three blocks.

Data collected from the FGD were categorised into several themes. These included space and facilities interrelated with outdoor and recreational activities, as discussed below.

Space Interrelated with Outdoor and Recreational Activities

Based on qualitative data, space refers to an area in a neighbourhood, especially for youth, to have leisure and recreational activities. These areas include a field, playground, multipurpose courts and green areas.

I can see that the area is crowded as space is inadequate of facilities for youth...

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 4)

...the facilities are not suitable for youths. This area is suited to community use where children can use it, adults can use it and even outsiders may use it. So this area is not for youth facilities as the futsal pitch can be used by everyone.

(Residents' Committee Member, Stakeholders FGD)

Both respondents highlighted that the space provided was small and inadequate, resulting in the marginalisation of the youth in this PPR as they could not use the facilities regularly for outdoor and physical activities because priority of use was given to younger children (Sanders & Munford, 2014).

Another respondent claimed that space was highly limited through barriers. Therefore, some of the youths needed to go beyond the boundaries of the PPR for physical and recreational activities.

Some spaces are restricted because most of the residents place their flower pots within the access pathway such as the pedestrian area, green area and even on the stairs.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 2)

According to these respondents, the insufficient space has changed the character of the youths, causing them to be inactive where once they used to be active. This situation even caused them to stay at home doing nothing or to go to shopping malls, thus missing out on physical activity and social interaction. This is an example of how youths end up organising their activities as a result of surrounding constraints (Richards et al., 2013).

“The soccer field, for example, it is too crowded because this area merges the use of residents from

three blocks, out of six blocks here. Therefore, if we are too late, this place is full of children aged between 7 and 12 years old. So, where can we have our leisure or outdoor activities?”

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 6)

...we often head to ‘Mid Valley Mega Mall because this is the closest area to home and it provides for social activities because it is large and there are lots of activities that can be done there.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 7)

Participants in the stakeholder group opined that youths should not be allocated a community space as they would create problems for the community. Youth representatives were not welcomed to participate in any of the residents’ committee meetings because it was believed that youths were not mature enough to give opinions.

This contradicts Crean’s (2012) finding that “youth must participate in decision-making related to policy making and direct service in order to promote adaptive individual decision-making skills.”

There are a lot of youth activities. We already provide a badminton court; however still they say their

needs are not met because they always demand facilities for other activities, such as roller blading, futsal, basketball and netball. But this is a never-ending story, right? They have too many activities.

(DBKL Town Planner, Stakeholders FGD)

I think if we seat the youth in the committee, we have to call more involved NGOs and stakeholders as well. It will be more difficult to make a decision as the number of members on the committee rises. We as the residents' committee will decide all the decisions for this neighbourhood....

(Chief of Residents' Committee, Stakeholders FGD)

To conclude, if space is not well planned, it poses a barrier on developing the character of youths and prevents them from developing necessary soft skills and social interaction in physical environment spaces. It is important to boost up positive character traits among youth because they are poised to become the future leaders of a country. Thus, physical environment (PE) influences the character of youths to a great degree in many aspects (Crean, 2012).

Moreover, it is better not to promote fundamental programmes but to take action to organise a physical development plan

to improvise artificial features for creating human interaction and positive relationship between neighbours and youth (Duncan et al., 2013).

Facilities Provision

The respondents also gave their opinion on how space affected the livelihood of youth in this high-density area. Youth and space need to be bonded; the facilities in a community are the instrument that link them together. The youth respondents felt that the facilities were not sufficient, and they were not satisfied with the availability of those facilities:

...space and facilities are not enough because the number of youth is large here. Plus, we cannot do any activity due to the high density of users. For example, no gym, no tennis, then this has impeded the youth interests and activities.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 1)

...as students, we think that these facilities are not sufficient. The facilities are minimal compared to the number of us. We may have free time on Sundays, but the facilities are unavailable at that time.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 3)

For recreational activities, there are inadequate facilities available for use by all parties, especially the youth. If you want to play takraw, others may want to play football or badminton. The availability of space cannot meet the requirements and serve everyone's desire.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 8)

The above quotations suggest that youths in this area have had bad experiences using the facilities because the number of facilities are inadequate and are not maintained properly. This problem causes them to not be active at outdoor activities during leisure time (Crean, 2012).

This result is clearly contradictory to that found by Danis et al. (2014), who stated that residents are denied the use of neighbourhood parks because of the insufficiency of facilities and space.

I know this place has limited space for outdoor activities, so I decided to do other simple outdoor activities such as walking and using the stairs instead of the elevator.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 9)

Rather than insufficient facilities, one of the respondents highlighted her opinion that female youths should be given priority to male youths. This female youth is married and a mother, but that does not prevent her

from wanting to enjoy leisure time indulging in outdoor activities like other youths.

According to Loon, Frank, Nettlefold and Naylor (2014), male youth often engage in physical activities because of fewer parental restrictions, while female youth only engage in the physical environment (PE) with their parents' permission.

...being women, we hope that they will provide us with a special room for activities such as aerobic exercise and 'poco-poco' dance. The hall can be provided.

(Youth FGD Respondent Number 1)

The Malaysia Youth Council members also expressed their desire to allocate the community hall as a venue for their activities for developing youth skills and character. They also asked the residents' committee for a seat on the community board.

According to Aminzadeh et al. (2013), a higher level of youth members in the community will buffer negative effects to the social condition. In other words, it is best for community members to guide and help youth to build character.

If it were possible, we beg that youth associations be given space in the community hall for them to organise training programmes for youth such as cooking, sewing etc. supported by the government...

(Malaysia Youth Council Secretary, Stakeholders FGD)

If there were an office, the youth could go there to plan and to organise, design activities, or convey dissatisfaction on any situation. That would be the right place to assemble them all.

(Malaysia Youth Council Committee Member, stakeholders FGD)

These quotations suggest that facilities play an important role in PE in building the character of youths actively and in a friendly manner among themselves.

CONCLUSION

It is optimal for youths to be involved in outdoors activities rather than to be closeted in their homes as a means of building character (Thompson, 2013). For this reason, it is necessary that open spaces be provided for youth as they allow for behaviour that is conducive for character building. As suggested by many studies, neighbourhood parks should be equipped with suitable physical facilities, including sport and exercise facilities (Danis et al., 2014) as these activities can help to nurture good character among youth. It is crucial that development of character among youth be triggered from young. Various factors may influence this character recognition in outdoor social interaction in open environments (Broberg et al., 2013).

To conclude, when it comes to planning and design, PE elements should be properly

allocated and connected to one another, as this area plays an important role in influencing youth to participate in outdoor activities. Therefore, the elements such as playground, multi-purpose court and a green compound must be connected to important linkages such as a green belt or jogging track.

Therefore, the provision of a safe and healthy PE is constant as supporting elements help youth to nurture important skills and shape positive characteristics in youths. We propose that certain PE might have a different impact on influencing the character of youth. Hence, space and facilities should always be taken into account in planning and designing living space for diverse communities.

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