UNIVERSALLY DESIGNED PUBLIC SPACES BY ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Public space, apart from public building is an important physical element in our built environment. Accessibility relates directly with the built environment and followed by accessible design that is often associated with providing to the needs of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). The current realm of our built environment claims to be accessible but only restricted to new buildings of public attractions and high-rise skyscrapers erected at urban developments. The unprecedented and left out public spaces in between these developments are the victims. These public spaces are the paths, the links, the connections, the nodes and the transitions of our built environment. This paper emphasizes the importance of enhancing the accessibility and connectivity aspect in order to create a universally designed public space to have the expectation of seamless journey. Lack of seamlessness in the access route concludes that those public spaces have not been taken into consideration while designing or planning adjacent developments. Accessibility may have been provided but restricted and is not designed for all which eventually is essential for everyone to participate in social and communal life. Significantly, noting accessibility as a crucial key factor in ensuring social inclusion and creating a balanced social sustainability.

Key words: Accessibility, public space, social inclusion and universally designed.

INTRODUCTION

Apart from public building, there are public spaces where they play an important role as a physical element in our built environment. These public spaces are the paths, the links, the connections, the nodes and the transitions of our built environment. Common public spaces would include local main streets, street markets, shopping malls, community centers, parks, playgrounds, and neighbourhood spaces in residential areas. These spaces actually play a vital role in the social life of inhabitants within the community. They act as a 'self-organizing public service', a shared resource in which experiences and value are created (Mean and Tims, 2005) and the social advantages gained from the spaces may not be obvious to outsiders or public policy-makers. The current realm of our built environment claims to be accessible but to a certain extend only and usually incorporated to new public attractions buildings and high-rise skyscrapers erected at urban developments. The unprecedented and left out robust public spaces that intertwined between these developments are the victims, making it the motivation and basis of this issue. The success of a particular public space is not solely in the hands of the architect, urban designer or town planner; it relies also on people adopting, using and managing the space, emphasizing the term; people make places rather than places make people.

A study done by Caroline Holland et.al (2007), have shown from several other studies, that a good-quality public realm can benefit local economies, encourage people to spend more time in shops and businesses, and raise house prices. Public spaces are regarded as democratic because everybody can use them: places that, rhetorically at least, allows 'community' to exist and flourish. Public space is 'our open-air living room, our outdoor leisure centre' (Lipton, 2002), important to the health and wellbeing of residents of all ages. Claiming social space and being seen in public becomes a way for social groups to legitimate their right to belong in society. Yet because they can be used by everyone, public spaces are frequently considered contested spaces; places where opposition, confrontation, resistance and subversion can be played out over 'the right to space' (Mitchell, 1995, 2003). These contestations may involve people from a range of social groups based on gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, social class and so on that was derived by (Valentine, G., 1996; Malone, 2002). The paper will further define the public space in relation to accessibility and mobility that emphasizes on social inclusion into the community as user of these public spaces.

THE PUBLIC SPACE

More coined by Caroline Holland et.al (2007), defining the similarities and differences in the usage of public spaces that allow people to meet on ostensibly neutral ground in planned and unplanned ways, to interact with others within the context of the whole community. These include family relationships of multi-generation family shopping expeditions, cultural youth groupings, and local social connections impromptu or otherwise a planned meeting with friends, neighbours and work colleagues besides groups meeting through a common interest. By facilitating this mixing, public spaces can contribute to the cohesion of communities. There has been a tendency to confine notions of public space to traditional outdoor spaces that are in public ownership, but opportunities for association and exchange are not so limited.

To members of the public, it is not the ownership of places or their appearance that makes them 'public', but their shared use for a diverse range of activities by a range of different people. If considered in this way, almost any place regardless of its ownership

or appearance offers potential as public space. Local streets outside city centers, residents and visitors expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range and type of local shops, businesses and other facilities provided, and enjoyed the opportunity to observe street life and meet friends. However, these advantages were offset by a series of negative features, in particular the dominance of road traffic in the design of the streets, the poor appearance and condition of the streets and adjoining facades, and the lack of greenery, seating and public toilets (Jones et al., 2007).

The essential of street can be seen from its appearance and function as a public open space where it creates major node for social arena such as relaxing, walking and chatting especially for heritage shared public spaces such as Jonker Walk in Melaka (Ja'afar N.H., et al., 2012), where public spaces play an important role here both as sites of connection and as places in their own right that serve an important role in the community that seek to create mixed neighborhoods of different age and social groups, and with a basic social infrastructure for the long term. The strategic management of public streets and spaces needs to be given greater priority, especially if neighborhoods' and shopping streets are to retain their distinctive character, which so often derives from the multiplicity of owners and long-term historical evolution.

This is where the public spaces in this context relate directly to accessible routes, seamless journey and connectivity in terms of creating accessibility. As derived by H. Filiz Alkan Meshur (2013), accessibility is clearly an important issue for PwDs in terms of their participation in social, scientific, professional and economic activities. From this perspective, accessibility should be regarded as one of the basic human rights. All physical and architectural obstacles in the environment should be removed and communication-enabling spaces should be designed to enable people with disabilities. They have the right to participate in all kinds of social, cultural and entertaining activities, and the right to demand those rights.

These differences between groups can lead to self-segregation in the use of particular spaces, those perceptions of differences and particular behaviours by different users can mean that spaces can be divisive as well as inclusive. The public visibility of different kinds of people is underpinned by their presence in public spaces, and people's understanding of their community is in part formed by who and what they see in the public domain. Many people use public spaces as opportunities for sanctioned people watching. Visitors and residents from different parts of the town, including people from different ethnic and socioeconomic groups and people of different ages and abilities, can be in the same place at the same time, allowing people to assess and reassess the characteristics of space and their own relationship with it.

ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Accessibility relates directly with the built environment and followed by accessible design that is often associated with providing to the needs of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). Accessibility is based on the shared values of respect for civil rights, which in the broadest sense includes the ability of all to enjoy the physical space with equal opportunities, in respect of diversity (I. Garofolo et al., 2014). In this context, accessibility defined as "an attitude of places, goods and services to be identifiable, approachable, understandable and usable independently, in terms of comfort and safety, by everyone" cannot be ignored any longer as a key issue to achieve high levels of quality of the built environment that meet the needs of the population. Generally, accessibility expresses the ability of an environment to ensure every person an independent life regardless of age, gender, cultural background and physical, sensory and cognitive functionality.

Accessibility defined by I. Garofolo et al. (2014), must be understood as a "process" and not as a "product", it should be noted that assessing accessibility of places, goods and services, cannot be defined in absolute terms, but as "synthesis of the levels of user satisfaction" related to the different considered users groups. Thereby, it should be recognized that every planning process that affects the living environment has a multidimensional and cross-sectoral nature and it must start from the analysis of needs and human aspirations of the greatest number of individuals, and must involve with an active and conscious role of all the stakeholders since the beginning. Enhancing accessibility would be by applying the concept of Universal Design, a concept that was introduced by Ronald Mace and supported by Harisson and Dalton (2013), stating that Universal Design, having moved on from 'barrier-free' design, embraces more diverse needs than just providing for Persons with disabilities and recognizes that in everyone's life course various forms of disability will be experienced, with differing degrees of seriousness. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages of adopting universal design principles is that they are inclusive of everyone, and not just providing for 'special needs' users or thinking merely of a 'barrier-free' environment. The Principles of Universal Design do not specifically address the removal of hazards, which should be a *sine qua non* for any design, but in designing for less-abled people this is so vital. Models of person-environment interaction have shifted in recent years, across disciplines, and can be best described as transactional, where the person is seen as being "embedded" in their total environment, and in a state of constant interaction.

At areas where they are physically accessible, other aspects of public spaces can present barriers to their use by some people. In addition to regulations, these include location, and the provision or lack of facilities. The siting and location of street furniture having a marked effect on how it was used by locals. Benches positioned with good viewpoints and 'something to look at' were heavily used by all kinds of people. Those located less conveniently, for example in a windy or less attractive position, were often ignored in favour of improvised seating on walls. The design of seating (for example whether multiple or single seated) had an effect on who used it and design needs to accommodate people's physical requirements. The unprecedented and left out public spaces in between these developments are the victims. From the tourism perspective for Malaysian heritage sites, the effort of providing accessibility for at our traditional street and town will potentially generate high income to the country as most travellers and tourists are elderly and diverse. Stated by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015) proves that the contribution of 'Travel and Tourism' in Malaysia has contributed towards the long term growth for Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015. Further elaboration by Asiah A. Rahim, et al. (2014), a sustainable design for accessibility should be

considered in all of our physical development in order to make our cities world class. Accessibility in the built environment is increasingly relevant to Malaysia, not only to prepare for the ageing population, PwDs but also the whole population at large.

DISCUSSION

Enhancing the accessibility aspect creates a universally designed public space for an unobstructed journey for diverse users and diverse family demography in the community. Considerations should be looked into while designing or planning developments of public use with elements of "designing with inclusion" to include all age groups and social groups, drawing people on public consultation and involvement; the key features of a successful shared social inclusive public space as suggested by Mean and Tims (2005), following these 'rules of engagement" and the deliberation of public space elements that has been derived by Caroline Holland et.al (2007) are broken down as follows:

(i)   **Public places as part of everyday life** by supporting exchange-based relationships, accessibility and availability; public spaces are places for the mundane, the expected and the banal. This important function should not be overlooked, especially in the rush to develop innovative, dynamic looking places that can often come at a cost to the local memories of particular places or memory. Yet this 'everyday' quality can mean that small, cost-effective improvements can be made to enhance public spaces simply by breaking up the monotony aspect by providing entertainment include street musicians and 'attractions' such as market stalls or something 'different' to look at with good physical access, welcoming spaces and appropriate operating hours for trading businesses in exchanging of goods and services.

(ii)   **Public spaces as places to promote tolerance and diversity by moving beyond mono-culturism;** Encouraging diverse groups and activities to share common spaces; and each social group carved out its own particular spot within the park but just because different social groups co-exist in the same space does not mean that social cohesion has been achieved. Nonetheless, to be able to see different types of social groups, may go some way to enabling everyone, children in particular, to observe differences, and thereby perhaps, promote tolerance for social diversity.

(iii)   **The provision, discreet good management of public space and avoid over-regulation of design**; the acknowledged and benefits they can bring to supporting communities and promoting social cohesion. It appears that it is not just the physical environment that encourages or discourages people to come out in public, but also the opportunity to see something different by choreographing spaces while also leaving room for self-organization, together with appropriate facilities of thoughtful positioning of benches and covered seating areas and access to toilets, may be a much more inexpensive way of creating good public spaces than large-scale redevelopment projects, as security and well-being are more likely to grow out of active use as people are drawn to, and tend to stay longer in, public spaces that offer interest and stimulation or a degree of comfort.

(iv)   **Public spaces as places to maintain a public presence by invites peers and others;** cultivating public space that serves as a democratizing function where being in public provides opportunities for all individuals and groups to be seen by embedding in social networks to encourage use of the public space;

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Enhanced by Dines and Cattell et al. (2006), which they emphasize on '*people make places: the 'co-production' of public space'* where in contrast to the idea that public space can be solely defined in spatial terms, as a particular set of configurations of urban design and construction that public space is 'co-produced'. That is to say, it only comes into being when it is activated by the presence of people according to dynamic and changing patterns and timetables. To conclude, a public space should give a sense of welcoming and inviting to the general public, and this include by breaking the physical environment barriers that in subtle gesture of pushing people away or denying access for PwDs. Some of these recommendation of characters and elements can interweave with each other as it gives more or less the same point of view on inclusivity and accessibility for the public in the effort of making public space accessible for all a success.

These are the main key elements that are identified for further development of our future public space policy in enhancing social inclusion for public space in Malaysia:

- **At new public spaces** – Considering a wider range of strategies for local public or quasi-public spaces where people create opportunities for social and economic exchange and these new social hubs includes non-traditional public spaces, for examples street markets, or street hawkers' area and community centers.
- **People-based Regeneration Strategies and Schemes / Proposal** - Future regeneration schemes and proposals for public space should be based on a better understanding of people's use of existing spaces and places, particularly street markets and traditional high streets. Local authorities can imply a starting point for developing strategies for public spaces that bring the economic, social and cultural aspects of daily life together by enhancing local attachments to existing spaces to relate back to the local communities in the longer term.
- **Universally Designed** – There are instances where the gap between the intentions of the Architect / Designer and the social outcome of a design can become far too wide. Attempts to recreate beautiful or artistic public spaces to suit certain demographics of the population without considering the more diverse range of users and do little to address the social needs of inhabitants, eventually may cause more problems than they thought have been solved. Similarly, an over- emphasis public space just to look good but fail to provide adequate attractions, amenities, or connections to existing economic and social networks, may lead to the creation of sterile places that people do not use.
- **Playful, Useful and Aesthetically Practical Spaces** - Many children and young people enjoy less local mobility today, and may know little about attractions and features outside their own neighbourhood context. Encouraging

people to extend their knowledge and familiarity with their locality through facilitating creative activities in public spaces and developing pedestrian-friendly urban routes could create a wider sense of attachment and discovery. Children still need opportunities for outdoor play in neighbourhood spaces with not just fixed equipment playgrounds in order to participate in communal games, which in turn create a sense of belonging and attachment to local places.

- **Multi-Disciplinary Management, Self-Regulation and Respect** - The variety of agencies whose activities affect public spaces poses particular challenges for their management. There are lessons to be learnt from the multi-disciplinary approaches pioneered by the local authorities / local council. Better coordination is needed to address the multiple concerns of achieving design, effective management, maintenance and social cohesion and inclusion. Evidence suggests that successful public spaces should build on the large degree of self-regulation of public behaviour that already exists. Approaches that actively encourage local distinctiveness and public amenity and facilitate social activity in public spaces, as opposed to stripping public spaces of all features vulnerable to vandalism or misuse, are more likely to result in cleaner, safer, greener public spaces.

In pointing out on accessibility, Maidin, A. J. (2012) has emphasize in accordance to Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, that it is made to recognized the existing and potential contributions made by persons with disabilities (PwDs) to the overall wellbeing and diversity of the community and society: the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, in enabling persons with disabilities to fully and effectively participate in society: and that persons with disabilities are entitled to equal opportunity in all circumstances and subject only to such limitations, restrictions and the protection of rights as provided by the Federal Constitution of Malaysia 2 Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution 1957 declares equal rights for all citizens:

> *"...there shall be no discrimination against citizens on grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law; or in the appointment of any office of employment under a public authority; or in the administration of any law relating to the requisition, holding or disposition of property; or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment."*

This gives a more legal platform for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) to be given equal opportunity to lead a normal life and access the public spaces as to be inclusive in social activities in order to help them succeed an independent life. The barriers in the physical and built environment at our public spaces require immediate attention. Accessibility is about giving equal access to everyone and public spaces can be accessible with the consideration of Universal Design application at planning and designing stage. Coined by Asiah Abdul Rahim et al. (2015) to identify whether the facilities provided match the needs of the people with disabilities, the minimum design requirements can be determined by Malaysian Standards, MS 1184:2014; Universal Design and Accessibility in the Built Environment-Code of Practice that fits and matches the facilities provided for various types of People with Disabilities (PwDs). Therefore, the government including private sectors are to facilitate their infrastructure with good facilities for PwDs, in all buildings typologies including public spaces for recreational purposes and tourist spots for a more diverse public to use such as wheelchair users, vision impaired, hearing impaired, elderly and children with disabilities.

These can be in line with our existing policies on Public Open Space Policy by Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa (JPBD), where it clearly states that The 2nd National Physical Plan or NPP-2 has the Theme 5 that outlined Human Settlement Management and its Policy 20 of the NPP-2 highlighted that planning standards and guidelines for urban development shall be designed to meet the needs of a developed country. Malaysia has also shown the commitment to promote and protect the rights of People with Disabilities (PwDs) and this is manifested by enacting new laws, formulating new policies and taking appropriate measures to comply with international law and resolve preliminary issues surrounding the ratification of the treaty into the domestic legal framework (Tah and Mokhtar, 2016). Coined again by Asiah Abdul Rahim (2017) on the commitment has been a responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) which is committed towards providing good facilities, despite accessibility and social attraction in society, review various approaches and strategies to fulfill the intention of Malaysian Plan of Action for People with Disabilities 2016-2022 that is in line with Government Persons with Disability (PwDs) Policy and the 11th Malaysian Plan (RMK11).

Further on, The Planning Standards and Guidelines for Open Space and Recreational Area (JBPD 7/2000) is a guideline formulated by the Federal Government to ensure that public open space is available for all types of development and Planning Guidelines for Universal Design under KPKT. It became a legal clause to the approval of planning permission and since land matter is under the State Government exclusively, the provision of public open space can only be implemented by the Local Authority as an adopted guideline by the State Government to adapt and apply whichever the State feels the best as it is not statutory and can be altered following the circumstances (http://blog.townplan.gov.my) and this can go hand in hand with Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974 Uniform Building (Amendments) By-Laws (UBBL) 1991, By-law 34A that states providing access to enable disabled persons to get into, out of and within the building and be designed with compliance to MS1184 as previous mentioned in the paper.

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