



## Exploring the urban park use, preference and behaviours among the residents of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



Maruthaveeran Sreetheran

Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), 43400 Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Cultural diversity  
Environmental behaviour  
Park safety  
Public attitudes  
Urban recreation

### ABSTRACT

The understanding of cross-cultural upon park usage is vital to be enhanced among public since findings that been discovered in the Western context are not own any similarities with the Asian context. In fact, it has been in a long run for the Western nations to primarily contextualized and conceptualized much on the literature of park usage. This study aims to look at how the people use and perceive urban parks in their daily life in the Malaysian cultural context, and also highlights the constraints faced by Malaysians while using the urban parks in the city of Kuala Lumpur. A survey consisted of 669 urban park users as the sample of the study (365 men, 304 females) aged between 18 and 73 years ( $M = 34.85$ ,  $SD = 11.46$ ) were conducted in five urban parks in Kuala Lumpur. Respondents were recruited based on a random sampling method, which composed of three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Malaysians wanted to use the urban parks for multiple purposes including active activities and others. Most of them would visit the parks and spend their time in a group consisting of family members or friends rather than alone. The percentage of respondent with 74.7% stated their reason of visiting the urban park in order “to get fresh air”, followed by the factor of reducing stress and relaxing with 69.7%; and the latter reason would be “to exercise, play games or keep in shape” with 61.4%. More than 80% of the respondents claimed the parks in Kuala Lumpur are safe to be visited. This is because, majority of the respondents tend to visit the parks in group of family or friends rather than alone. In addition, most of the respondents would run their activities in parks during the weekends, which simultaneously make them to enjoy their day in such comfortable and secure way. The findings of this survey would contribute to a better understanding of the present park usage of Kuala Lumpur residents. With a better understanding of current park-visiting habits, various constraints faced by the residents related to public security and safety, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall have been suggested to develop more comprehensive strategy in order to provide engagement and urban parks stimulation for its residents. In addition, this study is also fruitful for Kuala Lumpur future parks in terms of its development, design and management.

### 1. Introduction

In today's urbanised society, development of urban green spaces has become an integral entity in any urban city planning. This is important because more than half of the world's population (7 billion) live in urban areas and by 2050, 66% of the world's population is projected to be urban (United Nations, 2014). Urban green spaces generally improve the environmental conditions of cities by regulating temperature, sequestering atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, reducing noise, air pollution, and surface runoff (Hamada and Ohta, 2010; Hutrya et al., 2011; Escobedo et al., 2011; Gabriel and Endlicher, 2011; Armson et al., 2013). Urban green spaces also provide home for a range of animals and plant species (Nielsen et al., 2014). Also many are willing to pay significantly more to live near green spaces (Martin et al., 2004), though studies have indicated the association of increased property values with parks

(Crompton, 2001; Troy and Grove, 2008; Voicu and Been, 2008). This is because urban green spaces provide opportunities for urbanites to reconnect with green elements through physical recreation (Ewing, 2005; Arnberger, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006; Wilhelm-Stanis et al., 2010) which benefit them in terms of health and well-being (Hartig et al., 2003; Chiesura, 2004). Exposure to nature is also found to increase connectedness to nature, attention capacity, positive emotions, and the ability to reflect on life problems (Mayer et al., 2009). Studies have also indicated that green spaces enhance the social cohesion of the public through social interrelations (Reeves, 2000; Peters, 2010; Peters and Buijs, 2010; Kázmierczak, 2013) and social contacts (Kuo et al., 1998).

Despite the fact that a majority of the world's urban population is found within developing countries, there is a lack of studies regarding the use and perception of green spaces in such rapidly developing countries (Willemse, 2010). This is important because cities that are

E-mail addresses: [sreetheran@upm.edu.my](mailto:sreetheran@upm.edu.my), [msreetheran@yahoo.com](mailto:msreetheran@yahoo.com).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2017.05.003>

Received 9 August 2016; Received in revised form 3 May 2017; Accepted 4 May 2017  
Available online 10 May 2017

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undergoing rapid urbanisation often degrade these green spaces for other land uses. Therefore, proper studies need to be conducted in order to justify the importance of these urban green spaces for urbanites. Furthermore, a majority of studies that were conducted had specifically examined park usage in either a North American or European context (Coles and Bussey, 2000; Oguz, 2000; Payne et al., 2002; Tinsley et al., 2002; Janowsky and Becker, 2003; Chiesura, 2004; Balram and Dragicevic, 2005; Sanesi and Chiarello, 2006; Arneberger, 2006; Maas et al., 2009; Tyrväinen et al., 2007; Arnberger and Eder, 2011; Jorgensen and Anthopoulos, 2007; Kaczynski et al., 2009; Schipperijn et al., 2010a,b; Özgüner 2011; Adinolfia et al., 2014). Many studies were also conducted in the US and Western Europe on how ethnic minorities (e.g. Africans, Asians, Hispanics, Latinos, Turkish etc.) use urban parks for outdoor recreation as compared to the mainstream white population (Burgess et al., 1988; Wooley and Amin, 1995, 1999; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001, 2004; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Comber et al., 2008; Seeland et al., 2009; Buijs et al., 2009; Jay and Schraml, 2009; Peters, 2010; Byrne, 2012; Jay and Schraml, 2014). However, very limited studies have investigated park usage, particularly in an Asian context, except for a few developed countries such as Hong Kong (Wong and Domroes, 2004; Hung and Crompton, 2006; Wong, 2009; Lo and Jim, 2010), Japan (Yokohari et al., 2006), Singapore (Yuen, 1996), and South Korea (Lee and Kim, 2015). Others are mainly from mainland China (Jim and Chen, 2006; Shan, 2014a,b) and one from Pakistan (Qureshi et al., 2013). This is important because the ethnicity thesis postulates that differences in outdoor recreation are culturally driven and shaped by the specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the members of ethnic groups (Shinew et al., 2006). Furthermore, cross-cultural understanding on park usage is important because findings published in the Western context may not have any similarities to the Asian context which is very diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion. In fact, for many years, it has been the Western nations that have primarily contextualised and conceptualised much of the literature on park usage in general.

Previous studies suggest that ethnic differences in leisure time activities vary, considering the type of activity undertaken (Deepak, 2007). There are evidences which show people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds use green spaces in different ways (see Gentin, 2011). Ethnicity is a significant factor with regards to park usage and each place may be interpreted in a different manner by diverse ethnic minority groups (Rishbeth, 2001). Cultural influences also play important roles in creating attitudes towards landscapes (Rohde and Kendle, 1994). Consequently, we need to understand how different cultural groups use landscapes or urban parks. This is particularly important in a nation like Malaysia, which has a multi-ethnic community using green spaces together. By understanding how different groups of people use urban parks, this will direct the design and management strategies of urban green spaces (Johnston and Shimada, 2003). However, there is a lack of such studies in Malaysia, particularly on urban parks. Existing studies on urban parks in Malaysia mainly focus on landscape preferences (Pazhouhanfara and Mustafa Kamal, 2013) and safety or fear of crime issues in urban parks (Sreetheran, 2010; Sreetheran and Van den Bosch, 2015). With this, this study aims to look at how people use and perceive urban parks in their daily life through the Malaysian cultural context. This study also highlights the constraints faced by the Malaysians from using urban parks located in Kuala Lumpur city. This study fills a gap in the existing knowledge on park usage in a rapidly developing metropolitan city, Kuala Lumpur.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study site

This study was conducted in five selected urban parks in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Fig. 1). Kuala Lumpur is located about 3°08'N and

101°44'E. Kuala Lumpur, which is the capital city, covering an area of 243 km<sup>2</sup>. Kuala Lumpur is warm all year with temperatures ranging from 21 °C to 35 °C. It rains year-round, but it is heaviest and most frequent during the Northeast Monsoon, which runs from November to February. Total annual rainfall is high, averaging at 2370 mm. Based on sources from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010), the population for Kuala Lumpur in 2010 was 1.6 million people, which consisted of three main races: Malay, Chinese, and Indians. The city of Kuala Lumpur is also considered among the most densely populated states with 6,891 persons/km<sup>2</sup>.

For this study, only five major parks in the city of Kuala Lumpur were selected. The rest were smaller parks, such as neighbourhood, pocket parks, and playgrounds. These smaller parks are generally situated in every housing areas and homogeneously distributed in Kuala Lumpur. A brief description of each of these urban parks is presented in Table 1.

### 2.2. On-site survey

A survey was administered in a space of five months, from October 2012 – March 2013 with the assistance of six enumerators. The on-site survey was conducted using an interviewer-completed questionnaire survey (see Annex 1). When park users agreed to take part in the survey, the author/enumerator began by explaining in brief about the aim of study, procedure of interview, content of the questionnaire, and time taken for the interview. The survey was conducted in four languages, namely Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, and English to cater for the cultural diversity in Malaysia. Relying on the use of a single language in some research settings can result in the exclusion of significant groups of respondents (Matthews and Ross, 2010). This is essential, particularly in this study which involved the opinions of three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. The respondents' involvement was voluntary and they were not offered any type of incentive or reward for participating in the study. The park users at each park were surveyed on-site on both weekdays and weekends, in the morning (7:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.), afternoon (12:00 p.m. to 3.00 pm), and evening (3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.) in order to achieve a fully representative sample of park users. The respondents were asked about the use pattern and motives for visiting urban parks in Kuala Lumpur. In addition to that, the respondents were also probed on the fear towards crime in parks.

Concurrently, a semi-structured face-to-face interview among those who were willing to be interviewed further was also conducted either inside or outside the park areas of Kuala Lumpur. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 mins and was recorded using digital audio-recording devices. The questions were designed to explore how respondents use the urban parks in Kuala Lumpur. This was followed by questions on the constraints which hinder them from using parks in Kuala Lumpur (Table 2).

## 3. Results and discussion

The study discovered some similarities and differences in the Malaysians' attitudes towards urban park usage as compared to other cultures. To the author's knowledge, this study is the first to examine peoples' attitudes, particularly the residents of Kuala Lumpur towards urban parks as representatives of a large sample which consists of three main ethnic groups.

### 3.1. Demographic characteristics

The gender balance of respondents in this survey was fairly even, with 55% men and 45% women. The respondents consisted of 669 urban park users (365 men, 304 females) aged between 18 and 73 years ( $M = 34.85$ ,  $SD = 11.46$ ) (Table 3). Respondents were selected based on a random sampling method which composed of three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. The majority of respondents were Malays ( $n = 376$ ;

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