



# Public preferences toward shopping mall interior landscape design in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia



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## ABSTRACT

The number of malls in Malaysia has not only increased dramatically, but they have also been subject to continual expansion over the past few years. Despite this rate of expansion, there has not been enough attention paid to the quality of the spaces and interior landscaping of the malls on the basis of people's preferences. This study aimed to bring out people's preferences towards interior public spaces at shopping malls. Using a photo questionnaire, the results pointed to three major dimensions: the green dimension, the seating dimension, and the business dimension in open spaces of shopping malls where the green dimension received the highest preference. The green dimension includes water features, trees, plants, and shrubs. Moreover, legibility and coherence affected people's preferences for open spaces in shopping malls. People did not prefer the business dimension to spending leisure times, involving business equipment in shopping malls. The study suggested that shopping malls should be designed as truly public spaces with ample public areas. Green elements and water features should be used more in shopping mall public places. Moreover, policy makers can expand the "shopping town" approach for people's leisure in malls that should include characteristics such as rivers or waterfalls with a dynamic water flow, famous places, public libraries, gardens, town activities, and cultural activities.

## 1. Introduction

Social science researchers have paid significant attention to exploring public opinion toward various aspects of urban residential areas, a case in point being urban public landscape areas. Public landscape areas are divided into: urban parks, streetscape, green belts, gardens, forest parks, and recreation areas. Shopping malls can be viewed as public spaces, needing scientific and appropriate insight to landscaping of their open spaces (Lekagul, 2002). In this spirit, it seems that the participation of public visitors is essential to better landscaping design for shopping mall centres.

The number of shopping malls in Malaysia has been on the increase at an average annual rate of 7.0% (Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative Development and International Data Corporation, a.c.f. Ninth Malaysian Plan, 2006–2010). Even with this high expansion rate, there is not much available research regarding people's preferences toward the quality and interior landscaping of the malls in Malaysia. What is noticeable in the current situation is that the majority of the malls do not consider people's preferences in their premises. Spaces such as the

atria, corridors, lobbies, and walkways have been utilized for business establishments which may prevent people from staying longer. It is necessary that people's preferences toward the interior landscape of shopping malls be carefully studied. These pieces of information may have an impact on assisting the designer in creating an indoor functional space providing suitable amenities and a comfortable environment for the visitors. This study attempts to provide valuable and original information from patrons in order to design better shopping malls in the future. Thus, this article aims to identify people's preferences towards interior public spaces landscaping at shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

## 2. Literature review

In this part, previous research on people's preferences toward shopping malls interior landscape is reviewed. In this regard, preferences for open spaces in business environments and shopping malls are discussed accordingly.

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## 2.1. Preferences for open spaces in business environments

Wolf (2003) employed a psychometric and econometric survey to evaluate the consumers' responses to streetscape setting in the inner-city business districts in Athens, Georgia, United States. The researcher found that the business district with trees was preferred by the visitors. The customers stated their willingness to pay more for their parking fees and higher product prices, travel farther distances, visit more frequently and pay longer visits to business environments, which had more trees as compared to the ones without trees. Wolf (2003) also found that the business environments with trees have a high visual quality, offering extra comfort. A no-tree scenario was constantly rated as the lowest on each of the perceptual scales and expressed as barren, dull and stark, as compared to the business environments with trees evaluated as inviting, relaxing, and well-maintained.

Wolf (2004) used the content identifying method (CIM) by using 20 photos on-site at the Athens Business District, Georgia, USA, which yielded three categories, all of them content-based. This finding shows that the most preferred category contained scenes of trees and the least preferred category were the scenes without trees, which are largely dominated by buildings. Wolf (2004) also revealed that scenes with large trees and full tree canopies were preferred by the respondents in the study. Therefore, the two studies by Wolf (2003, 2004) point to the importance of trees in a shopping environment.

Lekagul (2002) conducted a study on the preferences of customers in Bangkok, Thailand, in conserving and designing market places. He found that the most preferred scene by the participants involved a modern shopping environment rather than the traditional markets. According to him, the customers still preferred a shopping environment with more plants. On the other hand, he explained that business stalls, especially those selling clothes and food courts, with narrow walkways, poorly maintained and enclosed spaces, were the least preferred characteristic in the interior modern shopping environment. Lekagul (2002) also revealed that the spacious and well-organised shopping environment with special physical content (such as seating area and vegetation) were highly preferred. This study also confirmed that people reacted differently based on the information and affordable quality the shopping environment offered.

## 2.2. Preferences for interior open spaces in shopping malls

Apart from these, modern malls also have atrium and other types of interior public spaces. According to Armstrong (1995), atrium allows the growth of plant species and the best atrium should include the exotic garden, which has palm trees and other tropical vegetation, water fountain and colourful flowers. In addition, Hamdan and Tajuddin (2000) argued that in conventional atria, interior gardens and landscape pattern play an important role in offering water elements and plants on the floor level that add extra comfort for mall users. In the case of lobbies, Armstrong (1995) points to lobbies as places where people could meet each other; for these reasons, they tend to identify prominent landmarks such as the water fountain to enable them to find each other easily. Armstrong (1995) argued that the design of many lobbies has neglected people's needs in terms of having no place to sit. Consequently, the author suggested that lobbies be provided with seating places, not only adequately but also in various arrangements. In addition, seating is a part of the landscape furniture, and according to Hill (1995), people need certain landscape furniture in every place they use.

According to Carpenter et al. (1975), many successful malls have interior landscape elements (especially flowering plants), which are often manipulated and replaced to attract more clients to come to the malls. This discloses that the presence of interior landscape in shopping malls is used for many purposes, such as providing a comfortable place for people to meet, pulling more people to the mall, and encouraging them to spend more money and longer time. According to Gruen

(1973), "the trader will always be most successful where his activity is integrated with of the broadest human experiences and urban features". This approach is known as "shopping towns" approach, which is different from the "machines for selling" approach (Gruen, 1973: 22). The machines for selling approach only encourages people to buy, as can be seen in the current situation in most shopping malls in Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, which seem to operate without considering the needs and preferences of the general public as their customers.

Previous research in commercial environment has also established that people react positively to and prefer a commercial environment which provides seating places, plants, and water features. Moreover, some major interior landscape elements which are considered as important by the previous researchers to be incorporated in indoor landscaping include plants (as revealed by Coleman 2006), colourful flowers (Armstrong 1995), water features (Hamdan and Tajuddin 2000), seating places (Armstrong 1995), sculpture or other artworks (Coleman 2006) and public clocks (Coleman, 2006). More accurately, Armstrong (1995) revealed that interior public spaces, such as the atrium, should consist of exotic gardens as well. Hamdan and Tajuddin (2000) proposed that these public spaces should have interior gardens and landscaping.

Here, we provided a brief literature review of the logic behind people's preferences for open spaces in order to get a better grasp of the overall picture in relation to these preferences. In many studies of landscaping preferences, the Information Processing and Affordance Theory is the key to understanding the way people perceive the environment. The findings from previous research has told us that people are prone to reveal certain responses rather than others and they may give positive responses towards some elements in public spaces such as shopping malls. Thus, in line with the objectives of this study, to collect empirical data on people's preferences and help designers in creating user-friendly spaces, which can be achieved building mainly on the information and affordable quality of the environment, gathering relevant information on such preferences takes on special importance.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Questionnaire design

In this study, the photo questionnaire was used as a part of the survey questionnaire because it has been acknowledged as an efficient method to obtain participants' preferences. Many researchers such as Kaplan (2007) and Wolf (2004) employed the content identifying method (CIM) to understand people's preferences and judgments as a useful procedure to reduce the data and make interpretation all the easier. Different people might see or categorize the environment differently; the patterns of the people's preferences could still be extracted using the CIM procedure (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1997). Most studies in landscape preferences employed the CIM, making use of the factor reduction technique to group the scenes based on their similarity in response. Photo questionnaire is a valid approach to represent the actual environment (Gandy and Meitner, 2007). Three procedures are involved in the scene preparation procedure as suggested by Suhardi (2006), Lekagul (2002) and Kaplan (1979). These are considered below.

### 3.2. Scene collection procedure

In keeping with one of the objectives of the study, i.e. to identify people's preferences for public spaces at shopping malls, it is necessary for the photos used to cover various kinds of interior landscapes found at the public spaces. Although the participants were chosen from those residing in Kuala Lumpur, not all of the sample photos were taken from the areas in Kuala Lumpur, because most shopping malls do not use these interior public spaces in a variety of ways. Due to this limitation, some of the photos were taken from areas inside and outside of Kuala

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