

# **Obstacles of Public Participation in the Design Process of Public Parks**

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## *ABSTRACT*

*Designer's job is no longer to produce unalterable solutions; the fact that there is a need to consult the end users in the design process has been discussed in various literatures. Previous works on public participation have given the depiction of very low public participation. This study is about establishing the obstacles of public participation in the design process of public parks as perceived by landscape architects. Six main factors that are detrimental to public participation were extracted and assessed by representatives from landscape consulting. Data was descriptively analyzed and the results have shed some light regarding the main obstacles.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out with the aim of exploring and establishing the key factors behind the apparent lack of public participation in the design process public parks as perceived by landscape architects. In the quest of achieving sustainability, the Malaysian Government recognizes that public participation is an integral part of sustainable development and good governance. Through various efforts from government agencies, public participation becomes an important element in governmental decision-making and planning processes. Public participation is not just an alternative for better planning, but is a requirement as stated in the planning law (Omar & Leh, 2009, p.30). Furthermore, the authors also added that the public has the right to know and participate in making decisions, particularly those which potentially affect the communities in which they live and work. In the quest of achieving sustainability, the act of citizen participation has been observed as one of the way forward in achieving this aim. As described by Loures & Crawford (2008, p.797), public participation begins laying the base for sustainable practices in planning and management of the physical environment. In creating sustainable communities it involves local citizens and allows citizens to analyze their own problems and fashion their own solutions plus supports community initiatives which allow them to be the instruments of their own change. Dola & Mijan (2006, p.5) emphasized that a process which facilitates sustainable development must provide equal opportunity for participation from all levels. The effects of the planning process on people's self-esteem, values, behavior, capacity for growth and cooperative skills are often considered more important than the merely instrumental consequences of a plan. Thus, people must be drawn in the decision-making, resolving conflict and planning for their future. This is in line with the statement reflected in Agenda 21 in which it calls for national sustainable development strategies to be prepared with the widest possible participation (Bass, et al. 1995. p.iv). Despite various findings regarding the positive consequences of public participation, a study by Dola & Mijan (2006) has signified that previous reports as well as works on public participation, have given the portrayal of very low public participation. It is therefore, the aim of this study to explore the obstacles which leads to the lack of public participation in the design process of public parks as perceived by landscape architects.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Although the consent for public participation has been recognized through legislation and vastly promoted through various government programs and proposal, several key obstacles that have been identified in various literatures. The obstacles that have been extracted through critical literature review can be classed into several main categories as some of them have similar themes and arguments. One of the most prevailing obstacles to participatory design is representativeness; the issue highlighted by Dietz & Stern (2008, p.192) is regarding the difficulties of finding out who may be affected by an environment decision. The authors argued that, it is important to identify who participates and who will be affected by the decisions made particularly by the professionals. Although the public is engaged in participatory design process, it may not be a representation of the “public” itself. (Dola & Mijan, 2006). They also argued that although public participation can be carried out through several strategies such as Focus Group Discussion (FGD) which involves the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political groups, local representatives, village work committees (JKKK), professional groups, developers and business organizations. Despite that, the questions still arise whether or not these groups are considered enough to represent the whole community. A study by Yao (2006) which found that although a mechanism for public participation has been established; in practice the public may not be adequately represented. A study by Eccleston (2000) found out that member of the public who attend public meetings tend to be more educated and technically sophisticated than the general public and usually have a vested interest in the outcome. It is therefore, suitable to state that one of the main obstacles to public participation in the design process is the question of representativeness.

Other literature also suggests that the timing of participation is also a crucial factor contributing to the barrier of participatory design. Yao (2006, p.18) has revealed that participants are not usually involved in the critical stages of planning, design and assessment. Following this, Doelle & Sinclair (2006) also noted that this lack of meaningfully timed participation discourages participation and actually encourages conflict (p.189). Apart from that, it has also been found that the process of public participation in the decision making process tends to be long and winding and associated with hearing in order to include the opinion of the public as well as costly,

time consuming and generally inefficient (Doelle & Sinclair, 2006; Dola & Mijan (2006)). These statements furthermore emphasize the fact that timing of participation is also one the significant obstacles of participatory design.

The question regarding the capacity of the public to be involved in the design process has been widely argued through various literatures. Christensen & Bower (1996) argues that users do not have sufficient technical knowledge. This statement is supported by Yao (2006, p.19), the author stated that the content of design and planning process often contains significant scientific, technical and legal information that can be difficult for the average citizen to understand. Dola & Mijan (2006) have also found similarities in the context of the Malaysian scene; they stated that a majority of the public may have limited awareness and knowledge on their rights in design and planning. This could provide three implications: first, the public is always satisfied and believed in the proposal; second, the public do not feel that participation is necessary and third, they do not understand the plan and do not know their rights (p.5). Dietz & Stern (2008) also indicated that the public is ill-equipped to deal with the complex nature of analyses that are needed for good environmental assessments and decisions. The unawareness of the public is furthermore worsened by the public's lack of interest in participative programs, the root problem as stated by Dola & Mijan (2006, p.6) could be cultural as Malaysians are also popular with their 'nevermind' attitude unless their backyards are at stake. While this mind your own backyard (MYOB) attitude is universal, lack of education and interest in government's program further dampens participation. Hence, it is stressed in various literatures that participation programs may fail to function effectively if people were not equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge. Therefore, the capacity of the public is considered to be one of the obstacles to participatory design as the public itself plays a major role in the process of participatory design.

Although agencies have acknowledged and expressed the need for an inclusive, two-way and continuous approach, the reality of the day to day practice is a far cry from these goals. The public participation process is criticized by Charnley & Engelbert (2005, p.170), arguing that it increases rather than decreases conflict between agencies and the public and creates disproportionate influence for public interest groups. Relating to the issue of communication, Cash et. al. (2003, p.1) highlights that the prevalence

of different norms and expectations in different communities. The study points out that difference in norms and judgments point out the difficulty of effective communication across the community, policy makers and the public. Magnusson (2003, p.229) also argued that public participation might not provide any positive effects that justify the extra cost and this statement are also emphasized by Dietz & Stern (2008, p.3) where the costs from involving the public in the design and planning process are not justified by the benefits. Therefore, the cost incurred by involving the public can be seen as one of the major obstacles of involving the public in the design process of public parks.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. As a mean of collection data for the research, two data collection instruments will be utilized in this research. The data collection instruments chosen to conduct this research are through questionnaire surveys and interviews. The series of interviews were conducted with several well-established registered landscape architects under Institute of Landscape Architects Malaysia (ILAM), they consist of practitioners from private firms who have been in the industry for more than 10 years and had been involved in the design and planning of public park projects. The interview is an important part of the survey where a few questions were linked back to the survey findings for deeper understanding of the perceived situation. Face-to-face interviews with eight executives who gave their consent in the returned questionnaires were carried out. Face-to-face interviews allow researchers to follow-up questions obtain instantaneous feedback from the respondents and gather further information by observation (Rashid & Wong, 2010). It also enabled data collected from the questionnaire survey to be validated. The survey questionnaire is formed in four parts that of Part A, B, C and D composing that of closed ended and open ended questions. Part A will be aimed at gathering the respondent's basic profile. Part B of the survey questionnaire was devised to meet the first two objectives of the research and Part C of the questionnaire covers the third objective of the study. A number of variables of obstacles to public participation in the design process were extracted from the literature review and grouped into several key categories. Respondents' were then asked to rate the variables based on a scale of 1

– 4, with scale of 1 being strongly disagree to 4 being strongly agree. The key categories are as follows: representativeness, timing of participation, capacity of the public, interaction among stakeholders, transparency in decision making, and cost. The following interview, were aimed at gaining the basic background of the respondents, identify the extent to which public participation is considered important in the design and planning process of public parks. The interview will also aim at obtaining opinions which reveal the perception of landscape architects towards the concept of participatory design. Furthermore, through the course of the interview, opinions regarding the obstacles pertaining the application of participatory design and possible methods to encourage more public participation in the design process of public parks were also gained. Data gathered from the survey and interviews were then descriptively analyzed.

## RESULT AND FINDINGS

The result from the survey and interviews has shed some light on the issue of the obstacles towards public participation in the design process of public parks as perceived by landscape architects. The objectives of the study have also been addressed through the finding of the survey as well as the interview. The extent to which public participation is considered important in the design and planning process of public parks has been identified through the survey and interview. The result shows that although public participation in the design process has seldom been practiced (or in some cases, not at all), its importance cannot be denied. It has been regarded as very important by the majority of the respondent from the survey and interview. Public participation in the design process has also been considered to result in a better outcome particularly when it comes to spaces for public use. Apart from that, the conceptual phase has been indicated as the phase in which the public can actively participate since ideas and input from the public can be easily tolerated in this phase as the general idea and proposed use behind the design is developed during this phase and things are not finalized yet. Table 1.0 shows the data gathered regarding the participation of the public during the design process.

**Table 1: Participation of the public during the design process**

Participation Of The Public During The Design Process	Response count	Response percent
Regularly	1	7%
At Some Stage	4	29%
Not At All	9	64%
Answered question		14

Data which revealed the perception of landscape architects towards the concept of participatory design were also successfully obtained. From the survey, four main themes of perceptions were indicated by the respondents. They are; a design process which focuses on the user’s need, a design process which focuses on the user’s ideas, user’s participation, as well as a design process which focuses on the real users. From the interview session, a more focused insight towards the perception of this concept amongst landscape architects was obtained. The result has indicated that landscape architects perceive participatory design as a process that involves various parties and focuses on the needs of users as well as giving them the right to have a say. Table 2.0 illustrates the data obtained.

**Table 2: Perception of participatory design**

Perception of Participatory design	Response count	Response percent
Focusing User’s Needs	10	71%
Focusing User’s ideas	4	29%
User’s participation	2	14%
Focusing on Real Users	2	14%
Answered question	14	

The sources of obstacles were identified as originating from the public themselves, the client as well as the professional. The public’s general lack of knowledge regarding technical matter, lack of awareness and a lack of interest towards government programs has been also argued as the main factors. Through the interviews, the government and government bodies have been identified as the main clients of public park projects. From their part, a non requirement for public participation has been regarded as the main obstacles as landscape architects usually carry out their duty according to the clients brief. Apart from that, timing and cost issues were also indicated

in the study as public participation has been considered as time consuming and adding extra cost to the project whilst not justifying it by its benefit.

**Table 3: Factors detrimental to public participation**

Factors Detrimental to Public Participation	Response Count	Response Percent
Not a requirement by the Client	6	43%
Time consuming	2	14%
Public Lack of Interest	1	7%
Communication issue	2	14%
Lack of awareness from the developer and client	1	7%
Answered question	14	

The findings from the study have indicated that the respondent's opinions are somewhat similar with the findings obtained from previous studies. Fairly large amount of respondents agreed with the suggested obstacles that have been extracted from various literatures. Results have indicated that the main barrier is that public participation is not a requirement by the client. This highlights the fact that landscape architects are merely carrying out their duty as required by the paying clients. The findings support the data from the study by Ricketts (2008) where architects and designers "solution" was to respond only to the architectural brief strictly defined by the client developer (paying clients). It is therefore suggested, that the issue of public participation is not a requirement by the client as a major barrier. Table 3.0 is a summary of the obtained data.

The study has also indicated that various opinions by the interviewees suggesting that landscape architects and designers themselves are contributing to the obstacles detrimental to public participation. The interview session has highlighted that the landscape architect's lack of experience to involve the public in the design process is one of the obstacles. Results from the interview has also affirmed that the incapability of the designers to address the importance of public participation as one of the obstacles. Adding to this, findings from the interview have also articulated that the designer's ego and the attitude of "designers know everything" add to the detrimental factors behind the lack of public participation in the design process. The third objective of the study also seeks to identify measures that can encourage more public participation in the design process



of public parks. It is therefore, noted from the survey and interviews that there are several measures in which it can help to encourage more public participation in the design process of public parks namely through the usage of mass media, public presentations, workshops as well as fostering awareness amongst the public through campaigns and education.

## CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the study have indicated that the respondent's opinions are somewhat to a certain extent similar with the findings from the literature, fairly large amounts of percentages of agreement with the suggested obstacles that have been extracted from various literatures were obtained. The study has pointed out that obstacles coming from such issues as timing of participation, the capacity of the public, interaction among stakeholders, transparency in decision making and cost could prove to be some of the major obstacles of public participation in the design process of public parks. The study has also revealed another key barrier which is the fact that public participation is seldom a requirement by the client. This finding has highlighted the fact that landscape architects are carrying their duty just to fulfill the requirement by the clients. It is therefore, suggested that the issue of public participation as not a requirement by the client as a major barrier.

Despite the obstacles, suggestions from the study regarding the possible methods of encouraging public participation in the design process has also been highlighted, Landscape architects, designers and professionals will need to play a role on the co-designing teams because they provide expert knowledge that the other public does not have. Professional designers are up to date with existing, new and emerging technologies as well as have an overview of production processes and business context of the project. The synergy between landscape architects professionals (contributing their expert technical and analytical knowledge) as well as the users (providing feedbacks and ideas), will make the design process of public parks a truly holistic process. Future research could be done in terms of studying the benefits of public participation in the design process. One case to point is

the need to study the benefits of public participation in which not many are aware of including the professionals.

Further study can be done in terms of developing a model for public participation in the design process of public parks. It is noted in the limitation that this study only covers landscape architects firms that is registered with ILAM and having a permanent address within Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. As a suggestion for further research, a study within this similar field could also be done in terms of broadening the scale by also including the client's side, landscape architect professionals from local authorities and government bodies as well as gaining opinions from the public. Comparison between case studies would also be suitable for further research of this topic. The findings of these researches will furthermore address the issue of public participation in the design process of public parks as a whole.

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