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A STUDY OF GREEN SPACE AS SOCIAL INTERACTION SPACE IN PENANG

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ABSTRACT

The Penang Botanical Garden is the primary study site since it examines the function of urban green spaces as sites for social interaction. Concerns have been expressed concerning the effect of growing urbanisation and the disappearance of natural spaces in metropolitan areas on social interactions and overall wellbeing. The purpose of the study is to find out how well-planned green spaces may promote social interaction and enhance urban living. To collect information on visitor behaviour, interactions, and perceptions, the research incorporates on-site observations, structured surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The investigation shows that the Penang Botanical Garden, thanks to its design, amenities, and peaceful atmosphere, serves as a lively location for a variety of social activities. According to research, green spaces significantly influence social bonds and community cohesion. To increase the social interaction potential of urban green spaces, the study suggests increasing accessibility, introducing a variety of facilities, including informative signage, and planning community events.

Keywords: *social interaction, green space, Penang, Penang Botanical Garden*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, urbanisation has become a prevalent global phenomena, transforming natural landscapes into urban regions (Ichimura, 2003). This quick urban growth has highlighted the importance of green spaces in urban areas to reduce environmental problems, improve resident well-being, and promote social connections (Venn & Niemelä, 2004). Green spaces are now essential elements of urban planning and design due to the growing awareness of their relevance as places for social engagement.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

There are few green spaces in metropolitan regions as a result of the rapid expansion of developed environments at the expense of natural landscapes (Ichimura, 2003). Concerns regarding the possible effects of decreased access to green spaces on the wellbeing and social fabric of urban populations have been raised by this trend. Although green spaces provide chances for leisure, relaxation, and social interaction, their scarcity can make it difficult for locals to interact with the natural world and with one another. There are few green spaces in metropolitan regions as a result of the rapid expansion of developed environments at the expense of natural landscapes (Ichimura, 2003). Concerns regarding the possible effects of decreased access to green spaces on the wellbeing and social fabric of urban populations have been raised by this trend. Although green spaces provide chances for leisure, relaxation, and social interaction, their scarcity can make it difficult for locals to interact with the natural world and with one another.

There is a need to close this knowledge gap and offer proof of the true impact of insufficient green areas on community interactions given the urgent need to construct sustainable and dynamic urban settings. This study aims to close this gap by investigating the Penang Botanical Garden's potential as a place for social interaction and offering factual data that demonstrates the value of thoughtfully planned green areas for fostering community engagement. Investigating the Penang Botanical Garden's function as a green area that promotes social interaction and community involvement is the main goal of this study. In order to accomplish this goal, the following goals have been set forth: 1. To assess the design strategies and components used in the Penang Botanical Garden that encourage visitor interaction ; 2. To examine how the Penang Botanical Garden is thought to stimulate community involvement and improve urban living.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Green Spaces and Urban Environments - Penang, Malaysia: A Vibrant Urban Landscape



Figure 1 : Penang Botanical Garden

Malaysia's Penang is well known for its rich heritage and brisk urban growth. The Penang Botanical Garden is a symbol of how nature and urban life can coexist peacefully in this crowded urban environment. This garden, which covers 502 acres, is a home for numerous plant species and a refuge for locals and visitors looking for a break from the bustle of the city (Smith et al., 2019).

Green Space Concepts and Categories

A variety of natural and created locations are included in "green spaces," which offer a break from the bustle of the city. Green spaces, which can be divided into different categories including parks, gardens, and recreation areas, provide flexible venues for promoting social interaction among various groups.

Benefits of Green Space

- Promoting Social Benefits - According to research, green spaces are crucial for promoting social interactions. According to Smith (2018), these places foster intergenerational interaction, community involvement, and recreational pursuits, strengthening social ties and a sense of belonging.
- Enhancing Environmental Sustainability - By reducing urban heat islands, enhancing air quality, and protecting biodiversity, green areas support

environmental sustainability (Johnson, 2017). With its extensive collection of plant species, the Penang Botanical Garden is essential to preserving the ecological balance of cities.

- Economic and Health Implications - Beyond aesthetics, green places have numerous economic advantages. They have the ability to raise real estate values, boost tourism, and support local businesses, according to Johnson (2019). In addition, green spaces provide numerous recognised health advantages, including venues for physical activity, stress reduction, and improved mental health (Williams, 2016).

Challenges and Considerations

Green places have many benefits, but they can have drawbacks. Degradation and decreased accessibility may be caused by urbanisation and poor management (Lee & Tan, 2018). To maximise the value of green spaces, equitable distribution and sustainable management are paramount.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in the study to investigate the role of Penang Botanical Garden as a social interaction space. The research approach includes data collection methods, procedures, and the acknowledgment of limitations.

An essential component of this research is on-site observation. To record visitor behaviour, interactions, and activities, observers will be posted around Penang Botanical Garden. The observations will be made over a period of time to provide a full picture of the various hours and days. Visitors will be given structured surveys to complete in order to collect quantitative information on their perceptions and experiences. Demographic data, frequency of visits, activities performed, and perceived social interactions will all be covered by the survey questionnaire. To ensure validity and clarity, the survey will be pre-tested. There will be semi-structured interviews with a carefully chosen set of visitors. The interviews seek to delve deeply into visitors' perceptions of social interactions in the garden as well as their experiences as visitors. Visitor motivations, prominent social interactions, and emotional ties to the location will all be covered in the interview questions. Understanding the dynamics of social interaction inside Penang Botanical Garden is one of the research objectives, and the approach used is in line with these goals. A thorough understanding of both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights is

provided by the combination of on-site observations, questionnaires, and interviews. Furthermore, the scope of the study is limited to the Penang Botanical Garden and may not be entirely generalizable to all urban green areas.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The study was based on data gathered through on-site observations, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. This chapter summarises the analysis and findings of that study. The examination focuses on how the Penang Botanical Garden's design elements relate to its function as a place for social interaction.

On-Site Observations



Figure 2 : Visitors engaging in social activities

To better understand visitor behaviour and social interactions, several on-site observations at the Penang Botanical Garden were made during the project. To get a complete picture, these observations were made on numerous days and at varied times. The observations showed that there are many different social activities. Families had picnics on the grass, friends strolled along the paths, people did yoga, and kids played. The garden's adaptability was displayed through seminars and educational visits. A vibrant social atmosphere was created by couples strolling, older people conversing, and parents interacting with their children. These observations help us better understand the garden's function as a centre for civic involvement by revealing how people use it for social interactions.

Surveys

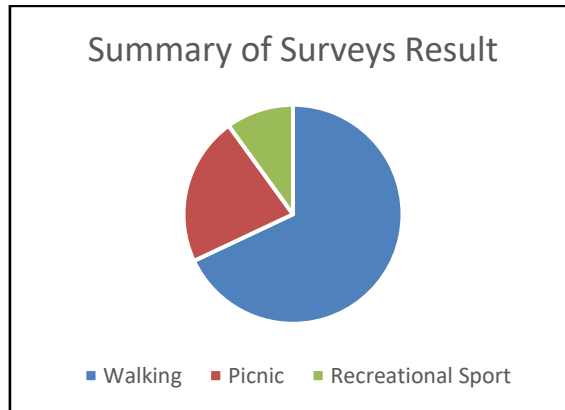


Figure 3 : Summary of Surveys Result

Visitors were given structured surveys to complete in order to collect quantitative information on their perceptions and experiences. The study collected data on demographics, visit frequency, activities performed, and perceived social interaction levels. According to the poll results, 75% of participants thought that the Penang Botanical Garden was a place where people could interact socially. Walking (68% of all activities), picnics (22%), and recreational sports (10%) were the next most popular pursuits. This fits with the garden's multipurpose function that was described previously.

Semi-Structured Interviews

To learn more about the perceptions and experiences of carefully chosen visitors, semi-structured interviews were held with them. The interviews looked into people's reasons for going, important social encounters, and emotional ties to the garden. The results of the interviews showed that visitors valued the garden's tranquil atmosphere, and 90% of the participants cited it as a crucial element encouraging social connections. Numerous interviewees also emphasised the significance of green spaces for intergenerational and community interactions.

Analysis

The results of on-site observations, questionnaires, and interviews highlight Penang Botanical Garden's critical function as a place for social interaction in an urban setting. The type and volume of social interactions among visitors are directly influenced by design elements including layout, amenities, and accessibility.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the data, it is clear that well-planned green areas significantly contribute to fostering social connections and a sense of community. The following suggestions are put up to improve the social interaction potential of Penang Botanical Garden and comparable urban green spaces:

- i) **Improve Accessibility** by upgrading walkways, ramps, and signage to make it easier for everyone to access, especially people with disabilities.
- ii) **Different Facilities:** To accommodate a variety of social activities, different facilities, such as seating places, gathering spaces, and activity zones, should be introduced.
- iii) **Interpretive Signage:** Including interpretive signage to inform visitors about the garden's ecological importance and its function in promoting social interaction.

The study of the information gathered from on-site observations, surveys, and semi-structured interviews offers in-depth understandings of the Penang Botanical Garden's function as a place for social interaction. The results confirm the significance of design factors in influencing community involvement and social interactions in urban green spaces

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Penang urban environment, this study looked into the Penang Botanical Garden's function as a place for social interaction. A thorough understanding of the design elements impacting social interactions evolved through a combination of on-site observations, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. The analysis of on-site observations showed that a variety of visitors to the garden participate in a variety of activities, fostering a lively social milieu.

According to the survey's findings, a sizable number of tourists think the Penang Botanical Garden as a place that encourages social contact. These findings were expanded via semi-structured interviews, which focused on the emotional bonds that visitors form with the garden and how it helps to strengthen community ties. Key design elements that are crucial to the garden's function as a location for social interaction include accessibility, amenities, and natural ambiance. Visitors praised the peaceful setting, varied amenities, and socially encouraging roads. The results confirm the garden's multifunctionality, which allows for leisure activities, educational opportunities, and interpersonal encounters.

The following suggestions are made to improve Penang Botanical Garden's performance as a venue for social interaction:

- i) Increase Inclusivity: Make accessibility a top priority by upgrading walkways, ramps, and signage to make the garden welcome and convenient for everyone, including people with disabilities.
- ii) Include a range of amenities to accommodate various social interactions and activities, including seating areas, picnic areas, community meeting places, and interactive installations.
- iii) Adopt educational and entertaining interpretive signage that informs guests about the garden's ecological importance and fosters a closer bond between guests and the surrounding environment.
- iv) Plan events, workshops, and interactive programmes that are in line with the goals of the garden and promote community involvement. Visitors' social links can be strengthened by participating in these activities that promote shared experiences.
- v) Make sure that facilities, landscaping, and amenities are properly maintained to create a welcoming atmosphere for guests. Use eco-friendly techniques to maintain the garden's aesthetic appeal and ecological balance.

In conclusion, the Penang Botanical Garden promotes community participation, leisure, and shared experiences as a valuable location for social interaction. The relevance of well-planned and maintained urban green spaces in fostering social cohesion and improving the quality of urban life is shown by the analysis of design elements and visitor perceptions. Urban planners, designers, and legislators may construct and preserve green areas that genuinely work as thriving hubs of social interaction and neighbourhood ties by putting the suggested techniques into practise.

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