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A Conceptual Model for Social Design of Urban Park to Generate Social Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Social interaction is a subscribed engagement among city dwellers in their routine activities within public open spaces. Urban parks have an essential role in engaging people in social interaction. This paper attempts to establish a conceptual model for social design of urban parks by relating three relevant concepts; first the notion of social interaction, second social activity. Third, the concept of users' experience, as way-finding. Until recently, research on socio-spatial aspect of environment has mainly focused on social ties, place attachment, and human well-being; thus disregarding the spatial aspect of urban park design. The findings suggest, a legible path structure of the park as an effective model to generate social interaction. The components of social experience are introduced as paths, nodes, landmarks and social activities organized within path structure. The model bridges the gap between social and perceptual dimensions of urban design theories.

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A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR SOCIAL DESIGN OF URBAN PARK TO GENERATE SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Abstract

Social interaction is a subscribed engagement among city dwellers in their routine activities within public open spaces. Urban parks have an essential role in engaging people in social interaction. This paper attempts to establish a conceptual model for social design of urban parks by relating three relevant concepts; first the notion of social interaction, second social activity. Third, the concept of users' experience, as way-finding. Until recently, research on socio-spatial aspect of environment has mainly focused on social ties, place attachment, and human well-being; thus disregarding the spatial aspect of urban park design. The findings suggest, a legible path structure of the park as an effective model to generate social interaction. The components of social experience are introduced as paths, nodes, landmarks and social activities organized within path structure. The model bridges the gap between social and perceptual dimensions of urban design theories.

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1. Introduction

Urban parks, in essence, are social spaces with the role of socializing urban residents which is regarded as one of the important aspects of urban civilization [25, 8]. The perceptions of urban parks in terms of social interaction and activity is the result of people's interactions with their environmental setting [19, 46].

Good quality urban park design could cater for public needs and satisfaction. Careful design could enhance social interaction among people [38] by providing meeting opportunities [5]. Also, it accommodates psychological fulfilment of urban residents [45, 25].

However, in this current decade, despite being planned with modern infrastructure, the design of urban parks could not support the function in terms of encouraging social interaction among people [18, 43]. It means designs of these urban parks would not support the users' social experience.

Until recently studies on urban parks mainly concentrated on the importance of

social sustainability in different aspects of the quality of life. Examples include ensuring healthy city environments by protecting urban biodiversity [31] or the evaluation of park accessibility and its use [3, 44]. However, there have been less studies to generate social interaction in urban parks.

Social interaction is commenced with unexpected eye contact in a fleeting moment and acted by at least two people who are present in the space. Therefore, at first, people need to become aware about the presence of other people in urban parks. But how could this awareness be shaped and enhanced through social design of urban parks? This paper raises the examination on how the social interaction would be generated within legible path structure of urban parks through contribution of social experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Path Structure

This study considers the social interaction within legible path structure of urban parks. Introducing this attribute of social

experience begins with referring to the definition of space. Space is defined by voids which are made with obstacles. From morphological point of view, the arrangement of these spaces unites in a particular form and draws path structure. This structure organizes as a whole and it is perceived as more than the sum of parts [1]. A similar explanation might also be related with the aggregation of the mass of each settlement like buildings within cities or plants in urban parks as barrier shapes the path structure moving between blocks. This structure as skeleton connects the origins to the destinations and produces patterns of demands through movement. Subsequently, the settings become socialized. In this vein, path structure is defined as a spatial arrangement of functions [26, 9, and 4].

2.2 Social Activities

The primal definition of social interaction is stated through structuration theory. In structuration theory, humans are agents (not all agents are human). Agency, as Giddens calls it, is the human action [22]. The foundation of Giddens' structuration theory for introducing social interaction is based on occurrence of social action within specific time with geographical reference [24]. Giddens argues that social actions include whole human activities in everyday social life, and social interaction as a face to face interaction is one of their products [13]. In social theories of urban design, social actions are indicated as social activities encouraging people to social interaction within urban parks. Social activities are outdoor spatial activities which depend on the presence of people [21]. Meanwhile, social activities are shaped simultaneously through bodily observation of other users while the experiencing of public spaces (urban park) occur through movement within path structure and staying within wide common arenas naming activity nodes [35, 25, and 48]. Attractive social activities are offered through fundamental spatial activities like walking, standing, sitting, etc.

These activities are mostly the preliminary point of almost all activities [20].

Accordingly, the spatial organization of these basic activities within path structure of urban parks, shapes the bodily experiences and thereafter, social interactions will happen. This is in consensus with Giddens and other well-known social theorists in the social science field including Bourdieu, Foucault, and also Lefebvre. However, these social theorists just mention the spatial aspect of social interaction in an implicit way. Even though they discuss about the social interaction derived from spatial distribution of social actions, this is related to the spatial position of different strata influencing their interactions [22, 29].

For instance, Emile Durkheim [16] to achieve solidarity among laborers suggests configuring these people in an organic way for producing face to face interaction naturally.

On the other hand, although social theories in urban design have mentioned that public spaces have two interwoven dimensions: spatial and social [10, 38] the process of shaping social interaction via social activities is less considered. Their explorations have been limited to assessing the use of public spaces with different methods like observation and their recommendations are confined to some guidelines in having safe, comfortable and sociable public spaces [17]. To figure out how social interaction is engendered through social and cognitive aspect of environment, this paper elaborates the way-finding notion with consideration of social activities.

2.3 Way-finding and Social Interaction

Cognition or perception means "the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses" [54]. Furthermore, spatial cognition initially means as the internal reflection and

reconstruction of the structures and relation among spaces in thought and remembering information to assess the built environment [57, 1].

On the other hand Goffman [23] introduces, the experiential aspect of social interaction as the reciprocated perception among people that causes them to become aware of each other in passive and active ways. He mentions that without this awareness, social interaction could not happen [22, 35]. However to perform social interaction, humans must be motivated, knowledgeable and become able to justify the actions and monitor them [22, 24].

Kevin Lynch proposed the theory of “the image of the city” in the primary period of cognitive theories. He defined the image of city as a consequence of mutual interaction among human and environment through perception. This interaction and experience is as a result of legibility of environment [15, 43].

Kevin Lynch introduces five legible elements including paths as channel of movement such as streets, boulevards, highways, etc. Edges depict the borders or restrictions between urban distinct areas. Nodes identify intersections or convergence of at least two paths. Districts are the detectable areas or zones within the cities. Landmarks are the sole anchor or focal points for orientation [37, 56].

This study, just considers the paths, nodes and landmarks organized within path structures and it does not concern about edges and districts. Because edges are more related with built public open spaces and, the districts are more related to the scale more than urban parks such as neighborhoods.

This article argues that, in addition to make legibility through distinctive landmarks, paths and nodes, the locations of activities within nodes which we call them activity

nodes, also should be legible and provides visual accessibility. A legible environment also supports way-finding ability.

Way-finding is the ease of movement through legible landmarks within path structure and activity nodes and encourages people to experience the environment [7]. With this regard, social interaction is defined as people watching in passive way while people move within path structure naturally or whether they gather together within activity nodes. Path structure configures the paths, nodes and landmarks. The integration of uses and activities within path structure causes people to see and memorize legible elements through linking them to their social usage. In this vein, these constituents obtain the functional cues and movement towards them could be boost up [55, 61]. This possibility helps people to make more accurate decisions in way-finding and sketch mapping [6, 61]. Accordingly, way-finding is a sense-based process by connecting mental image with social interaction [2, 52]. Although theorists state that the differences in age, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, past experience and culture have effects on cognitive representation of perceiving environment, the spatial elements coined by Lynch are the common environmental experience among people. Besides, while the image of cities is criticized due to not presenting a precise exact expression of the world by distortions in scales by widening or compressing distances or twisting directions, it is argued that the image, by keeping the topological characteristics of each space and maintaining the sequences among legible elements, could overcome this weakness [41, 34]. So, the scattered districts and torn relations between legible elements drawn by people could be sewn back together within an integrated form. Therefore, this value is important for examining whether or not people could find their ways [27, 2].

Social interaction has been less considered in relation to legibility of path structures

and way-finding notion and within the context of urban parks [14, 42].

Way-finding through legibility just considers spatial forms by isolating them from their social context and fails to assess the cognitive characteristics of legibility elements in terms of evaluating social interaction [30]. Moreover, legibility of environment without consideration of legibility of activities could have negative influence on human natural movement by making the environment homogeneous and boring [47, 29, 58, and 32]. Thus, way-finding and orientation depends on functional motivations rather than simple physical stimuli [40]. Furthermore, Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard, by proposing the term activity in giving social life to the legible elements, had emphasized on distinctive social functional aspects of paths, landmarks and nodes, which makes traveling more attractive within each environmental setting [28, 53].

3. Findings

In light of the above descriptions, it is found that the design of vibrant and memorable path structures which remain in parks users' perception, motivate them to interact with other park users. As illustrated in following figure, this paper proposes a conceptual model regarding to the fact that nodes, paths and landmark within urban parks in addition to social activities facilitate ease of movement and motivation to experience urban parks. As a result, the fundamental function of social experience is defined by giving information to people to find the location of activities through legible path structure. Subsequently, the interaction among people whom find their ways toward destinations spontaneously happens.

This finding is in agreement with William H. Whyte's view [60] as he mentions 'people-watching' attracts people to use and visit the urban public spaces [36]. Subsequently, as both social theories in urban design and social science emphasize, social interactions are both the sources and

consequences of social activities. Therefore, watching people give them information to become involved in activities [39, 61].

Also, the findings of this study are parallel with studies on the legibility aspect of environment imply a relation between legible and social environment [50] specifically within urban parks in Malaysian context [43].

The statement of this study also agrees with the findings from place experience studies consider the relationship among activities, experiences (imageability) and physical features [56, 11].

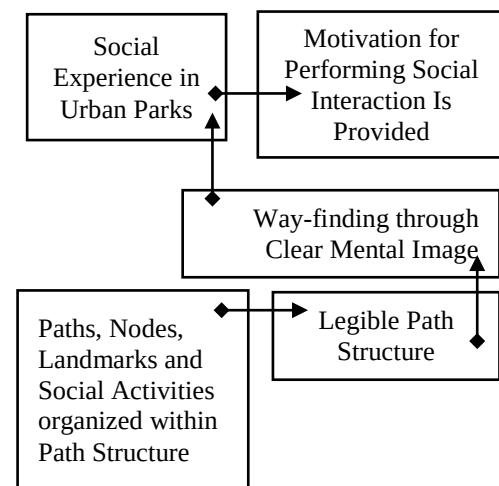


Figure 1: A Conceptual Model for Social Design of Urban Park

However, these studies mainly stress the effect of inter-relations between image and phenomenological terminologies such as place identity, meaning and attachment [49], most of these studies have dependency on peoples' emotional bonding to places [51, 33]. Moreover, until recently, even if these relations have assessed different sorts of activities within urban parks, such as leisure activity [45] they have considered social activities less in terms of social interaction. On the other hand, the effects of these relationships have been seen to solve social segregation among people via social integration [12]. In addition, the contribution of social interaction and place

attachment have been mentioned for improving social cohesion [46, 59].

In light of the above statements, this paper fills this gap among social and spatial studies by introducing another term- social experience, which is placed against legibility in landscape studies which introduce legibility just through legibility elements. Moreover, this study introduces elements of legibility of urban parks as paths, activity nodes, landmarks and social activity to generate social interaction among park users.

4. Conclusion

According to the theoretical reviews, it is demonstrated that there is a lack of emphasis on the social and spatial dimensions of urban parks and how it contributes to the sociability of these spaces. Therefore, in order to improved social design of urban parks; this paper conceptualizes the legible path structure as a model for designing urban parks.

This model is based on the way-finding notion and social activities by distributing these activities throughout the path structure of the urban park. The key elements of this structure are paths, nodes, landmarks and social activities. It is proposed that the path structure could engender a sense of improved movement and activity nodes could support engagement through the process of way-finding. Landmarks have the role of orientation in this process. All three elements of path structure support social activities that could shape a clearer mental image of our urban parks. This clear image besides informing urban park users about the presence of other people and locations of activities creates seamless use and social interaction within urban parks. This paper emphasizes that urban parks should serve for the social-spatial characteristics of urban parks allowing social interaction in a well-qualified structure.

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