

Fostering Community Resilience through Public Spaces in Low Cost Housing in Selangor

Memupuk Ketahanan Komuniti melalui Ruang Awam di Perumahan Kos Rendah di Selangor

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ABSTRACT

Rural-urban migration has intensified in many developing regions, including Selangor, Malaysia, leading to an increasing demand for affordable housing. In response, the government has implemented a zero-slum policy aimed at eradicating informal settlements through the promotion of high-rise, low-cost housing developments. However, these projects often neglect the quality of public spaces, resulting in social isolation and environmental degradation. This study examines three low-cost strata housing projects in Selangor, analysing how inadequate public spaces exacerbate social and environmental issues, including overcrowding, limited community interaction, and reduced ecological resilience. Through qualitative and quantitative assessments, the research reveals that the lack of well-designed public spaces within these developments contributes to social fragmentation and environmental stress. Residents report feelings of disconnection, reduced safety, and limited recreational opportunities. Conversely, case studies of successful public space interventions highlight transformative impacts on social cohesion and community well-being. By integrating green areas, communal facilities, and inclusive design, these interventions foster interaction among residents, enhance social ties, and promote a sense of belonging. The findings indicate that enhancing public spaces in low-cost housing can significantly improve the quality of life for residents, bridging the gap created by rapid urbanization. The study underscores the need for policymakers to prioritize public space design in future housing initiatives, aligning with the goals of the zero-slum policy while addressing the socio-environmental challenges posed by rural-urban migration. Ultimately, this research advocates for a holistic approach that considers both housing and public space as interconnected elements vital for fostering sustainable urban communities in Selangor.

Keywords: migration; rural; urban; public space; low cost strata housing

ABSTRAK

Migrasi luar bandar ke bandar yang semakin meningkat di kebanyakan kawasan membangun, termasuk Selangor; Malaysia telah menyebabkan peningkatan permintaan perumahan mampu milik. Sebagai penyelesaian, kerajaan telah melaksanakan dasar 'setinggalan sifar' yang bertujuan menghapuskan penempatan tidak rasmi melalui pembangunan perumahan kos rendah berstrata. Walau bagaimanapun, projek-projek ini didapati seringkali mengabaikan kualiti ruang awam, yang mengakibatkan pengasingan sosial dan kemerosotan alam sekitar berlaku. Justeru, kajian ini meneliti tiga projek perumahan strata kos rendah di Selangor melalui analisis bagaimana ruang awam yang tidak mencukupi mempengaruhi isu sosial dan alam sekitar mengakibatkan interaksi komuniti yang terhad, dan penurunan ketahanan ekologi. Melalui penilaian kualitatif dan kuantitatif, kajian ini mendapati bahawa ketiadaan reka bentuk ruang awam yang baik dalam pembangunan ini menyumbang kepada perpecahan sosial dan kesan terhadap alam sekitar. Kajian turut melaporkan penduduk merasa terasing, keselamatan yang rendah, dan kekurangan peluang rekreasi. Sebaliknya, kajian kes intervensi ruang awam yang berjaya menunjukkan impak positif terhadap perpaduan sosial dan kesejahteraan komuniti. Dengan mengintegrasikan kawasan hijau, kemudahan komuniti, dan reka bentuk inklusif, intervensi ini dapat meningkatkan interaksi antara penduduk, memperkukuhkan hubungan sosial, serta memupuk rasa kekitaan. Penemuan kajian ini menekankan keutamaan reka bentuk ruang awam dalam perancangan perumahan kos rendah, yang sejajar dengan matlamat dasar sifar-setinggalan, selain menangani cabaran sosio-alam sekitar yang timbul daripada migrasi luar bandar ke bandar. Secara keseluruhannya, kajian ini mencadangkan perancangan holistik amat diperlukan dalam memastikan kediaman dan ruang awam dianggap sebagai elemen yang saling berkait dan penting dalam membangunkan komuniti bandar yang berdaya huni di Selangor.

Kata kunci: migrasi; desa; bandar; ruang awam; rumah strata kos rendah

INTRODUCTION

The stark reality of 1.1 billion people living in slums underscores the significant failures of traditional top-down approaches to housing and basic services. Without sufficient land allocated for affordable housing developments, families are often forced into informal settlements, where conditions are substandard and security of tenure is uncertain. This situation not only contributes to the growth of slums but also increases vulnerability to eviction and displacement. In Malaysia, the government's introduction of a zero-slum policy aimed at eliminating slum conditions by the year 2000 marked a proactive step towards addressing this crisis. However, the implementation of this policy has encountered numerous challenges that have hindered its effectiveness. One of the primary issues has been the ad-hoc nature of housing development. Many projects have been rolled out without a comprehensive urban planning strategy, leading to haphazard construction that fails to consider the specific needs of local communities. As a result, these neighbourhoods often lack cohesion and essential amenities, making them less liveable and sustainable.

Inadequate social infrastructure compounds these problems. While housing units may be constructed, they frequently lack accompanying facilities such as schools, healthcare centres, and

recreational areas. This absence of essential services not only diminishes the quality of life for residents but also perpetuates cycles of poverty, as families find it difficult to access education and healthcare, which are vital for upward mobility. Moreover, community exclusion from the planning process has been a significant barrier. When residents are not actively involved in the decision-making related to their living environments, the solutions developed can be misaligned with their actual needs and aspirations. This disconnect can lead to dissatisfaction and resistance, further complicating efforts to improve housing conditions.

To address the pressing issues of inadequate housing and social fragmentation in low-cost strata housing, a research initiative focused on identifying factors that contribute to social cohesion through the development of public spaces has been undertaken.

This research aims to explore how well-designed communal areas can foster interaction, build community ties, and improve the overall quality of life for residents. The primary goal of the research is to understand the elements of public space that enhance social cohesion among residents of low-cost strata housing. This includes investigating the types of public spaces that are most effective—such as parks, playgrounds, gathering areas, and community centres—and how these spaces can be designed to encourage social interaction and inclusivity. By addressing these systemic issues through a multifaceted approach, Malaysia can make significant strides toward fulfilling its zero slum policy goals, ultimately ensuring that all citizens have access to safe, affordable, and sustainable housing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of low-cost housing in Malaysia was officially enacted during the First Malaysia Plan (1966-1970). This initiative aimed to enhance the welfare of low-income residents, as outlined by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU, 1965, p. 182). The Malaysian government undertook this initiative with financial assistance from the Federal Government. Throughout the First Malaysia Plan, a significant proportion of low-cost housing was constructed to resettle urban squatters and to provide rental options (Aziz, 2007). Low-cost housing in Malaysia was further developed in accordance with official guidelines set forth in the Fourth Malaysia Plan (1981-1985). During this period, the government mandated that each five-year development plan prioritize the construction of low-cost housing for low-income groups. This concern centred on the capacity of public and private sector developers to construct sufficient low-cost units during each five-year cycle, ensuring access to affordable housing for all citizens.

Despite nearly four decades since its inception, the quality of low-cost housing has not seen significant improvements compared to other housing categories. Key issues frequently overlooked include the often-remote locations of these developments and the substandard quality of social and recreational amenities, with some housing projects lacking communal spaces altogether. One contributing factor to the persistence of these challenges is the imperative to maintain low housing prices, thereby ensuring affordability for low-income residents. This situation has led to widespread dissatisfaction among residents regarding the quality of low-cost housing (Musa et al., 2020), subsequently giving rise to a myriad of increasingly severe social and environmental issues.

The constraints faced by occupants of low-cost housing are evident in several dimensions, including the overall cleanliness of the housing areas, health risks, limited parking facilities, neighbourhood dynamics, safety concerns, population density, and pollution—encompassing air, water,

and noise contamination. Such issues contribute to the discomfort experienced by residents and the broader community residing in low-cost housing. This assertion is substantiated by a study conducted by Nooriah Yusof (2019) in her article titled "Contributing Factors to Housing Stress in Low-Cost and Low-Medium Housing Areas in Penang." The research involved communities residing in low-cost housing across several locations, including George Town, Bayan Baru, Gelugor, and Bukit Jambul showed that. residents of low-cost housing in these areas, reported experiencing stress attributable to factors related to housing quality and environmental conditions, such as overcrowding, inadequate parking, transportation costs, cleanliness, and safety. The subpar quality of the living environment and housing in low-cost areas has negative repercussions for the overall well-being of residents and the community at large.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN LOW-COST HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS

Public spaces play a critical role in addressing social and environmental challenges within low-cost housing developments, particularly as urbanization accelerates and communities grapple with issues such as social isolation, crime, and inadequate infrastructure. These spaces serve as accessible venues for interaction, recreation, and economic activity, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life for residents. By fostering inclusive environments, public spaces contribute to social cohesion and well-being, while also incorporating green elements that support sustainability and environmental health (Gray et al., 2024). The design and implementation of such spaces are increasingly viewed as cost-effective strategies to mitigate the pressing issues faced by low-income communities, transforming them into vibrant areas where individuals can thrive collectively.

However, the effectiveness of public spaces in low-cost housing is often compromised by challenges such as neglect, poor maintenance, and inadequate management. These issues can lead to underutilization and deterioration, particularly in resource-limited settings. To address these challenges, a collaborative approach involving local governments, community organizations, and residents is essential (Ramburn et al., 2023). Prioritizing the maintenance and development of public spaces through joint initiatives can ensure their accessibility and functionality for all residents. Investing in the upkeep and enhancement of these areas is crucial for fostering connection, safety, and economic opportunity, ultimately realizing their potential to improve the quality of life for residents in low-cost housing developments (Montemayor, 2019; Arnold, 2022). The research implications suggest that effective management and community engagement are vital for maximizing the benefits of public spaces in urban settings.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with residents. The research commencing with a comprehensive need inventory to identify the specific requirements and preferences of the community (Ramos et al. 2019). This process included engaging residents through informal gatherings and community meetings to build rapport and establish trust (Cheung et al., 2022). By understanding local customs, values, and social dynamics, researchers ensured that the resulting public spaces were relevant and beneficial. Actively involving the community in the design process was achieved through workshops and participatory design techniques, which

empowered residents to contribute their ideas and preferences. Once a consensus on the design was reached, the project transitioned into a collaborative development phase, where community members participated in volunteer days to construct and landscape the public space. This collaborative effort is hoped to foster a sense of ownership and pride while reinforcing social bonds among residents (Voinea, and Profiroiu, 2022).

To enhance the sustainability and vibrancy of these public spaces, knowledge transfer programs and community events that equipped residents with the necessary skills by universities and Non-Governmental Organisation were carried out.

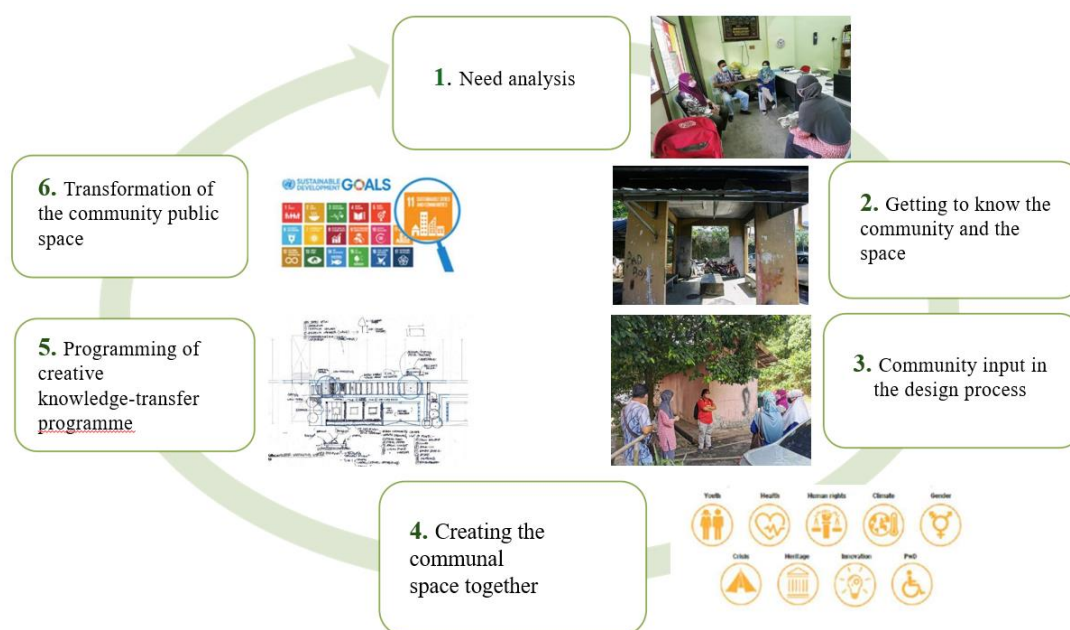


Figure 1.0: Process and strategies involved throughout the project

SITE STUDY AND CRITERIA OF SITE STUDY SELECTION

This project starts with the selection of 3 community areas in three (3) different sites – Flat Taman Industri in Ampang, Flat Ukay Perdana in Ulu Klang and Flat PPR Gombak Setia in Gombak that have limited communal spaces and green spaces. The selection of the area will be carried out after the consultation and agreement of the PBT and the shortlisted JMB representatives. With this, a program model that focuses specifically on the potential of each community can be designed to be replicated to other strata housing areas for a more systematic environmental and social empowerment.

Figure 2.0: Flat Taman Industri and the space before the communal area development



Figure 3.0: Flat Ukay Perdana and the space before the communal area development



Figure 4.0: Flat PPR and the space before the communal area development



RESULTS

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY PREFERENCES FOR PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN

The need inventory conducted within the community revealed a diverse array of preferences among residents, highlighting the importance of safe play areas, green spaces, and facilities for social gatherings. Data collected through surveys and interviews indicated that community members are particularly interested in public spaces that promote interaction and enhance their overall quality of life. Recent research underscores the significant benefits of urban green spaces on public health, emphasizing their role in fostering community well-being (Lindsey & Kuo, 2023). These findings suggest that incorporating such features into public space design can lead to improved physical and mental health outcomes for residents.

FOSTERING TRUST THROUGH MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Previous studies have shown that rapid pace of rural-urban migration has become a central focus in urban studies, with significant implications for community development and resilience. As people migrate from rural to urban areas, they often encounter new social, cultural, and economic environments, which can lead to challenges in social integration and a sense of belonging in the urban context (Ley, 2019). Therefore, effective community engagement, as outlined in the development of public spaces, emerges as a crucial factor in addressing these challenges and fostering community resilience. In this research, building rapport with the community emerged as a critical factor for the successful development of public spaces. Informal gatherings, community meetings, and daily social events served as effective strategies for relationship-building, enabling researchers to gain valuable insights into local customs and priorities. Trust-building is vital, as evidenced by recent studies that examine successful urban projects where engagement strategies fostered trust between community members (Wright & Wong, 2023).

The findings also revealed how process of trust-building is particularly significant in contexts where rural-urban migration introduces cultural diversity and shifts in community dynamics. Such findings in parallel with recent study which have demonstrated that when stakeholders engage with local communities through informal gatherings, cultural events, and participatory workshops, they not only gain valuable insights into local customs and priorities but also build the necessary trust for successful urban interventions (Wright & Wong, 2023). In areas with high migration rates in the study areas, trust-building becomes even more critical, as rural migrant populations may initially feel alienated from both the urban infrastructure and long-standing residents.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN IN PUBLIC SPACE DEVELOPMENT

The design process in the three study areas with active engagement among different age group through workshops and focus groups, allowing residents to express their ideas and suggestions. By utilizing participatory design techniques, community members were empowered to visualize their concepts,

fostering a sense of ownership in shaping their environment. Research indicates that such collaborative approaches not only enhance the relevance of public spaces but also improve community satisfaction and well-being (Amado et al., 2010). The involvement of residents in the design phase ensures that the resulting public spaces genuinely reflect community needs and preferences, as highlighted by the work of Harun et al. (2021), who emphasizes the importance of inclusive practices in urban planning.

Additionally, the participatory design approach is also a direct response to the challenges of social fragmentation and marginalization. By integrating community input at every stage of the design process, developers and urban planners ensure that public spaces are not just physical sites, but also social and cultural hubs where all members feel represented and valued. As highlighted by Voinea, and Profiroiu (2022), inclusive practices in urban planning are essential to building equitable spaces that support a thriving, cohesive and resilient society. It is by involving residents in shaping their environments that make these spaces become more than just physical locations—they become symbolic centers of community strength and cohesion.

COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR LASTING PUBLIC SPACES

After the design was complete, community members participated voluntarily for landscaping and construction as part of the collaborative development phase. In addition to giving people a sense of pride and ownership, this practical involvement improved social ties as they collaborated to achieve a common objective. Research indicates that community resilience and social cohesion can be improved through participatory development procedures (Legge, 2020). Furthermore, frequent updates and chances for comment enabled the area to change to meet community standards, highlighting the importance of continuous communication in public space initiatives (Sergio et al., 2023).

Programs for knowledge transfer were put in place to encourage sustainability and guarantee the public space's lifespan, giving locals the skills, they would need for future upkeep and community administration. Workshops given by experts equipped community members with the skills and information necessary for efficient area stewardship. Residents' sense of responsibility is increased by this program, which also promotes continued use of the area (Jiang et al., 2020). The idea that community-led maintenance projects can strengthen social networks within the community and improve the sustainability of public areas is supported by research (Kim and Kim, 2022).

The findings further emphasise the importance of community engagement as a vital component for the sustained success of public spaces. Janmaimool et al. (2019) emphasise that this involvement should be viewed as a continuous process rather than a singular event, necessitating regular feedback and adaptation. Public spaces that evolve in response to the changing needs of the community are likely to remain valuable, experience high levels of usage, and foster positive social interactions.

Figure 5.0: Figures show the condition of each public space after collaborative development



Before



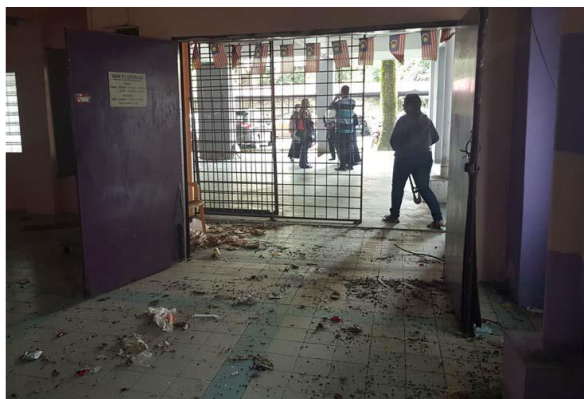
After



Before



After



Before



After

In summary, the research demonstrated the critical role of public spaces in low-cost housing developments as facilitators of community resilience and social cohesion. These spaces not only provide essential venues for social interaction but also enhance collective efficacy and empower residents through participatory design and management processes. The evidence suggests that well-designed public spaces can mitigate social isolation, foster informal support networks, and contribute to improved mental well-being among residents. Furthermore, community-led initiatives that prioritize resident involvement in decision-making processes can strengthen social capital and trust, which are vital for navigating socio-economic challenges.

As urbanization continues to accelerate and low-cost housing becomes increasingly necessary, it is imperative for policymakers and community leaders to recognize the multifaceted benefits of public spaces. By investing in inclusive and accessible public spaces, communities can cultivate environments that promote social cohesion and resilience, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for residents in low-income neighbourhoods. Future research should therefore continue to explore innovative strategies for public space design and management that prioritize community engagement, ensuring that these vital resources serve the needs of all residents effectively.

ETHNIC STUDIES IMPLICATION

The research on rural-urban migration and low-cost housing in Selangor, Malaysia, has significant implications for ethnic studies, particularly in how urbanization impacts different ethnic communities. As rural populations migrate to urban centers, ethnic groups may experience varying degrees of integration or marginalization, depending on the design and accessibility of public spaces. The study suggests that poor-quality public spaces in low-cost housing developments may contribute to ethnic segregation, social isolation, and tension, especially when these spaces fail to cater to the cultural and social needs of diverse groups. Ethnic studies would explore how these developments might either reinforce or challenge existing ethnic divisions, focusing on how spatial design can promote or hinder interactions between different communities. If public spaces are not designed with ethnic diversity in mind, marginalized groups may face increased social fragmentation, which could exacerbate ethnic inequality and disconnection.

Additionally, the study raises ethical considerations regarding cultural representation and inclusion in urban design. Ethnic studies would examine whether public spaces in these developments provide opportunities for cultural expression, community gatherings, and the preservation of ethnic identities. Inadequate public spaces may lead to feelings of exclusion, especially for minority or immigrant groups who may not have their cultural needs acknowledged. Furthermore, the design of public spaces can influence inter-ethnic interaction and social cohesion. Well-designed spaces can foster positive relationships across ethnic lines, helping to build a sense of belonging and solidarity. From an equity standpoint, ethnic studies would also assess whether all groups have equal access to quality housing and public spaces, which could affect their integration and overall well-being. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for inclusive urban policies that consider ethnic diversity to promote more equitable and harmonious communities.

CONCLUSION

This research on rural-urban migration and low-cost housing in Selangor, Malaysia, has significant implications for ethnic studies, particularly in how urbanization impacts different ethnic communities. As rural populations migrate to urban centers, ethnic groups may experience varying degrees of integration or marginalization, depending on the design and accessibility of public spaces. Poor-quality public spaces in low-cost housing developments may contribute to ethnic segregation, social isolation, and tension, especially when these spaces fail to cater to the cultural and social needs of diverse groups. Ethnic studies would explore how these developments might either reinforce or challenge existing ethnic divisions, focusing on how spatial design can promote or hinder interactions between different communities. If public spaces are not designed with ethnic diversity in mind, marginalized groups may face increased social fragmentation, exacerbating ethnic inequality and disconnection.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of community engagement in the successful development and sustained success of public spaces. Continuous involvement ensures that spaces adapt to changing needs, maintain high levels of use, and foster positive social interactions, promoting a strong sense of community. Feedback and adaptation are essential for the long-term viability of these spaces. Inequality in the constructed environment often results in limited access to quality spaces for marginalized communities, reinforcing social divides. The research advocates for a more inclusive approach to design, emphasizing human-centered design principles that prioritize empathy and understanding of diverse user experiences. By engaging directly with marginalized groups, urban designers can create spaces that meet physical, emotional, and cultural needs, fostering social cohesion. Repurposing underutilized urban areas into community assets can bridge gaps between privileged and marginalized populations, enhancing community resilience. Ultimately, participatory planning that empowers marginalized groups strengthens social equity, creating environments that enhance belonging and inclusivity. This research aims to guide policymakers, urban designers, and developers in creating sustainable, vibrant communities through public space design that promotes social cohesion and resilience.

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