

Reviving Urban Third Places in Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

Third places are often overlooked but vital components of urban life, encompassing public spaces like cafes, parks, libraries, and community centres. These spaces are crucial for fostering connections, social interaction, and community cohesion. However, in today's society, third places are experiencing a decline, especially in urban areas, posing concerns for mental well-being and social isolation. Factors such as rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and digital interactions contribute to this decline, alongside rising real estate costs and commercialization. To address this issue, this research aims to understand the decline's causes and propose strategies to revitalize third places. By focusing on architecture, urban design, and community engagement, the goal is to create inclusive, vibrant, and accessible spaces that promote well-being and social interaction. Through human-centred design and collaboration with communities, the aim is to cultivate resilient environments that prioritize meaningful communal spaces, ultimately enhancing mental health outcomes and fostering thriving communities. Expected results include actionable recommendations for architects and policymakers to cultivate resilient, socially cohesive urban environments. The contribution will provide a framework for reimagining third places to address contemporary societal needs.

Keywords: Third Places, Urban Sustainability, Placemaking, Gentrification, Community Engagement

Introduction

Background Study

In contemporary society, the concept of third places—public areas distinct from home and work environments—has drawn attention for their role in promoting social interaction, relaxation, and community cohesion. These spaces, which include cafes, parks, libraries, and community centres, have historically served as essential hubs for fostering connections and enriching social life. Life without community has produced, for many, a life style consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social well-being and psychological health

depend upon community. (Cries et al., 1997) The observable decline in third places, particularly in urban areas, poses a pressing societal concern. The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in 2015 found that 29.2% of individuals aged 16 and older experience mental health problems. About one in three Malaysians struggle with mental health issues, with the highest rates observed in individuals aged 16 to 19 and those from low-income families (MALAYSIA, 2016). It is very important for us to understand the role that third places play in our society and why we are slowly losing them. Although Third Places are not always permanent fixtures in urban areas, they are recognized for their characteristics that enhance social engagement and foster place attachment. They act as central hubs for local social interactions within any urban environment (Rahman, 2017).

Various factors contribute to this decline or loss in value, including rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and a shift towards digital and remote interactions. According to (AlibsWrites, 2023), the development of technology and the spread of online communities have facilitated online communication. However, technology has also played a role in reducing face-to-face social connections. Additionally, rising real estate costs and commercialization have led to the displacement of traditional communal spaces. These changes have, in turn, exacerbated social isolation and loneliness, which are linked to adverse mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety. While existing literature recognizes the importance of third places, there remains a gap in understanding the complex factors contributing to their demise and developing comprehensive strategies to counteract this trend. Understanding the intricate interplay between socio-economic dynamics, technological advancements, and societal well-being is critical in formulating effective interventions. Therefore, this study aims investigate the issues highlighted above, its causes and potential ways to overcome it.

Problem Statement

Motivational Problem

The rise of the technological advancement has played a part in the decline of third places in urban areas. Smart phones have helped improved our means of communication and media access. Now, digital methods have superseded almost all other forms of communication, especially in business. I can't remember the last time I hand wrote a letter, rather than an email at work, even my signature is digital these days. Picking up the phone is a rare occurrence too—instead, I FaceTime, Zoom, or join a Google Hangout (Forbes, 2019). However, technology has also played a role in reducing face-to-face social connections. Although technological improvements appear fantastic, they have resulted in an epidemic of loneliness. The advancement of technology and the growth of online communities have made online communication easier. The scarcity of "third places" for socializing has led to dissatisfaction for many. Third places provide people with a location to gather, build relationships, and cultivate a sense of community and belonging, playing a key role in combating loneliness and enhancing mental and physical health. However, we should explore all means of using technology to improve the quality of space when it comes to developing or improving third spaces in the city.

The coronavirus pandemic came at a crucial point for third places. The 2010s saw a significant increase in the number of third places closing, with many establishments being priced out by

chains and large corporations. As well as this, the growth of social media and technology made it less necessary for many people to go out and socialise. Popular social networks such as Facebook became the staple new third places and screen time grew steadily (SOUK, 2024). However, following the pandemic, the "two sides folded into each other," and "with our favourite hangouts banned, we've been stuck in environments that we equate only with work – either professional labour or domestic labour, with no place to let off steam or get some respite." (The Week, 2024). However, the reopening of public spaces and loosen restrictions, efforts have to go into revitalising existing third places.

Big Tech companies have also disrupted traditional 'third spaces' such as bookstores, cafes, and small businesses by providing more convenient and affordable options via their online platforms. For instance, Amazon has upended local bookstores and shops, Uber (or Grab in Malaysia) has transformed the taxi industry, and online shopping through eCommerce platforms has affected brick-and-mortar retail stores. This shift has resulted in the decline of these traditional third spaces, which were once central to local communities and served as hubs for meaningful social interactions. (Atiqah, 2023)[LinkedIn].

In short, it is clear from the motivational findings that certain measure needs to urgently be taken in order to overcome the decline in third places in our urban areas. Therefore, ongoing research and investigation are still needed to not just increase the quantity of third places, but also increase the quality of existing third places in Kuala Lumpur

Research Problem

Gentrification often leads to the transformation or displacement of traditional communal spaces as property values rise, catering to higher-income demographics. This displacement limits access for lower-income communities, erasing cultural heritage and social fabric (Lin et al., 2023). Disrupted social networks exacerbate social isolation, perpetuating cycles of inequality. Lin also states that economic displacement is the most common form of gentrification, referring to households being compelled to move due to surging property prices and rents. The privatization of public spaces is increasing, and when these spaces are controlled, especially when the public is unsure about the legal or acceptable boundaries of behaviour, residents often self-regulate. They monitor their own actions and limit interactions, particularly after experiencing embarrassing confrontations (Dr. Jiayi Jin, 2024). Therefore, more research and efforts need to be carried out to make sure gentrification does not affect existing public spaces and its users.

Urban growth is characterized by significant gains in urban/built-up areas at the expense of green or open spaces (Singh Boori et al., 2016). The limited availability of space can also result in community hubs being located in areas that are less convenient for many residents, particularly those in underserved or low-income neighbourhoods. Kuala Lumpur has a growing demand for green spaces, due to growth in populations, improved quality of life, increased leisure time, and rising environmental awareness and expectation. Unfortunately, the recent rapid pace of urban expansion and redevelopment have eradicated or degraded some existing urban green spaces and failed to preserve natural pockets and corridors in large-scale sprawling into green fields (Rahman, 2017). This situation may further exacerbate existing disparities in access to communal resources, leaving some populations without adequate support for mental health and well-being (Manis et al., 2022). He adds that

addressing this challenge requires strategic planning and innovative approaches to repurpose existing spaces and integrate community hubs into the existing urban fabric in a cost-effective and equitable manner. Therefore, there it is important to have important to make critical design decisions to achieve the best outcome, given that space is highly limited.

Just as our bodies require maintenance, so do the structures we've built and the communities formed within them. This care is essential not only for their physical appearance but also for social benefits, representing a connection to neighbouring communities and the city as a whole (Theses & Martin, 2022). However, what is surprising is the lack of priority given to the *place-keeping*, or long-term management of such spaces, once *place-making* has occurred. Without place-keeping, public spaces can fall into a downward spiral of damage, disrepair and inadequate maintenance. This can potentially lead to manifestations of the 'broken window syndrome' where even 'cosmetic damage can invite more serious anti-social or even criminal'. (Dempsey & Burton, 2012) This can lead to residents feeling unsafe in places which become unused in favour of others. Trying to restore such places to their former 'glory' can be a costly exercise, not just in financial terms, but also socially to regain users' confidence to use the place safely and comfortably.

The research focuses on two primary questions. First, it seeks to understand how the social and architectural needs of users in Kuala Lumpur influence the design and functionality of third places in the urban landscape. Second, it aims to identify the architectural and placemaking strategies that can rejuvenate and sustain third places within contemporary urban environments. In line with these questions, the research objectives are: first, to analyze social interaction patterns, accessibility, inclusivity, cultural relevance, and other factors that affect the design and functionality of third places in Kuala Lumpur. Second, to explore innovative architectural and placemaking strategies that can revitalize and sustain these spaces within the context of modern urban settings.

Conceptual Framework

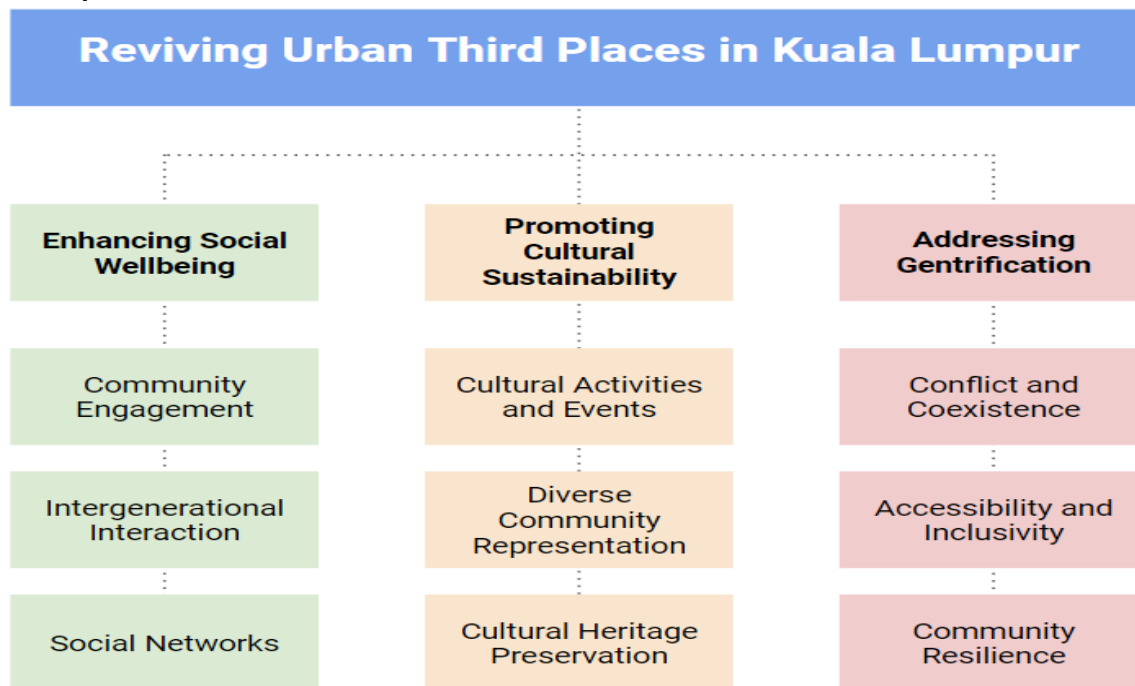


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Third place regeneration urban Areas

The conceptual and theoretical framework for revitalizing or creating new third places in urban areas integrates four key themes: enhancing social wellbeing, promoting cultural sustainability, reconnecting historic urban landscapes, and addressing gentrification. It explores how multi-activity community groups can improve social networks and intergenerational interactions. It emphasizes preserving cultural heritage and inclusivity in diverse communities through culturally rich activities. It balances historic preservation with modern functionality and adaptive reuse of spaces. Finally, it addresses conflicts in gentrifying neighbourhoods by designing inclusive, accessible third places that foster community resilience and cohesion, ensuring these spaces serve all socioeconomic groups effectively.

Literature Review

The literature on third places, urban greening, and gentrification highlights the significant role that these spaces play in shaping urban environments and influencing social sustainability. Starting with Dempsey (2012), the study addresses the lack of attention given to place-keeping, or the long-term management of spaces after they have been created. The research argues that limited resources and an incomplete understanding of the complexity of place-keeping hinder its effective implementation. The paper emphasizes the importance of evaluating public spaces after their creation to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the community and support user engagement. This sets a foundation for understanding the need for long-term care in maintaining third places.

Goosen (2018) builds on this by exploring how third places contribute to social sustainability. The research highlights that, although third places have always existed in urban areas, their roles are often not fully realized due to unclear functions and uses. Goosen argues for better third place planning to enhance social sustainability, aligning well with Dempsey's findings on the importance of maintaining these spaces. The emphasis on creating socially sustainable

environments reinforces the idea that effective management and planning are critical to sustaining third places over time.

Rahman (2017), focuses on the conservation of urban green spaces in Kuala Lumpur, noting that rapid urban expansion has led to the degradation or disappearance of many natural areas. The study examines residents' willingness to pay for the conservation of green spaces, highlighting the importance of preserving natural areas to improve urban life quality. This connects to the broader discussion on third places by emphasizing the value of green spaces in urban settings, further supporting Goosen's call for better planning and conservation efforts in third place management.

Similarly, Theses (2022) examines gentrification in urban areas, with a specific focus on how revitalization efforts often prioritize economic growth over the needs of existing residents. The research redefines gentrification by integrating the concept of third places, emphasizing the need to consider how community spaces evolve alongside economic changes. This study complements previous research by addressing the social consequences of gentrification and the role third places play in either mitigating or exacerbating these effects.

In line with this, Belanger (2007) investigates the sociability and identity of public spaces in gentrifying neighborhoods. The study finds that transforming public spaces can lead to conflicts between long-time residents and new arrivals, as the changing meanings of these spaces may cause dissatisfaction and eventual relocation. This further emphasizes the need for careful planning and management of third places to ensure that they serve the entire community, particularly during periods of urban transformation.

Lin (2023), explores tourism gentrification, focusing on how changes in industrial areas affect local residents. The study proposes a four-dimensional framework to explain why residents may choose to relocate, due to the stress and changes brought about by tourism development. This research highlights the challenges of maintaining third places in the face of tourism-related gentrification, suggesting that policymakers must protect cultural and industrial heritage during urban transformations.

Continuing the discussion on spatial networks and third places, Dr. Jiayi Jin (2024) focuses on reconnecting spatial networks in historic urban landscapes. The study addresses how the decline of third places, caused by informal constructions and urban sprawl, affects neighborhood livability and identity. Jin proposes strategies for using third places to reconnect these networks, reinforcing the idea that third places are vital for sustaining social and spatial cohesion in urban areas.

Finally, Singh Boori (2016) examines urban growth in Kuala Lumpur using remote sensing and GIS technology. The study highlights how geographical and socio-economic factors, such as population growth and policy changes, influence urban expansion and the development of third places. This research connects to the broader theme of using urban policy and cultural factors as catalysts for creating and maintaining effective third places.

Together, these studies underscore the importance of third places in fostering social sustainability, managing urban growth, and mitigating the effects of gentrification. They

highlight the need for thoughtful planning, long-term management, and the preservation of cultural and natural heritage to ensure that third places remain vital components of urban life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, third places play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion, enhancing urban livability, and supporting the mental and emotional well-being of urban dwellers. However, the decline of these spaces due to rapid urbanization, gentrification, and technological advancements poses significant challenges. The literature highlights the critical importance of long-term management, or place-keeping, to ensure the sustainability and functionality of third places. Moreover, addressing socio-economic disparities, preserving cultural heritage, and engaging communities in the planning process are essential for revitalizing and maintaining these spaces. Effective strategies that integrate both social and architectural perspectives are needed to ensure that third places continue to serve as vital hubs for social interaction and community engagement in urban environments like Kuala Lumpur.

Moving forward, policymakers, urban planners, and architects must collaborate to design and implement innovative solutions that balance modern urban development with the preservation of community spaces. By focusing on inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural relevance, third places can be transformed into resilient environments that cater to the diverse needs of urban residents. This research contributes valuable insights into how architectural and placemaking strategies can rejuvenate and sustain third places, providing a framework for future interventions aimed at enhancing social sustainability and community well-being in contemporary urban settings.

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