



Urban Spaces for All- The Sama Raya Urban Park Kuching, Sarawak

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Urban spaces for all are usually made up of the non built up land within and around urban areas such as public parks, private gardens, urban streets as well as city squares. Public space which is well designed and managed is one of the fundamental assets and a key component for a sustainable city's functioning. Sustainable city must be also livable, pleasant and attractive for its citizens and should contribute a positive impact on its economy, environment, safety, health, integration and connectivity (Ely and Pitman, 2014). The amount of public green spaces per inhabitant, public parks and recreation areas are often mentioned as important factors to make the city sustainable cities (Chiesura, 2004). More importantly, it is also about the social aspects of city life which foster social ties and create a sense of place for the urban dwellers while interacting with the living environment and hence promote health and happiness for all citizens from all age, gender and origin.

Urban parks, also known as green infrastructure are being increasingly recognized as having a measurable positive impact on the health, both physical and psychological, and well-being of urban residents (Tyrväinen et al, 2014). It provides residents with first-hand experience of nature and natural processes which are both diminishing over the years due to intense development and the increased in population. On the same note, a well-equipped urban open space provides available physical spaces and facilities for people of all ages and interest to spend their leisure time. It act as an important forum for contact and communication, thereby helping to cement the fabric of society and promote social cohesion by furthering mutual understanding between the increasingly diverse social groups which go to make up today's urban society. They provide conducive space to play and engage in both formal and informal activities including sports and socialising.

Parks provide social and psychological services, which are of crucial significance for the livability of modern cities and the well-being of urban dwellers apart from providing important environmental services such as air and water purification, wind and noise filtering, or microclimate stabilization (Burgess et al, 1988; Coley et al., 1997; Chiesura, 2004). A park experience may reduce stress (Ulrich, 1981), enhance contemplativeness, rejuvenate, and provide a sense of peacefulness and tranquility to the city dwellers (Kaplan, 1983).

Sama Jaya Urban Park, previously known as Stutong Protected Forest with a total area of 38ha, is one of the well-known parks in the city of Kuching, Sarawak. It is one of the oldest protected areas in the state, wholly owned by the state government and managed by the Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC). Sama Jaya Nature Park is like an island, surrounded by development and human settlements with the main vegetation consisting of kerangas forest, peat swamp and partly secondary forest and thus considered as the Green Lung (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
.The Green Lung: Sama Jaya
Urban Park, Stutong,
Kuching, Sarawak.
(need to improve
photo's
quality)



The park is part of Kuching City - a Garden City created to provide better living environment to the urban dwellers (Austin, 2004). The park is open to all regardless of age or gender and ethnic origin where communities were brought together and is one of the most popular sites for Kuching City dwellers to do their morning and afternoon exercise. SFC's records show that during weekdays, an average of 200 to 300 Kuching City folks use the park for exercise while on weekends the number can double to 400 to 600 with significant number of foreigners (Plate 2).

Sama Jaya Urban Park is equipped with facilities and infrastructure, such as activity centre, conference room, timber and bamboo museum, forest biology museum, baruk shelter and a viewing tower to enhance educational and social activities. Another unique feature is the Hiroshima-Sarawak Friendship Garden, sponsored by the Governor of Hiroshima, Japan, to symbolise the close ties between Japan and the state of Sarawak (SFC, 2006). There are stone monuments at the

Garden, symbolising the natural beauty of Sarawak. Such monuments include the miniature Sea Stack, a replica of the distinctive feature of Bako National Park, and a miniature Limestone Pinnacle, a renowned feature of Mt Mulu National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage (SFC, 2006). The park can be used as an outdoor recreation venue for conducting preservation and conservation programmes.

The availability of two nature jogging trails of 800 m and 1.6 km namely, Malaysia Nature Trail and Sarawak Nature Trail were designed mainly for educational purposes and to further promote health and recreation activities. They were the main attractions for the urban dwellers could be directly "in touch with nature" (Plate 3). Schroeder (1991) has shown that natural environments with vegetation and water induce more relaxed and less stressful states in observers compared with urban scenes with no vegetation. This ability of natural elements to function as "natural tranquilizers" may be particularly beneficial in urban areas where stress is an all too common aspect of daily living (van den Berg et al., 1998). The presence of foot reflexology path has been very popular with users or visitors who believe it can help reduce toxins and increase blood circulation (SFC, 2006). Some parts of the park also cater for people with special needs and it aims to see that they are able to access and use the urban park.

FIGURE 2. Exercise
has become
part of
the life of many
Kuching city
dwellers.



An innovative community project, the Tree for Life Programme which involves the planting of trees to promote conservation awareness was initiated. People from different walks of life participate and form joint responsibility towards the management of the park, and the same time promote the development of social ties. Beside aesthetic, psychological and health benefits, natural features in cities can have other social benefits. Nature can encourage people to use outdoor spaces, increases social integration and interaction among neighbors (Coley et al., 1997). Sama Jaya Nature Reserve is a good example of a well-designed open space which is well planned, friendly to all users. The number of visitors have increased from day to day. With numerous tree species, the park can moderate the impacts of noise and pollution and provide habitats native plants and animals and can contribute significantly to the amelioration of the impacts of urban heat island through the cooling effects of vegetation. Park can also help regulate the water balance (Adeline, 2013; Goh, 2013). But perhaps most importantly, they play a vital role in maintaining and improving the quality of life and the health and well-being of the citizens.

The quality of life and liveability of cities are being influenced by the quantity, design, management and maintenance of urban green space. While mitigating the adverse effects of urbanization and support community engagement by providing residents with a venue for participation in and attachment to their communities, urban park provide a sense of place and offer essential life-enhancing qualities that aid community and individual's well-being. Sama Jaya Urban Park is able to offer education and lifelong learning opportunities through formal education, and research and informal learning while enhancing Kuching City as an attractive place to live, work, invest and travel.