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## **CARVING SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC SPACES ALONG HISTORIC URBAN RIVERSCAPES**

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### **Abstract**

Recreational activities along urban waterways has gained popularity since the 1970s and efforts are underway to enhance public access to waterfront locations. Consequently, this resurgence has spurred the development of diverse public open spaces along riverbanks, offering various means of engagement with the river ecosystem. In the case of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the historical significance of the confluence of Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak dated back to the 1850s. This paper examines on how these historic urban rivers of Kuala Lumpur portrayed as a successful public space based on four qualities highlighted by the Project for Public Spaces: Sociability, Uses and Activities, Access and Linkages, as well as Comfort and Images. To study the applicability of these qualities, a comprehensive site observation was conducted using a checklist provided by the Project for Public Spaces. The findings from this case study confirmed the relevance of these criteria and underscore the significance of an integrated approach to foster successful public spaces, particularly in accentuating the unique attributes of historic urban rivers.

**Keywords:** Urban River, Historic Urban River, Public Space, Kuala Lumpur

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Urban river corridors are considered as crucial components of green infrastructure, offering scenic views and open spaces for recreational activities (Vian, Izquierdo & Martínez, 2021; Prominski et al., 2023). They often become popular spots for parks, promenades, and cultural events, enhancing the quality of life for urban residents. However, the historical evolution of urban development has significantly influenced the structure of riverside areas and their integration into urban landscapes (Yassin, Bond & Mc Donagh, 2015). Globally, natural riverbanks have undergone extensive transformations due to historical neglect in urban planning (den Boer, 2020). River-oriented recreational developments typically adopt a "ribbon" layout in most cities, featuring activities like walking, cycling, sightseeing, boating, and nature excursions distributed along the river corridor (Vian, Izquierdo & Martínez, 2021).

Referring to Kuala Lumpur, the inception of Kuala Lumpur's settlement in 1850 were located on the confluence of two rivers; Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak. The rivers had become the catalyst of the mining, agricultural and cultural activities of Kuala Lumpur. Since then, urban fabric of Kuala Lumpur has changed gradually and became one of most well-planned cities in Malaya. Hence, the history and identity of Kuala Lumpur not only limited to the historical buildings located along the rivers, but the entire area including the spaces and the rivers. These rivers served as crucial catalysts for the development of culture and civilization (Wang & He, 2022). Their role goes beyond mere geography, profoundly shaping economic, social, and cultural aspects throughout the course of human history.

To ensure the historical value of the urban river of Kuala Lumpur are well conserved, a successful public space need to be integrated alongside the river. The examination of on-site conditions of the Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak will involve the integration of a checklist provided by the *Project for Public Spaces*, focusing on the four key qualities of successful public spaces: i) Access and Linkages, ii) Comfort and Image, iii) Uses and Activities, and iv) Sociability. As highlighted by *Charter of Public Space* (2013), public space “are an integral and meaningful part of the urban architecture and landscape, with a determinant role in the overall image of the city” (National Institute of Urban Planning (INU), 2013). Their impacts extend beyond mere geographical significance, permeating various aspects of human life, from economic activities and settlement patterns to cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Historic Urban River**

Urban historic rivers foster a strong connection to a city's history and an appreciation for the natural environment. They served as focal points for social and recreational activities, providing opportunities for leisure, relaxation, and

community gatherings. Additionally, urban historic rivers contribute to the overall sustainability of cities (Feio et al., 2022).

The *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (HUL) by UNESCO defines the historic urban landscape as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values, extending beyond the notion of a "historic centre" to include the broader urban context and its geographical setting (UNESCO, 2011). Even without explicitly mentioning "historic urban rivers," the Recommendation on HUL includes elements such as topography, geomorphology, hydrology, natural features, built environment, infrastructures, open spaces, gardens, land use patterns, spatial organization, perceptions, visual relationships, and all other elements of the urban structure (UNESCO, 2011). Within these definitions, UNESCO indirectly acknowledges historic urban rivers as part of urban heritage.

Now, historic rivers actively fulfil their newfound roles, seamlessly integrating water as a fundamental element within the city's public spaces. The embankments have evolved into focal points of social life. In Malaysia, urban design teams still face challenges creating designs that are appropriate and sustainable for the city's river corridor due to insufficient development policies and guidelines related to the river corridor (Abidin, Flanders, & Gillian, 2020).

### **Public Space**

Recreational activities in public spaces commonly take place in expansive areas such as parks, streets, plazas, sports facilities, private yards, balconies, and other similar spaces. These urban public spaces served as realms of freedom, enabling citizens to express their urbanity in diverse ways, be it through contemplation, social interaction, or physical exercise (Gouvea & Mont'Alvao, 2021). The inclusion of open space should be regarded not as an afterthought but as an integral component of urban planning that required careful consideration (Suratman, Raid, Nadzri, Samsudin, & Mohammad, 2020).

Based on *Charter of Public Space* (2013), public spaces should be regarded as a "public good" where "all places are publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive [and] has its own spatial, historic, environmental, social and economic features" (National Institute of Urban Planning (INU), 2013). Hence, the potential for diverse manifestations in urban public spaces is immense, contributing to the overall well-being of a city if urban public spaces maintain a vibrant population.

Based on the *Project for Public Spaces* (2023), successful public spaces are indicated by four (4) qualities; i) Access and Linkages, ii) Comfort and Image, iii) Uses and Activities, and iv) Sociability. Each of these qualities act as a tool to help in accessing any public place, as a good or bad space (Refer Figure 1: The Place Diagram). A thorough understanding of these attributes are essential for the

effective development of public spaces, particularly those situated in proximity to historic urban rivers.

Referring to the historical urban rivers, the incorporation of these four essential qualities is imperative for the successful reintegration of the watercourse into the urban landscapes. This endeavour, in turn, will indirectly address the aesthetic and functional requirements of the city and its inhabitants, augment the vibrancy of public spaces, and contribute significantly to the overall prosperity of the community (Hradilová, 2013).



**Figure 1:** The Place Diagram  
Source: *Project for Public Spaces, 2023*

**i. Access and Linkages**

The accessibility of a location is determined by connections to the surrounding environment, encompassing both visual and physical aspects. Thriving public spaces are characterized by easy entry and navigation, being noticeable from afar as well as in proximity (*Project for Public Spaces, 2023*). In the context of historical urban rivers, access and linkages are important, shaping the connectivity and utilization of these watercourses within the urban fabric. A

comprehensive understanding of these factors is essential for sustainable urban development (Miradyanti, Srinaga & Dewi, 2021).

As urban settlements expand, well-designed public spaces with good access and linkages become increasingly vital. They are essential for the success of urban areas, promoting inclusivity and catering to diverse resident needs (Miradyanti, Srinaga & Dewi, 2021). These elements, functioning as components of plazas or streets (Byrne & Sipe, 2010), often adopt broader dimensions in densely populated urban environments, creating a promenade-like character and hosting recreational, cultural, and commercial attractions (Vian, Izquierdo & Martínez, 2021). An effective planning ensures a harmonious integration of historical urban rivers into contemporary landscapes, fostering cultural and environmental enrichment.

## **ii. Comfort and Image**

Comfort, addressing physical and psychological aspects, are essential for user's satisfaction (Gehl, 2010), while image, shaped by aesthetics and design, influenced social interactions and the overall appeal of public spaces (Whyte, 1980; Nasar, 1998). Both elements enhanced the quality of urban environments, contributing to positive experiences for residents and visitors, ultimately influencing the sustainable development of urban areas. Understanding these factors are essential for effective urban planning and design (Gehl, 2010; Whyte, 1980; Nasar, 1998). Considerations of safety, cleanliness, and seating area accessibility are encompassed within the aspects of comfort and image (*Project for Public Spaces*, 2023).

For historic urban rivers, comfort and image are pivotal for fostering community well-being and sustainable development. Comfort, addressing physical and psychological elements, is crucial for user satisfaction within the river environment (Gehl, 2010). Simultaneously, image, influenced by historical preservation and aesthetic design, plays a crucial role in shaping social interactions and the overall appeal of the river area (Whyte, 1980; Nasar, 1998). Prioritizing these factors are imperative for effective planning and preservation strategies, contributing to more positive experiences for residents and visitors and influencing the long-term sustainability of historic urban riverscapes (Gehl, 2010; Miradyanti, Srinaga & Dewi, 2021; *Project for Public Spaces*, 2023).

## **iii. Uses and Activities**

The significance of uses and activities in urban public spaces are fundamental for fostering vibrant communities and sustainable development. Diverse, well-planned activities contribute to social interaction, cultural enrichment, and community engagement, enhancing the overall vitality (Carr et al., 1992; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018). A cherished public space seamlessly incorporates diverse planned and spontaneous activities, serving and engaging the local

community. However, maximizing these benefits require strategic planning and continuous management, involving program development, organization, triangulation, and effective conflict resolution, such as those arising between commercial interests and complex historical considerations (*Project for Public Spaces*, 2023).

Varied activities, including cultural events, recreational pursuits, and communal gatherings, also contribute to the river's vitality (Whyte, 1980; Carmona et al., 2003). Strategic planning and management of these activities are essential for the preservation and adaptive reuse of historical riverfronts, ensuring their relevance and contribution to the socio-cultural fabric of urban areas (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018; Carr et al., 1992).

#### *iv. Sociability*

Achieving sociability is challenging but becomes a distinctive hallmark once accomplished. Encounters with friends, engagement with neighbours, and ease in interacting with strangers create a heightened sense of place and attachment to the community (*Project for Public Spaces*, 2023). Social interactions, facilitated through diverse activities and gatherings, contribute to a sense of belonging and shared identity (Allen et al., 2021). Sociability's functions extend beyond spatial design, influencing the overall liveability and vibrancy of public spaces (Carmona et al., 2003; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2018). In terms of understanding and prioritizing sociability are considered crucial for effective urban planning, ensuring that public spaces are dynamic, inclusive, and conducive to positive social experiences, ultimately enhancing the quality of urban life (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2010).

In public spaces along historic urban rivers, interactions and communal activities foster a shared connection to the historical and cultural identity of the river environment. This sociability not only enhances the overall quality of the public spaces but also strengthens the community's attachment to the historical narrative of the urban river (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012).

## **METHODOLOGY**

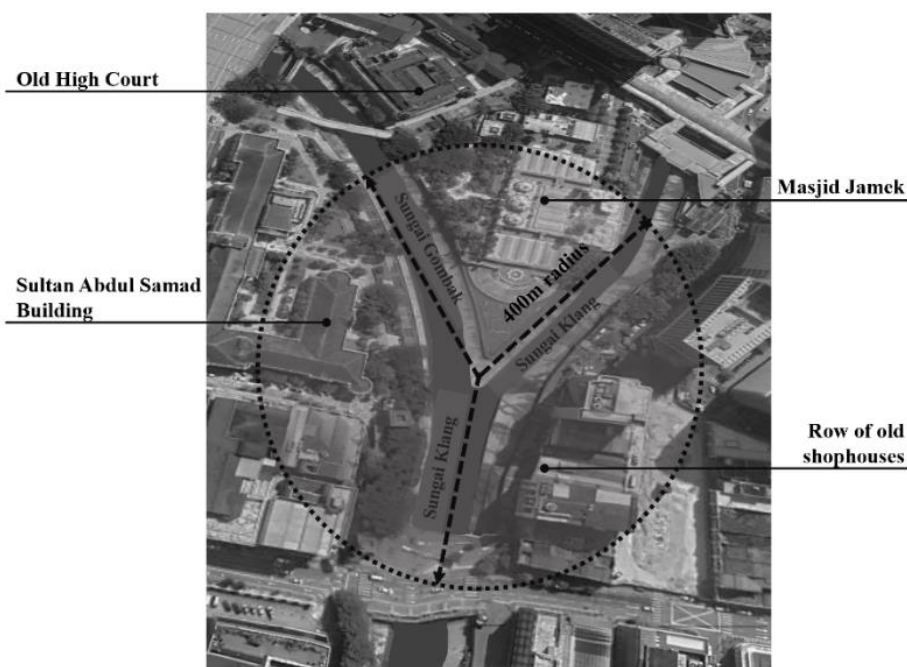
This research employed a qualitative research approach with a qualitative descriptive analysis method. Qualitative descriptive analysis is utilized to demonstrate a phenomenon occurring in a specific location and described the reasons behind such occurrences, rather than to prove or refute a theoretical hypothesis (Taguchi, 2018). This study adopted a case study method, signifying that an event in one location cannot be generalized to events in other places even if they share similar components (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). A case study is a thorough empirical investigation examining a current phenomenon within its authentic context, particularly when the distinctions between the phenomenon and its context are unclear, and the researcher has limited control over the events.

(Yin & Campbell, 1989; Yin 1994, 2009). Data collection method in this study includes site observations. The study employed observational method where the researcher visited the research site to directly observe and experience the events taking place (Morgan et al., 2017). The research was conducted along the historic urban river of Kuala Lumpur, Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak.

## FINDINGS

### Study Site: The Confluence of Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

A prosperous public space, complemented by diverse activities along the banks of Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak, play a pivotal role in accentuating the historical significance of these rivers (Figure 02). By integrating checklist provided by *Project for Public Spaces*, the four qualities of successful public spaces; i) Access and Linkages, ii) Comfort and Image, iii) Uses and Activities, and iv) Sociability will be examined on site. The determination of whether public spaces situated along these rivers can be deemed as successful hinges on the presence of these four qualities.



**Figure 2:** The Klang River and Gombak River, enveloped by historic edifices.  
*Source: Adapted from Google Earth, 2023*

The site observation encompassed a spatial radius of 400 meters from the confluence of the Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak. This methodology

aligned with established urban planning principles that recommend a proximate analysis of a site to capture the immediate contextual influences (Cullen, 2010). Such radius ensures a comprehensive examination of the surrounding built environment and facilitates a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and architectural dynamics at play in the vicinity of the rivers (Gehl, 2011; Lynch, 1960). This approach is consistent with best practices in urban research and design, enabling a thorough exploration of the spatial relationships and contextual factors shaping the studied area.

### ***Access and Linkages***

Accessibility analysis from the site observations shown that the access and linkages to the north of Sungai Kelang and Sungai Gombak, and to the south of Sungai Klang are well maintained and accessible in a diversity of ways — walking, cycling and micro-mobility (Figure 3). However, there is an unwelcoming area underneath the city’s elevated Pasar Seni Light Rail Transit (LRT) Station that had created a barrier between the Pasar Seni and Jalan Benteng. But with shade from the sun, this site can be an ideal place to potentially be revived (Figure 4).



**Figure 3:** Access and linkages located along Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak that can easily access in a diversity of ways.

*Source: Author, 2023*



**Figure 4:** Potential spaces located underneath of Pasar Seni LRT Station.

*Source: Author, 2023*



The proximity of the rivers to transit hubs significantly influences the utilization of linkages along their banks. This site is close to the Pasar Seni LRT Station, Masjid Jamek LRT Station, and several bus stops. The moments preceding a train arrival, the anticipation for a bus, and the brisk walk to a connection collectively transform the area into an active space.

### ***Comfort and Image***

The streetscape along a river serves as a pivotal factor in establishing comfortable spaces. Referring to the qualities of comfort, the public spaces located along these rivers are well equipped with streetscapes such as seating, landscaping, and pedestrian pathways (Figure 5). The seats for example are conveniently located in the sun or shade that contributed to the creation of inviting environment and conducive to the users. In addition, these public spaces also provide visually unblocked pathways (Figure 3). Therefore, it created a sense of safety by providing clear sightlines, minimizing hidden corners, and enhancing overall visibility. This transparency foster a perception of openness, reducing potential hiding spots and promoting a secure environment through increased awareness of surroundings.



**Figure 5:** Strategically positioned streetscapes within the study area offer users comfort-enhancing qualities.

*Source: Author, 2023*

This location holds considerable potential for enhancing its image. Surrounded by noteworthy heritage buildings, these public spaces contributed to the augmentation of the site's historical value (Figure 6). Positive perceptions of these public spaces, coupled with opportunities for photography, enhancing user engagement and contribute to the overall success of the area. The combination of aesthetic appeal and photo-worthy features will attract users, fostering an increase in activity and vibrancy in these public spaces.



**Figure 6:** Heritage buildings located along the river created a photo-worthy experience to the users.

*Source: Author, 2023*

### ***Uses and Activities***

Major nodes that become the main meeting point can be seen on the south part of the rivers, facing the Masjid Jamek and the Sultan Abdul Samad building. The water features situated at the confluence, along with the bridge spanning along Sungai Gombak, have attracted a greater number of users, including tourists, to visit this area (Figure 7). However, moving to the south of the area, most of the users used the space as main linkages to the transportation hubs.



**Figure 7:** Most activities are centred around the convergence of the river near Masjid Jamek and the Sultan Abdul Samad Building.

*Source: Author, 2023*

The individuals utilizing the access points along the rivers are predominantly comprised of staff working near this area. Hence these public spaces are more active during daytime. It is challenging to observe a diverse range of individuals, such as retirees and those with young children, utilizing these spaces during the daytime when others are typically at work.

### **Sociability**

As highlighted earlier in the literature review, when individuals meet up with friends, and find ease in connecting with strangers, they often experience a heightened sense of connection or attachment to both their community and the environment that encourages these social activities. For this study area, there is a mix of ages and ethnic groups especially at the café located next to the rivers and photo-spot. Even in the absence of conversation, some users exchange smiles and make eye contact as they cross paths.

For spaces located near Pasar Seni or Central Market, the temporary night market set-up underneath the Pasar Seni LRT Station has become a popular social gathering spot for users (Figure 8). Featuring stalls offering a diverse range of local foods and artwork, this location has inadvertently evolved into a renowned hub for users.



**Figure 8:** Rows of stalls offering a diverse range of local foods and artwork.

*Source: Author, 2023*

## **CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

Among the four qualities assessed on-site, the most notable attributes of the public spaces along these heritage rivers are i) Access and Linkages, and ii) Comfort and Image. These spaces demonstrated excellent connectivity between the buildings situated near the rivers and transportation hubs. Concerning the qualities of iii) Users and Activities, as well as iv) Sociality, although their attainment poses a moderate challenge, once realized, they constitute distinctive and unmistakable features. These qualities are crucial for the placemaking movement and help to establish vibrant community spaces for all. Accordingly, it is logical to view activity as both the inception and culmination of the process—serving as the perspective through which public spaces are conceived and a significant metric of their efficacy in the elements.

The geographical juncture of the rivers should be highlighted as the main city's historical genesis. The confluence not only symbolizes Kuala Lumpur's foundational origins but also highlights its historical and cultural significance. Therefore, this area holds significant potential to provide users with diverse experiential opportunities. Recognizing and promoting sociability is crucial for sustaining the cultural legacy of historic urban riverside public spaces. This fosters a heightened awareness of the rivers' historical value, transforming them into vibrant conduits of cultural heritage. The symbiotic relationship between public spaces and activities revitalizes the urban landscape and nurtures collective consciousness about the historical narrative embedded in Sungai Klang and Sungai Gombak. Establishing an authentic local destination requires understanding of the genuine preferences of the local populace. Development of policies and guidelines related to the river corridor should emerge from community engagement, ideally leveraging local resources, expertise, and materials. Such creative involvement cultivates an inclusive milieu where community members witness their ideas that shaped the place.

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