The Development of Friendly Public Park Benchmarking: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: A successful park or green spaces can contribute to the wellness of public. Park should be high-quality public spaces that provide glorious greenery and nature for people to take pleasure in the park. Therefore, the introduction of a friendly public park is significant to ensure the people received the benefits from the park. However, many types of research either in academic or non-academic not described the term of the friendly public park thus, it has shown the gap of knowledge for this concept. The aim of this paper is to develop the friendly public park benchmarking in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are: to identify the understanding of friendly public park concept from local authorities and to develop the friendly public park benchmarking according to local authorities' perspectives. An in-depth interview with the semi-structured question has used as tools to obtain the data from five respondents. The analysis shows that respondents agreed with safety (through seven attributes) and accessibility (through two attributes) as main components in friendly public park benchmarking. However, in term of features component (through two attributes), there is a various opinion that necessitates being a consideration before take in to measure the friendly public park benchmarking. The study suggests that local authorities should undertake comprehensive research in recognizing a friendly public park benchmarking to promote the sustainable development.

Key words: Public park, development, friendly, benchmarking, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

The public park is an area of open space provided for recreational use, can be in its natural or semi-natural state, or planted and is set aside for human enjoyment or the protection of wildlife or natural habitats. The public park may comprise of rocks, soil, water, flora and fauna and grass areas but may also include buildings and artifacts such as playgrounds. Since, the nineteenth century, the provision of parks has been a major focus in promoting places for relaxation and recreation. Park should be good public spaces that provide glorious greenery and nature not only for people to enjoy but also for a particular city to be sustainable with its ecological functions and values (Malek and Mariapan, 2009). Therefore, the introduction of a friendly public park is significant to ensure the people received the benefits from the park.

However, many types of research's either in academic or non-academic described the term of friendly more focusing on environmentally friendly, pet-friendly park and difficult to found the concept of a friendly public park. Thus, it has shown the gap of knowledge on the friendly public park concept. In the field of public park and the concept of friendly, there are many relationships. It is because a park is a used when people see them as accessible, safe and aesthetically. When using the concept of friendly in a public park, it is focusing on safety and accessibility aspect as well as related to facilities in the park, whereas to make a park becoming as a friendly public park, it needs more than these aspects such as the features in the park. Cormack *et al.* (2010) stated that a variety of facilities in parks that supported active and passive recreational activities including those for structured and unstructured activities were important and one of the element under the features in the park. Hence, it is appropriate to identify, how far the understanding concept of a friendly public park by stakeholders specifically local authorities?

The introduction of friendly public park benchmarking is significant which can measure the user's convenience when to do activities in that park, besides being a friendly place where visitors feel welcome.

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Benchmarking refers to the process of critically evaluating a program's or service's activities, functions, operations and processes to achieve a desired level of performance. It showed that friendly public park benchmarking is a necessity to develop to increase the number of people that feel close to the parks and appreciate the nature.

The development of friendly public park benchmarking, not only based on user preference but also from the stakeholder perspectives. The stakeholders who responsible for developing and improving the condition of parks can derive from the characteristics of a park that associated with park used and physical activity. Urban park support physical activity through their accessibility, provisions to facilitate active pursuits, capacity to provide opportunities to a wide range of users and their semi-permanent nature (Cormack *et al.*, 2010). According to Bedimo-Rung *et al.* (2005), park environmental characteristics that could be related to physical activity including park features, condition, access, aesthetics, safety and policies. Hence, what is the components and attributes which can describe as a friendly public park benchmarking based on stakeholder's perspectives particularly of local authorities? The objectives of this study are: to identify the understanding of friendly public park concept from local authorities and to develop the friendly public park benchmarking according to local authorities' perspectives. The involving of local authorities is significant to get the specifics explanation on developing the friendly public park benchmarking.

The concept of friendly public park: According to Jamil, a park is an area of land set aside for recreation and includes aesthetic delight resulting from the appearance of such open spaces. The main objectives of park users are to spend time in the open space, to rest and intend by water and green areas, to meet and chat with friends and to get rid of the pressures of urban life (Oguz, 2001). Friendly means characteristic of or befitting a friend. In another way, user-friendly is as an application, facility and system that intended user's ability to use it efficiently and successful. Meanwhile, Anuar *et al.* (2015) clarify friendly in the concept of tourist friendly destination are which can give satisfaction to meet tourist's demand and supply through contact and maximum use of activities, products and spaces. As of this statement, the concept of friendly in a public park can interpret as characteristic of an element that well-suited with user's facility to use and give convenience to them. Therefore, the friendly public park is the concept that gives satisfaction and convenience to the user follow which well-suited to the user's desirable.

The component of friendly public park benchmarking: To develop the components for the friendly public park, it can derive from the characteristics of the park that associated with park use and physical activity. According to Cormack *et al.* (2010), urban parks support physical activity through their accessibility, provisions to facilitate active pursuits, capacity to provide opportunities to a wide range of users and their semi-permanent nature. Meanwhile, Bedimo-Rung *et al.* (2005) stated that park environmental characteristics that could be related to physical activity including park features, condition, access, aesthetics, safety and policies. Based on these studied, it clearly specified that safety and access are two attributes that necessity and need to consider when developing a friendly public park benchmarking. The components stated as.

Safety component: According to Cormack *et al.* (2010), dimensions of safety are divided into three, personal safety that concerns with the presence of undesirable users of parks such as drug users and homeless persons, safety from crime included the presence of lighting, presence of law and enforcement, increased security and surveillance and the presence of secluded paths and areas and safety from injury included the presence of glass, syringes, rocks, debris, heavy traffic and other users paths. In measuring the safety component, there are eight variables which are:

Isolation in parks: To increase the opportunities for informal surveillance and reduce the number of isolated places where crime can take place unseen, the approach of the essence of the "eyes on the street" was planning and design. Safety should be a primary consideration along main routes through parks and between the park perimeter and the street. In more isolated natural areas, possible dangers should be recognized using clear signage and legible layouts which direct people toward more heavily populated areas (Burgess *et al.*, 1988).

Layout and legible design: According to Lynch (1960), as it has described as the degree to which space is understandable, it means the ease with which its parts can be recognized and organized into a coherent pattern. When a park is legible, users are able to form clear, accurate images of it. Legibility is also vital for efficient pedestrian circulation as legible pathways convey a sense of easy access, of clear direction and well-defined boundaries.

Visibility and sightlines: Visibility and sightlines is a major factor in enhancing park users' feelings of comfort

and safety. Clear sightlines allow park users to ability to verify the presence of persons which they might find threatening. The degree of visibility that is appropriate has to evaluate the scale, function, context and user group of a park.

Access and circulation: Safety can enhance by providing users with a choice of entrances and exits as well as routes to and from areas. Referring to Bentley *et al.* (1985), the extent to which an environment allows people choices of movement on a site refer to as physical permeability. The absence of a legible and efficient circulation system may discourage use altogether or lead to some "dead" areas that are likely to become deserted creating an essential precondition for undesirable activities to occur.

Lighting: The single most requested physical design modification to improve safety is usually an increase in lighting. Lighting is an essential factor because it can clarify the layout of a park by emphasizing walkways, focal points, gathering places and building entrances. When planned as a coordinated system, lighting improves the nighttime legibility, use and enjoyment of a site.

Diversity: The successful park spaces offer some degree of diversity in their physical features, activities and users. Efforts to improve safety that involve the extensive removal of the vegetation of reduction in the variety of park environments are unlikely to result in safer places. Efforts to improve safety that involve the extensive removal of the vegetation of reduction in the diversity of park environments are unlikely to result in safer places.

Signage and park information: Signage is an important component in promoting park safety because people feel safer when they know where they are and how to get to where they want to go. Signage should be positive, informative and encourage people to enjoy themselves. Signage can also use as a tool to educate users about security issues and to encourage them to report suspicious activity.

Territorial reinforcement: Territorial reinforcement is more to the sense of ownership that a design creates for space. Encouraging or promoting activity that instills a sense of ownership and expanding the sphere of influence over that space. Incorporate design elements that help distinguish between public and private property.

Accessibility component: Accessibility is defined as the ability of people to get to and navigate within a park. According to Sakip *et al.* (2015), public parks with proper

accessibility and well linked with its surrounding area can improve the value of park environment and enhance community development and social bondage. Users or visitors more comfort when the park has clear good accessibility and linkage and next to their place. The two variables had been used to measure the accessibility component such as:

Individual access: Individual access is the distance that people need to leave from his home to park. Vehicular circulation and access to public transportation such as the public transport within transit route also need to consider. Heavy vehicular traffic in surrounding neighborhoods may also impede pedestrian access to parks.

Access within a park: Access within a park is the ability of people to move around easily inside the boundaries of the park. It needs to be defined according to the design of particular parks and should also consider with perceived access which given that perception of inaccessibility may become as constrain for park activity behaviors. The use of vehicles is a common and accepted method of travel to parks. For some time there has been a growing interest by visitors to utilize other areas of parks such as management trails to extend the use of vehicles as a recreational pursuit.

Features component: Park has a wide variety of features that lend themselves to different types of usage that supported active and passive recreational activities. The physical components or on-site characteristics of a park might be one of major park characteristics that may influence in park use. The important determinant of a park's ability in promote physically active leisure behavior is by the presence or absence of a variety of park attributes. In measuring the features component, two variables are used such as:

Park facilities: Park facilities were areas in the park that could use for physical activities and physical facilities that available to users such as picnic tables and security lighting. There are specific types of facilities that promote higher levels of physical activity than others and park users engage in higher levels of physical activity in parks that have playgrounds, sports facilities and trails.

Examples swings and barbecue equipment and a qualitative study that has conducted in Australia identified the availability of amenities as among the important park features influencing people use of local park (Bedimo-Rung *et al.*, 2005).
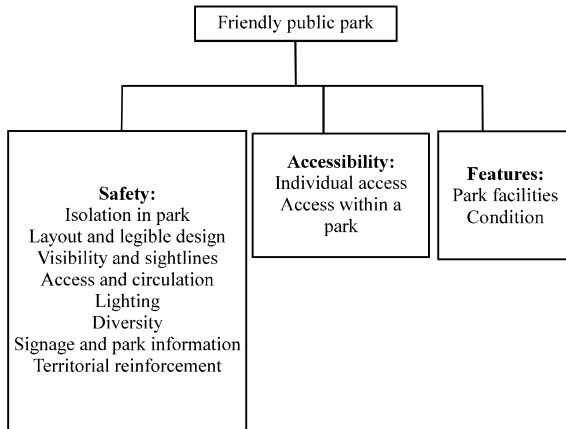
Fig. 1: Conceptual framework of friendly public park benchmarking

Condition: People choose to visit the parks not only because of what features located there but also because of the condition of those features (Bedimo-Rung *et al.*, 2005).

Maintenance: Users are more likely to visit a park where the features are maintained on a regular basis and shun those places containing elements that are in disrepair and lack of maintenance was often identify as an issue influencing the use of the park (Cormack *et al.*, 2010). Several studies reported uneven ground or playing surface, lack of grass and poor quality sidewalks as a problem in the park and from these problems, it shows that characteristic of playing surfaces and cleanliness within parks were regularly identified as important to users.

Safety of equipment: Several studies have highlighted the inadequacies of playground equipment that have led to injury and even death. In 2001, almost 190,000 children required emergency room treatment after being injured on public playground equipment (Weintraub and Cassady, 2012). The condition of play equipment is likely to factor into parents' decisions to let children play in certain parks (Fig. 1).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection method: Data collection has been made through secondary and primary. Secondary data is the data that have been already collected and recorded by someone else and readily available from other sources. For this study, the secondary data was gain from the literature review such as previous journals, articles, books and reports. It will strengthen the questions for the interview and also support the statement based on the

Table 1: List of respondents

Name of respondent	Date and time of receiving data
Respondent 1	
Assistant Director of Landscape	19th May 2016 10.15 a.m.
Respondent 2	
Senior Assistant Director of Landscape Architect	30th May 2016 9.45 a.m.
Respondent 3	
Assistant Director (Horticulture)	20th June 2016 4.00 p.m.
Respondent 4	
Assistant Director of Landscape Architect	15 July 2016 10.00 a.m.
Respondent 5	
Assistant Director of Landscape	01 August 2016 10.00 a.m.

coded data (using Nvivo Software). Primary data is conduct through qualitative method. Through the qualitative method, an in-depth interview was used to gain the data from the expertise in the field of a public park. Thus, the respondents will select through purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling, also known as judgmental sampling meant the sampling that has chosen through specific criteria. In purposive sampling, each sample element was selected for a purpose, usually because of the unique position of the sample elements (Schutt, 2006). The local authority that has proper management in a public park was selected to be respondents in this study. Table 1 shows the list of respondents for this research.

In part of analyzing data, Nvivo 10 Software was use which seemed highly suitable for qualitative processing. The data obtained through a digital recorder were filtered and then those that were not relevant were removed. Subsequently, the data analyzed according to the themes that were appropriate for the development of friendly public park benchmarking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are five respondents from different local authorities gained for this research. The analysis showed that respondents have various background educations, the scope of work and experience in the field:

"I started my job as Assistant Director of Landscape in MBPJ; start from May 2014 and until now. My job does not concentrate on park directly. It more engaging with community and join program with community" (Respondent 1)

As Senior Assistant Director of Landscape Architecture. Duty on landscape section which is the management of amenity trees. Experienced in this fields more than 10 years, wherein Putrajaya 10 years and consultant 2 years" (Respondent 2)

"As an Assistant Director of Horticulture in DBKL for 4 years. I manage the maintenance of soft scape, hardscape and also the plant conservation in Taman Botani Perdana" (Respondent 3)

As Assistant Director of Landscape Architecture. Experienced in this fields more than 6 years" (Respondent 4)

"As an Assistant Director of Landscape for 4 years. Have many years' experience inside and outside the organization. Doing the maintenance of landscape and also the communities work" (Respondent 5)

Through the various background and experience of respondents, the analysis showed that all respondents agreed on the importance to have a friendly public park in Malaysia. It is one of the tools to captivate more people to visit and used the park. However, most respondents agreed that the concept of the friendly public park must have specific objectives so that it can be different from the condition of existing park. The concept of the friendly public park should concentrate on the characteristics of the park and the design of park must be appropriate to the area and climate.

The understanding of friendly public park concept: The question continues to the understanding of respondents to the friendly public park concept. The analysis showed that there are many perspectives from respondents regarding this concept:

"Friendly public park is a big thing and in within that, it is user-friendly, OKU- friendly, kid- friendly, pet-friendly and friendly to all it users" (Respondent 1)

"Friendly public park for me first is user-friendly. Friendly to all categories including gender, age and the most important is OKU-friendly. It means everyone can use" (Respondent 3)

"Park created by following the needs and wants of the people that use it. It must be friendly so that people can feel close to the park" (Respondent 4)

All respondents agreed that to be a friendly public park; it must fulfill the criteria as user-friendly which is a convenience to all level of the user. Also, the park also

required to be OKU-friendly where it is one of the government suggestions when to build a park. Furthermore, the respondents suggest this concept be relevant to the park which situated enclose with the public.

The question continues to identify either have a significant when to develop the friendly public park concept in Malaysia. The analysis showed that every one of the respondents agreed when this concept develop in Malaysia. Respondent also agreed that neighborhood park is the suitable park to apply this concept because the setting of this park is close to the public:

"It is good because of the real situation now, we have no focus which is like a few concepts mixing but the whole thing; it has no concept or benchmarking. So, it is important to have this friendly public park. The park that easily applicable for this concept is neighborhood park and regional park" (Respondent 1)

It is important to have friendly public park because safety and accessibility aspect is the most important things that need to consider when to develop a park. "The park that suitable to apply this concept is local park or municipal park. If for the neighborhood, it must consider the need of the community in that area" (Respondent 3)

The park that suitable to apply this concept is park that near to the community which is neighborhood park" (Respondent 5)

Therefore, the first objective of this study which is to identify the understanding of friendly public park concept has been reached based on the respond by the respondents. The understanding of respondents will give the assistances to develop the friendly public park benchmarking in Malaysia.

The development of friendly public park benchmarking: The development of friendly public park benchmarking is determined the suitability of components and attributes from the respondent's perspectives. The analysis shows that varying justification and opinion from respondents concerning the identifications of components and attributes of friendly public park benchmarking. Connected to main components which related to the friendly public park, the analysis showed that the majority of respondent agreed with the safety and accessibility of the main components for measures friendly public park

benchmarking. However, when it comes to features components, the analysis showed the varying perspectives and thoughts that need to be considered as main components in friendly public park benchmarking:

> "For safety, it is more of design. There is no problem with that. However, for safety, it needs also to view on planting design and planting material" (Respondent 2)

> "When you talk about the friendly public park, safety and access come first. Features come after the safety and access of the park guaranteed. Safety and access are the most important thing you need to consider" (Respondent 3)

> "For safety and access, I agree with it. For features, maybe you can explore more on its aesthetic value including soft scape, tree selecting and also playground equipment" (Respondent 5)

The questions continue to find the relevant attributes which reflected the main components: safety, accessibility and features. For the first component which is safety, eight components have proposed according to the literature review. The analysis showed that majority of respondents agreed with the seven attributes under safety component. The seven attributes which agreed by respondents are: isolation in park layout and legible design visibility and sightlines access and circulation lighting diversity and signage and park information:

> "For me, territorial reinforcement not so important. For management and maintenance, it quite important but for the user, it not so important. Because for users, they want the park that easy to access" (Respondent 1)

Besides, the analysis shows that signage and park information, lighting, visibility and access and circulation are the most important attributes that need to be considered in friendly public park benchmarking. All these attributes are significant to ensure the safety of the user when they've used the park. To identify the attributes under accessibility components, there are two attributes which identified in literature review: individual access and access within a park. The analysis shows that there are many various perspectives regarding this two attributes. The majority of respondents mentioned that the use of a vehicle in the park could be a convenience to the users but it should review the level of appropriateness and type of vehicle use as the need to focus on safety issues.

Nevertheless, most respondents have agreed: individual access and access within a park are the important attributes in accessibility components to measure the friendly public park benchmarking:

> "For access component, the use of a vehicle in the park which is under access in the park, it depends on park and features in the park. If you develop new park with concept friendly public park, you can make the access in park by using vehicle and which type of vehicle that can use" (Respondent 1)

> "How about their safety if using the vehicle in the park? It must be suitable for the condition in the park" (Respondent 2)

> "The use of vehicle need to consider the condition of the place. The suitable vehicle that can use in park is vehicle that eco-friendly which is use battery such as tramp, buggy and electric scooter" (Respondent 4)

To identify the attributes for features components, there are two attributes that can be used to measure the friendly public park according the literature review: park facilities and condition. The analysis showed that there are various perspectives and opinion from respondents concerning this attributes. The majority of respondent have agreed that this two attribute are not suitable attributes for features component toward to measure the friendly public park benchmarking:

> "Park facilities in park features, it is important so that there are activities in park" (Respondent 4)

> "For features, we must consider with culture and value of the park" (Respondent 5)

Therefore, the second objective which is to determine the friendly public park is benchmarking according to the stakeholder perspectives has achieved. The majority of respondents agreed with safety and accessibility as main components in friendly public park benchmarking. However, in term of features, many sides need to take into account where they contend other components such as aesthetic values are suitable and features are under it. For attributes in components, there are seven attributes in safety component. The seven attributes are: isolation in park layout and legible design visibility and sightlines access and circulation lighting diversity and signage and park information. Meanwhile, individual access and

access within a park, are the attributes that have been chosen by respondents to measure the friendly public park benchmarking under accessibility component. However, for features component, this two attributes: park facilities and condition is not suitable attributes to measure the friendly public park benchmarking.

CONCLUSION

The friendly public park is the concept that gives satisfaction and convenience to the user follow which well-suited to the user's desirable. It is a concept which referring the characteristic of the park that closes to the public. The finding shows that all the respondents understood the concept of the friendly public park and clarified the significance on having this concept in Malaysia. Nevertheless, regarding components and attributes which include in the friendly public park, the respondents agreed with the components of safety and accessibility. However, in term of features component, there need to take justification where have other components that will be relevant such as aesthetic values. It is similar to the identification of attributes for friendly public park benchmarking. Most of the respondents agreed with the attributes in safety and accessibility component but not in features component. Therefore, the necessity of in-depth study is highly required to ensure the friendly public park benchmarking will cover all the area that needs by the public as the main user as long it provided by the local authorities as a provider a public park in Malaysia.

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