



CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE PHYSICAL OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT IN URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING AND POLICY

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Abstract

The important of outdoor physical environment to the development of children can never be questioned, since children spend large amount of their time outdoor as compared to adults. Children are vulnerable to their conditions of the physical environment and its quality affects their overall behavior patterns. Children are well known to play everywhere and play with everything. But for urban children, their movement and their play opportunities are often restricted by traffic and unsafe environment.

Today the provision of children outdoor play areas i.e children playgrounds or open spaces, has become integrated into the planning process in most of our residential development. How well it is furnished is an indication of the value that society places on children development. We are fortunate to have such services but are they conducive enough to cater the need for children or do they meet their expectations?

This paper discusses the existing children outdoor facilities developed out of local planning practices. Do these facilities held the potential for our children's physical development? How would the children benefits from their playing environment? Are children happy with their play spaces or do parents concern about their children play opportunity? The paper examines the need to create a more conducive play space beyond the quantitative preferences and guidelines. It further highlights the need for community participation in creating a more functionalized playground.

Keywords: Open Spaces, recreational planning, children play areas.

1.0 Introduction

You can probably recall a world yourself as a child. There was a vacant lot or open field, a building site or back alley where you fled from time to time to escape adult judgment and scrutiny. There, far from a guardian's watchful eye, you and your

friends made your own laws, appointed your own leaders, settled you own disputes. But the landscape for children play area has changed dramatically. Those vacant lots and open fields have given way to a more economical development - have been paved into parking lots or built into shopping malls

and subdivisions. Those back alleys and secret cul-de sacs have become truly frightening and dangerous as it is poorly lit up. The freedom many of us associate with childhood is at worst a leftover, at

best a luxury out of reach for millions of today's kids.

Playing in our environment nowadays will not be the same anymore. Formal provision for children's play



Picture 1: Children will play anywhere, anytime regardless of the settings, but a good furnished and maintained play space are rare in our urban areas.

nowdays often consists of a few pieces of dilapidated equipment in otherwise barren grounds (Teng, 2002, Editor, 2001). Provision for play and recreation is not a priority in most municipalities. Where there are high levels of poverty and a desperate need for health, education, housing and other basic services, investment in children playing facilities may appear to be a frivolous use of limited space and resources (Rani, 1998; Choong, 2000). But even in the poorest neighborhoods, children and their

caregivers make it very clear that safe play is high on their list of concerns. The desire for play is not a frivolous matter, but a deep rooted developmental drive which, when met contributes to growth and competence on every level of human being. This is not limited to younger children. Recreational opportunities for adolescents or adults support their physical and social development, and their constructive integration into the community.

2.0 Importance of children and children's play areas.

Children constitute about 50 percent of the world's population and in the contexts of Malaysian population about 65 percent of its population is children aged less than 18 years old. It is always important to understand what exactly means by 'children' is as there are distinct issues which the urban environment raises in relation to younger children when compared with older children or youths. In the former case, urban planning issues center mainly on the need to protect such children from real and perceived harm, while in the case of youths there are often expressed concerns about the need to design the urban scene in such way as to minimize the harm they cause. Of course, in term of recreational need they differ significantly, as older children have different needs from those of younger children with respect to their use of the space, given their capacity for independent movement.

Many study emphasized on urban children because there are lots of problems involved in urban living (Frost, 1992; Sallis et al., 2000; Boreham and Riddoch, 2001). Although these problems are not unique to living in the city, many are aggravated by urban development and environment. There are many reasons for focusing on urban children, not because they are unfortunate, but in the city we find the problems of vandalism, high crime rate, rapes, thefts and so on that city is seen as threatening place physically and socially. Whereas children at these ages ideally should be provided with secure, safe, comfort and peaceful environment, a

welcoming transition to the larger world. They should be places where children can play safely, walk to school, socialize with friends and begin to enjoy and accept differences. There are certainly many reasons why we have to be concerned about the children as we always overlooked it!

Children's development is not the same as growth, although these words are use interchangeable at times. Growth means becoming larger, while development implies that growth and change take place in an organized and integrated ways. Development does not just 'happen' to children. Through their involvement in the world around them they are active participants in this reciprocal process. Through their engagement with the world around them children acquire a range of skills which they will draw on throughout their lives. Children will spent most of their waking hours actively involved in play — plays covers a wide range of behavior - from noisy physical activity with other children, to quiet and solitary exploration: from spontaneous and unstructured sequences of pretense and imagination, to complex and highly structured games of skill. Play is highly productive part of growing up: it has been referred to as the child's work, and this is intended most seriously (Boreham and Riddoch, 2001).

The outdoor environment for many children is very important as their location for play, and research shows a marked preference amongst most children for outdoor play, wherever possible. Time spent outdoors is one of the most consistent predictors of children's physical activity (Sallis et al., 2000). It could be argued that among primary

school aged children, active free-play or unstructured physical activity that takes place outdoors in the child's free time may potentially be the major contributor to children's physical activity (Burdette et al., 2004). For example, an observational study in the US found greater amounts of physical activity amongst pre-school children occurred as active free-play rather than structured activities. Parkinson (1987) argues that the outdoors offers a counterbalance to the parent-dominated indoors and affords a domain which is explorable, dynamic and interesting. Children experience the environment in a deep and direct manner, not as a background for events but as a factor and stimulator.

3.0 What do we have for our children's play today?

Physical outdoor planning for children in a residential environment meant the planning for playgrounds. Playground planning is certainly a critical component, but we should not assume that children play areas are only resort to establishment of playgrounds with swings, slides, climbing structures and see-saw. Children needs for recreational opportunities have changed with the changing trend in leisure and recreational activities in the society. A better understanding of where children play and why, is important because it may inform opportunities to promote children's physical activity.

Today the provision of children outdoor play areas i.e children playgrounds or open spaces has become integrated into the planning process in most of our residential development.

- Sport facility areas: These consist of playing fields that should be at least 3.2 hectares in extent to offer the maximum number of games and to enable effective management and supervision;
- Local parks and gardens: These areas are meant to serve the recreational needs of residential neighborhoods. The area should at least be 2.4 hectare and be provided wherever possible within 0.4 kilometer radius of the neighborhood it is intended to serve;
- Local play areas: These are children's playgrounds. Their minimum size is 1.4 hectares, and they are to be provided with a standard of 0.2 hectares per thousand people. They are intended to serve catchments areas within a radius of 0.2 to 0.4 kilometers.
- Incidental open spaces: These are small open spaces to cater for the needs of the immediate local residents. The general rule applied for the size is a minimum of 0.3 hectare, and to be provided with a standard of 0.12 hectare per thousand people.

There is guidelines to be referred and standards to be implemented (City Hall Kuala Lumpur, 2003). Developing guidelines and standard for play spaces and play opportunities has become critical with conflicting demands for spaces in urban areas. The emphasis of the guidelines is to provide more parks and open spaces for recreational activities. What is obvious about the guidelines is the emphasis on open space standards, expressed as a ratio in hectares

per 1000 people, and their catchments areas. The 'standards approach' uses two major principles: the type of open space and the space requirement, which would depend upon the area (a fixed percentage based on the total amount of land in the subdivision) and the population in terms of a density ratio. These practices of standards and typology clearly contribute to prevent the development of strategic open space policies. The approach has its critics, who argue that such a formula does not relate needs and benefits. Furthermore, a significant consequence of such emphasis is its preoccupation with means rather than ends, uses rather than functions and products rather than processes. The shortcoming has been further strengthened by an overwhelmingly uni-dimensional perception of the role of open space as almost exclusively recreational. Other significant non-recreational functions of open space have been relatively neglected.

This process, called 'planning gain'¹, benefits the local authority, as they can impose obligations on developers to carry out tasks beneficial to the community. Provision of parks and associated facilities depends on the size of the development. The standard used is described in the planning guidelines, with one park typically serving one large or several smaller neighborhoods. Areas 2 to 8 hectares in size or ten percent of the developable area, whichever is lower, should serve no more than 3,000 to 5,000 residents per park. Ideally, local parks should be accessible to residents who live within 400 metres radius of the park. Local parks are frequently located adjacent to elementary schools, so as to

share acquisition and development costs with the school district. They are generally located away from major arterial roads to provide safe and easy access for the users that surround it. They should be accessible without having to cross major arterial roads.

While the space requirement for parks is governed by the population and the size of the development, the provision of facilities is based on the facilities guidelines suggested by the Town and Country Planning Department. Facilities in neighbourhood parks may include the following: playground equipment on a safe surface; unlighted practice fields for baseball, soccer, football; unlighted tennis courts; unlighted multi-purpose courts; active areas for unorganized play; picnic areas with benches, picnic tables and cooking grills; shaded pavilions and gazebos; jogging exercise trails and security lighting.

The space allocation method applied to the total subdivision helps to guide planners to quantify the amount of land that should be allocated within the development or for future development. There are also guidelines to specify the type of facilities to be provided. The application of the guidelines and standard meet the twin concepts of development plans and development control of the area. Housing developers are required to submit the total housing development application, including the park area, to the planning department. Once submitted, the applications are considered by the planners and other technical departments that involved in the planning process. The basis for determining whether or not a particular application should be approved is based on the Structure Plan

policy, together with any other material consideration, allied with the judgment of the planners and relevant members within the Planning Department.

The amount of land made available for local parks by this procedure has generally been successful in providing enough space for passive or active recreation areas in urban areas. However, as shown by the number of local parks and their total area, there is a deficiency in the provision of local parks (Muhammad, 1993; City Hall Kuala Lumpur, 2003). Heseltine and Holbron (1987) summarize much of the dispute that persists amongst parents in commenting that ‘with the best intention of children provision or other physical environment are almost valueless in meeting the developmental needs of children’.

3.1 Methods

The discussion present a set of parks—three different selected parks and their surrounding residential areas represent a cross section of local park population in Kuala Lumpur. The residential local parks within the territory of Kuala Lumpur City Hall amounted to 66 sites, which were variously classified as open fields, buffer zones, children’s playgrounds, stadiums, and green spaces. Of these 66 sites, 46 were eliminated for two reasons: first, those classified as stadiums, implying that they were privately managed recreational facilities, and second, those areas classified as buffer zones or green space². Since the study is focused on residents’ perceptions, only parks that fell within residential areas or neighborhoods were

considered. These eliminations left 20 local park sites for analysis. The parks themselves vary in size, ranging from 0.4 hectares to 1.2 hectares as well as in terms for apparent visual and facility developments. The three parks were selected from the 20 parks, using a clustering technique³ as a tool for data reduction (Everitt, 1974). Clustering operates by grouping parks that have common attributes that can be determined and measured. The types of park were grouped according to the apparently dominant provision of equipment and facilities; park having the best, average park and poor provision of park facilities. Categorizing the parks in term of their quality of provision can establish a basis for analyses of the relationships between variables that would help to explain the ways residents use the parks, their importance and the roles played by these parks.

A survey of 210 residents living within the residential areas surrounding the parks constituted the second components of the data collection. A sample of residents was drawn from an area within 400 metres of each of the selected neighbourhood parks. This is a distance suggested as an area covered by local parks in the existing planning guidelines, and referred to as ‘threshold area’ (Planning Guidelines: Recreational Open Spaces, 1997). This distance is also justified in the work of Bang (1970) when he used an area within 400 metre distance from parks as his study site and found that use of parks reduced with distance. The resident survey was designed to generate an analysis of people’s attitudes and how they related to recreational facilities for their children. Questions

were designed to obtain information on how residents view and use their local parks. It was concerned with collecting data on the residents' perceptions of the space: the quality of parks and their children's uses of the spaces and their suggestions for future improvement.

Response frequencies were tabulated for all questions. Statistical comparisons were made to assess the relationships between study variables. Chi-square was used to determine significant relationships between each level of independent variables. Additionally, cross-tabulations were prepared; for example to determine the percentage of respondents using parks in each particular neighborhood. All results reported are based on tests of significance at the 0.5 alpha level.

3.2 Park observed

3.2.1 Physical development

The descriptions of the three parks were based on observation of the sites, and on secondary data collected from City Hall. First, Bukit Maluri park is located in Planning Zone 15, known as Bukit Indah. It was developed in 1976 and gazetted into the City Hall open space system in 1984. The park comprises approximately 2.59 hectares, with a very flat surface. It was designed as part of the required residential open space by Bukit Maluri Sdn Bhd Developer (Refer Picture 2(a)). The park's facilities are a children's playground (four swings, six see-saws, two slides, one monkey climb), one basketball court, one tennis court and 86 benches. The park is accessible from most

points on its periphery. It is fenced except on the outer side of a monsoon drain. This park had the highest number of benches; however, they were arranged sparsely in the middle of the park. The rest of the site was grassy, and informal paths traverse parts of the area. Although it is the biggest park among the three, it did not have a proper soccer field, but evidence of trampled grass indicated that the area was heavily used for soccer games (Refer Table 1).

Secondly, the Taman Tun park is located in City Hall's planning unit known as Edinburgh. It was developed in 1974, but was not managed by City Hall until it was gazetted in 1984 (Refer Picture 2(b)). It is on higher ground than the street level, and slopes down-wards to the east. Jalan Zaaba has a unique facility in the form of an enclosed garden with considerable children's equipment, seating facilities, trees and a plant nursery. The area is a higher-class neighbourhood, populated by higher income groups of people with mixed ethnic backgrounds. TTDI Seapark Development Sdn Bhd initially developed the neighbourhood from an oil-palm plantation into a new suburb and community. As the boundary of the urbanized Federal Territory expanded over time, this new suburb eventually became an 'old' suburban area within the centre of Kuala Lumpur.

The third park is Pantai Dalam park located in Bukit Indah Zone; it is 1.63 hectares in size and was developed in 1972 as part of the open space for a New Village⁴ (Picture 2(c)). This park is located in Bukit Indah Zone; it is 1.63 hectares in size and was developed in 1972 as part of the open space for a New Village. The land surface is flat, and

contains two sections, a children's playground and a soccer field. The children playground is only a small area located at the main entrance of the park. The children's playground was provided

with six swings, two seesaws, two slides and eight concrete benches located along the edge of the park.

The apparent differences across the parks can be seen in the table below:

Table 1: Neighborhood Park Profile

Park characteristic Size	Pantai Dalam 1.63hec	Taman Tun 1.92 hec	Bukit Maluri 2.59 hec
Children playing facilities			
Swings	6	4	4
See-saw	2	6	6
Slides		1	2
Monkey climbs	-	1	1
Sitting benches	8	24	86
Teenages/Adults facilities			
Takraw court	1	2	2
Basketball court	-	1	1
Badminton court	-	2	1
Tennis court	-	-	1
Soccer field	1	-	1

Sources: Adapted from City Hall Kuala Lumpur and KLSP study 2000

Taking a close look at the problems they share, clear patterns emerge which offer an excellent guide to understand the play area and the exclusivity of the sites for children.

People associate parks with children and childhood. The perceptions that parks are places for children and that children are the most legitimate users was commonly accepted. Concerns about the current poor state of parks were often expressed in terms of how they affect children. . Even more pressing, some of the areas designated as recreational parks were not properly developed, or in some cases were even left vacant (The Star,

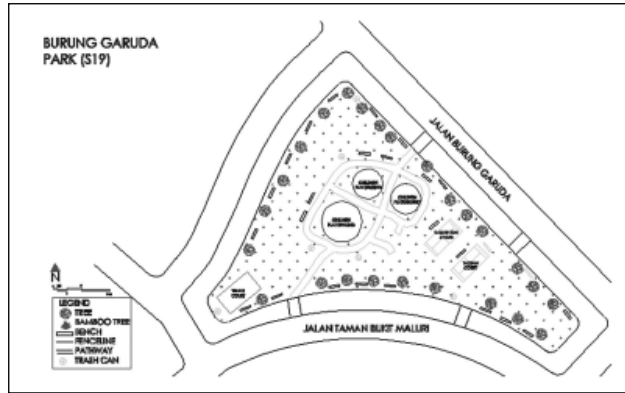
2000). As shown in the table, parks are unevenly furnished and often not matched to needs of the users- in term of modern needs, and located in the wrong place.

Such problems have drawn attention from the public, as well as planners (Chan et al. 1993; Hamzah 2003; Wan 2003). The problems are summarized below:

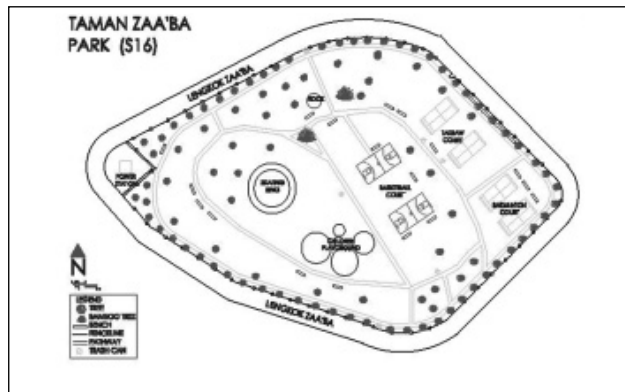
- There are apparent differences in the development and maintenance of the parks: most of the parks in poor neighborhood areas were not properly develop. The development of the area is a reflection of the area not being regulated constantly. What

Picture 2: Layout design of children play ground and its facilities

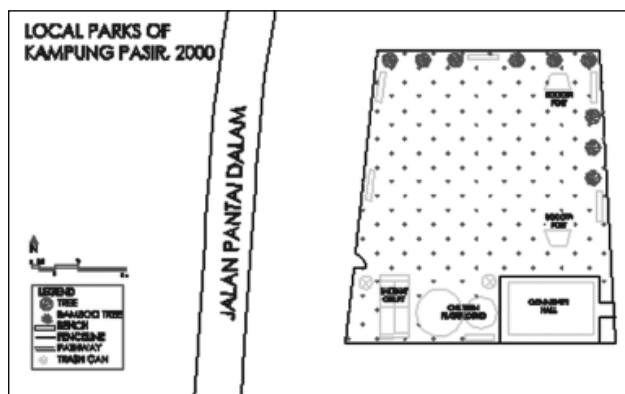
(a) Bukit Maluri park



(b) Taman Tun Park



(c) Pantai Dalam Park



it implies here that the play areas are developed out of the convenience, that the provision was based on relatively easy option-- standardized equipment with minimal supervision to fix.

- Lack of functional design: There is no evidence of design, with poor setting of facilities. Many of these parks have been formed from historic landed estates, thus left to the local authorities to maintain and manage. Although the provision of the play areas were planned as integral with new housing but it fails to materialize as developments take shape on the ground because developers tend to leave the tasks until the end or just because the fear of residents' complaints.

The most common design concept fit the open space criteria practiced by most local authority is that it turns the area into highly specific space. Within the site, spaces are design for one specific use, and lack of spatial differentiation leads to spatial discrimination against non-sports activities. Due to the size of the area, only limited selection of specific functions can be realized. It might not be the most critical factor as long as it provides opportunity to all. This designation of space favors the already assertive boys and male adolescents. The dominance of the football field leads to the segregation of gender uses of the area. Options for activities beyond the conventional use of the facility are

extremely limited. Due to this lack of option, not many female users were observed using the space, except for the small children playground area.

- Lack of proper landscaping: There is no proper tree planting and lack of supporting facilities; hence the open space looks bare and monotonous. In fact most of the spaces appear to have no design and management philosophy. Typically adults view urban trees and vegetation as part of landscaping that helps to beautify and green their neighbourhood, thus improve the visual amenity. But the child at play may view tree as a resource – something that is to be climbed, or as reference point, while vegetation is a means for cover in the game of hide and seek or just like their hunting ground for insects or butterflies. In other word, the landscape has different utility values by different group of viewers.

3.2.2 Children and park space interrelation

The existence of parks was perceived to be important (54%) by people of Pantai Dalam compared to the situation with the two other neighbourhoods. However, in general, all respondents find that parks still play an important role within their neighbourhood as shown by positive pearson correlation ($r = 0.01$ significant at 0.05 level) among the parks.

Table 2: Importance of the presence of parks as perceived by residents.

Importance of park	Name of park					
	Pantai Dalam		Tmn Tun		Bukit Maluri	
	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%
Not important	7	10.0	15	22.1	8	12.9
Average	25	35.7	29	42.6	33	53.2
Important	38	53.6	24	35.3	21	33.9
Total	70	100	68	100	62	100

Respondents were asked 'if the park were taken away, how would you feel about it?' Not surprisingly, if open space is considered important, residents will react negatively to such a proposition. Responses were grouped into six categories reflecting the attitude they expressed. Most responses related to negative attitudes: anger and frustration. It is interesting to note that despite the deplorable state of the Pantai Dalam park, and the small size, as compared to the other, residents tend to have a positive attitude towards their park.

Parks visits provided a way for children to spend time with fellow friends. For parents taking children to the parks was also seen as an opportunity for parents to talk to children. Interview with older children of this neighborhood began to show the extent to which they use the open area as place to hang out. They knew the area from childhood. It's a place to meet people and stay there for the evening.

The responses given here were only opinion made by parents, the intention here is to observe the general pattern of local parks use by children approved of,

or known to adult respondents. In view of the variation of purposes, residents are allowed to repeat as many uses as applicable in the questionnaire, which then can be totalled. As noted in the listing of the activities, the uses were generalized to the categories of active, passive or visual, as judged appropriate to the actual reported use.

The high percentages of active uses are expected, as children are more commonly associated with active games such as soccer, takraw, badminton and so on. However the higher percentage of passive uses in Pantai Dalam is unexpected. This unexpected result may stem from the differences in the features of the parks in term of the playing equipment provided and children's engagement in physical activities that were restricted by poor and limited provisions and equipments. "Exercise is important, of course, but children have so many other needs that are not being addressed". "They need a diverse, secure and supportive place, a safe haven. Once they have that, the play will come. And that play, you know, will be wonderful' reiterated by one of the parents.

Table 3: Summary of children uses of the parks

Children uses	Name of park					
	Pantai Dalam		Tmn Tun		Bukit Maluri	
	Number of uses	%	Number of uses	%	Number of uses	%
Visual uses	19	10.2	13	10.7	25	11.6
Active uses	81	43.5	57	47.1	87	40.5
Passive uses	84	45.2	44	36.3	84	39.1
Others	2	1.0	7	5.7	9	4.8
Total	186	100	121	100	215	100

Despite the increasing concern that is being expressed about the problems and deteriorating trends arising from poor planning and management of these areas, it is mostly subjective, and there is little empirical data to support it and no systematic research. There is a need for detailed study for each community of the city and an open-minded approach to the specific problems that might be found. Studies on users have been done by many planning (Department of Town and Country Planning, 1999), but they tended to focus on quantitative measures and standards, neglecting the dynamic nature of people's experience of the outdoors in the context of the site and situation of the area, which would determine whether the existing parks are capable of fulfilling the basic principles presented and envisioned by the Total Planning and Development guidelines.

3.2.3 Perceived problems

The notion that parks are places for children and that children are the most

legitimate users of public parks can to a certain extent be accepted from these result. However, their activities are, by and large, associated with the built provisions of the site, and this is particularly so for the types of activities afforded for different age groups. The importance of parks to children requires no further discussion. However, concerns about the current poor state of the local parks in terms of the effect on children's uses were frequently expressed by parents: the opportunity for children to engage in enjoyable and purposeful activities. Anxiety about limited choices of playing equipment and poor equipment maintenance was most reported. This is an important remark, as society in general agrees to the idea that provision of opportunities for children's play is important, as play is closely linked to children's development and learning. Practically this means that the play possibilities provided should be in step with the level of mental, physical and emotional development of the children. The non-use of playgrounds by children may not be because they prefer to be

watching television or playing at computers but because children's playgrounds have limited playing opportunities or are just not interesting and challenging enough.

Pantai Dalam residents felt that having a 'vast' landscape made their park attractive, yet not inviting for the children outdoor games. The surveyed parks generally lacked ancillary infrastructure or public amenities to support community events. The lack of parking space, lighting, toilets, and shelters are all problems, and suggest facilities that might reasonably improve the condition and use of the areas.

Poor ground maintenance is also a problem. As highlighted by residents, their comments were related to broken facilities, trash and soggy land surface. One of the residents from Taman Tun claimed; 'I helped to pick up trash thrown by kids playing here'.

The discussion with parents in the study shows that their other concerns

about their children is the personal safety for oneself and for one's children, and this issue becoming more urgent and today most symbolized in the decline of park uses.

It is generally argued that changes in values within a given society will exert their own influence on the living environment, including the demand for quality recreational spaces and quality neighborhood environment. As society has changed, parks must also be changed to meet present needs. Of primary importance, perhaps, is the evaluation of the existing park and its capability to provide opportunity for recreational activities to happen so that we can understand the urban open-space realm better and work towards better design for the future needs of the population. Since changes in city living has changed the type of games and activities enjoyed by the urban children, we have to adjust our thinking regarding park planning for our current urban children. It would seem that

Table 4: Reasons for not using the park

Deterrent factors of park uses	Names of Parks					
	Pantai Dalam		Tmn Tun		Bukit Maluri	
	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%	Number of Respondents	%
Playing equipment: Quality and quantity	14	34.1	4	12.1	14	56.0
Variety of activities	8	19.5	8	24.2	5	20.0
Accessibility	2	4.9	2	6.1	2	8.0
Infrastructure facilities	10	24.4	13	39.4	2	8.0
Poor maintenance	4	9.8	6	18.2	2	8.0
Safety	3	7.3	-	-	-	-
Total	41	100	33	100	25	100

Table 5: Feelings about park safety for children

Safety rating Children	Name of park					
	Pantai Dalam		Tmn Tun		Bukit Maluri	
	Number of residents	%	Number of residents	%	Number of residents	%
Not safe at all	12	17.6	9	13.0	3	4.3
Somewhat safe	15	22.1	15	21.7	3	4.3
Average	22	32.4	29	42.0	29	41.4
Safe	10	14.7	12	17.4	26	37.1
Very safe	9	13.2	4	5.8	9	12.9
Total	68	100	69	100	70	100

$p=0.001$; test is significant at 0.05 level

certain children values towards parks prevail, but the needs may have been changed.

4.0 Towards creating a children play areas

Despite typological disorder, and in some aspect lacking of formlessness and shrinking children play areas, it does not allowed to detract from the fact that the provision of the sites were very much appreciated by residents and are still places of great pleasure to children; deeply enjoyed and loved. The discussion have implications for planners and policy makers since they reinforce the fact that play is normally a housing-based activity in the neighbourhood and its development is crucial in determining the richness (or otherwise) the children play opportunities. Some points to consider for children play spaces are:

- The fact that value of local park lies partially in the knowledge and

conditions of the parks. There is a direct relationship between a park's quality and the use of its space. Better neighbourhoods are provided with diverse recreation opportunities while, on the limited evidence of the present study, poorer neighbourhoods are relatively lacking in outdoor facilities. This relationship is significant especially in relation to children's equipment. Therefore, there must have differences in the controls, application guidelines and approval process from one housing project to another. There are few consistencies in terms of sizes, objectives and design of such spaces, and each development approval has evidently been in part a response to the developers' level of financial capability and commitment.

- Use of the parks is conditioned by the opportunity available for residents to carry out their outdoor activities. The discussion shows,

somewhat surprisingly, inadequacies of facilities did not hamper people from using the parks, but the types of activities engaged in by the children are influenced by what is provided for them. They probably do not need expensive equipment but they need opportunity to optimize the use of the area. Park functions can go beyond their physical attributes if there is connection between them and their surroundings. The underlying principle for future development of local parks here must be to ensure the provision of better quality children facilities by acknowledging the full potential of their functions as outdoor recreational resources for all level of users, within the framework of our hierarchical open-space system.

- What probably needed is more versatile and functionalized space in reasonable proportions. What it means here is that the differentiation of the spaces within a site should be not through a predefined function but through differing dimensions and qualities of the material used. In other words the space could offer various user groups, over the course of any given day, different usage possibilities. The approach of park standardization contributes to the static nature of parks. The use of standard be the basis for creating guidelines which should not be implemented strictly and closely, planners should not called for standardized park elements based on generic facilities that approached

some population norm. What is implied here is the understanding of what the users need from the areas.

- Safety in public area such as this is a basic requirement for flexible use. Design that does not include the users influence the way people feels about and within a public space in their neighbourhood. Safety is also determined by the regular maintenance of the space. While this is primarily a question of ones financial capability or resources, it should be considered seriously during the development of a design and management of the area.
- Sensitive local park planning should acknowledge that cities are made up of many types of children with many kinds of needs. Thus a two-way process of engagement is required, whereby the community, planners, government officers and professionals should learn together and try to achieve agreed objectives and plans. This would be empowering for all. Children should be engaged during the planning stage as their views and experiences will very much mirror their needs and aspirations. The developments on play areas are highlighted and determined by young people (the planners), expectedly not the user of the area. Children usually created their own kind of order based on criteria quite different from those of adults. It is this order that planners must come to understand and respect.

5.0 Conclusions

Some of the children playgrounds are in need of design and management reform. Although the parks are very minimal and basic in terms of provision and maintenance, it is still be considered as important space to the residents especially to small children. Children's uses of the areas were dominant but hampered by the deteriorating facilities due to a lack of maintenance, vandalism and poor design.

The value of local parks lies partly in the knowledge that they exist, and partly in the conditions of the parks. The use of the park by children could be significantly improved with some *insight and hindsight* given to fixing their shortcomings. The potential of playground within this limited development could be realized if the consciousness among planners to create a satisfying recreational environment. As commented by Kevin Asher (in Krohe 1990), "The power of park is not in its size...the true standard of park is the level of customer satisfaction". If planners, architects and policy makers have serious intent to improve the play world of the urban child, they would do well to observe this message.

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- 4 In the land use survey process, visiting and travelling through the parks numerous times made the area familiar. It became clear what playgrounds and small lots are. With the information from the branch offices and help from the officers, identification and the search for information about the park sites became easier.

Footnotes

- 1 Planning gain is 'a term which has come to be applied whenever, in connection with a grant of planning permission, a local planning authority seeks to impose on a developer an obligation to carry out works not included in the development for which permission has been sought or to make some payment or confer some extraneous right or benefit in return for permitting development to take place (Greed 1996;p61)
- 2 These types of open spaces are predominantly small planted linear areas forming an integral part of the city's street features, and including areas planted to divide traffic flows
- 3 Cluster analysis is a statistical procedure used to reduce data to more manageable statistical application. The growth in popularity of cluster analysis paralleled the early growth in computer installations. The major stimulus was the classic book by R. Sokal and P.Sneath, *Principles of Numerical Taxonomy* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1963) The literature on cluster analysis virtually exploded after its publication and continues to show dramatic annual increase even now.