

Night Market Contribution to Sustainability of Urban Spaces

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ABSTRACT

There are three main elements of sustainable development, namely: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and social sustainability. No doubt that it is difficult to intertwine harmoniously the anthropocentric of social and economic objectives with the eco-centric objectives. Using Malaysia and Thailand as a case study, this paper attempts to explore the night market phenomenon which has a positive impact on urban sustainability, especially in small urban spaces. The night market traders are able to increase their incomes which come from lower-middle economic class. Utilising of unused urban space as a 'venue' of night market has changed the landscape. The research applied various techniques in gathering data and presented findings which are in line with various socio-spatial dimensions. It is found that night markets have slowly transformed unused urban space into a place.

Keywords: Malaysia, night market, sustainability, Thailand, unused urban space

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, public spaces emerged out of many different forces. The consequences of societal encroachment

due to interferences and transformation of spaces are conspicuous in urban areas. Some were product of a heterogeneous society with various needs, interests and aesthetic appreciation. Others were by-products of the desire for careful planning in whatever priorities guiding their form and functions aligned to state policies. Nevertheless, there are other elements that occur on-site without any formal planning procedure. Carr (1992) defined public spaces as open, publicly accessible areas where people indulge in group or individual activities.

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On one hand, public spaces can take many forms and may assume various names, such as plazas, malls, and playgrounds, sharing common ingredients. On the other hand, public spaces also enable people to connect with others, and affiliate with them in some ways. People are not passive; they

manipulate and change space according to their preferences. Thus, space always has an influence and impact on the people (Carmona, Heath, Oc, & Tiesdell, 2003). Public space is not structured according to the planning intention of the municipality.

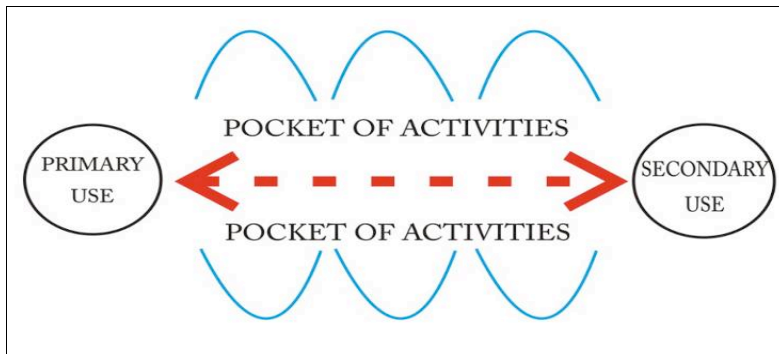


Figure 1. Linkages of activities

Relph (1993) in his study of urban space argued that phenomenology is an understanding of an individual at the stage of a clear rational thinking and the result or exploration of the experience cannot be explained literally. It includes experience and perception of the individual. It also depends on the number of observations and assumptions of his or her intelligence. Likewise, urban place cannot be explained literally and our understanding of the place is often based on the dynamic activities of the people.

Scholars have focused on the phenomenology of the place based on interactions of people in the urban areas, such as Jacobs (1961), Relph (1983), Trancik (1987), Seamons (2003), and

Whyte (2005). Seamons (2003) stated characteristics of a place are determined by physical, social and psychological nature. No two places are the same, he found and the image of a place is not represented by a significant landmark but by the established processes of the community in the area. Even the spaces in dwellings are arranged according to requirements of the occupants. The place and its surroundings consists of collective built forms which identify the place.

A few studies had looked at the complexity and function of towns and cities in relation to the economic development and growth of cities: These are The Image of the City, Jacobs (1961), 'Eye on the street', Relph (1983) with a concept of

Place and Placelessness, Trancik (1987) 'the Lost Space', Seamon (2003) 'Space and phenomenology'. All these scholars focused on the quality of the environment, either physical or social, rooted in the activities of the people. Human experience is at the core of phenomenology and is a significant factor in enriching the urban place. The existence of an activity that helps to produce the economy is reflected by the integration and experiences of individuals. Furthermore, two main activities, primary and secondary as discussed by Jacobs (1961) are the main linkage in urban activities (Figure 1). It is the interchange of continuous primary activities that form the agglomeration of people in urban areas while various and additional secondary activities help to support the continuous usage of the space. The integration of primary and secondary usage supported by the pocket of activities provides linkages that lead to a diverse and multi-function of activities in urban areas. These diversities give "live" to the urban environment and enrich the quality of urban space.

Night Market as A Place Ballet

Place ballet is a phenomenological notion developed by Jacobs (1961) and later enhanced by Seamon's in his *A Geography of Lifeworld* (1979) to describe regularity of place initiated by habit, routine and supportive physical environment. Conducting their own daily activities, people come together in space, which takes on a sense of place. Individual participants using the same space unintentionally create

a larger place with its own tempo of activity bustle and calm. These elements will lead to the formation of *Place Identity*.

Place ballet may occur at various scales, indoors or outdoors. A lounge, café, office building, public space or any other situation where users come together regularly, face to face, provide a foundation for place ballet. One phenomenon of place ballet is an outdoor night market that later became a weekly "fiesta" in a certain setting in Malaysia and Thailand since 1970s. The scale of the night market grew bigger after the recession of 1997. The job prospectors that were laid off after the recessions saw the "night market" as the venue to try their luck on small businesses. The consequences of place ballet for environmental and planning theory are also examined in this study corresponding to its role in sustaining a sense of locality and community that can be found in the night markets of Malaysia and Thailand.

METHODS

This research aims to explicate the night market phenomenon in terms of the participants' consciousness (what they are experiencing and how). Its focus is on the intentional relationship between the person and the meanings of the things they're focusing on and experiencing.

Various techniques were applied in gathering data, such as interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, and analysis of personal texts. Supplementary techniques such as repertory grids (Kelly, 1955) and

documentary sources was also used to explore the meanings further. Researchers engage in reflexive analysis (Finlay, 2005), moving back and forth in a kind of dialectic between experience and awareness; between studying the parts and the whole. The analysis process involves a process of reflective writing and rewriting. This process aims to create depth: multiple layers of meaning are crafted to lay bare certain truths while retaining the ambiguity of experience. This strategy is suitable to investigate the issues because several potential causes and factors of the relationship between people and urban space were rather diverse and interrelated.

The research was conducted in various urban areas of Malaysia and Thailand while one example of each country is discussed in this paper, i.e. night market at Sungai Dua Road near the main campus of University Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia and night market at Sanehanusorn and Prachathipat Road, Hat Yai, Thailand.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Night market in Malaysia and Thailand emerged as early as the 1970s and prospered after the economic recession of 1997. During this period, the informal sector began to thrive after the formal sector began retrenching workers leading to the latter setting up small businesses at the night market in order to survive. These activities are established naturally and a product of limited opportunity in terms of job availability. In recent decades, the night market in both countries are encouraged by

the government and legalised by the city council.

Most of the unused urban space near the residential areas is connected by secondary or service roads that often become the venue for these night markets. Usually these activities start at late evenings until midnight. A wide range of uncooked and cooked food, as well as everyday household items are displayed together with handicraft or any items that can fetch a penny. In Malaysia, the location of the night markets changes daily according the region and is rotated weekly as allowed by the city council. However, in Thailand, its location is not rotated, fixed on any particular urban space or unused space that has been determined by the city council. In Malaysia, the location is often close to the housing areas or within the proximity of the main primary road of the newly urbanised areas. However, in Thailand the existence of the night market is a continuity of activities of the formal activities during after hour operation. Hence, the continuous activity in the urban areas is prolonged until midnight.

Characteristic of Night Market

The people in Malaysia and Thailand have relied on the night market for many decades for their groceries and daily household needs. Night markets particularly benefit especially young couples who work long hours and do not have the time to visit supermarkets. Despite the mushrooming of shopping outlets and malls, the night market remains popular and indispensable to Malaysians and Thais. It started as an

extension of local marketplace in towns and villages where traders sold their goods in the late evenings till night. While most wet markets selling fresh produce operate during early mornings, the night market operates in the evenings. Working mothers who do not have opportunity to shop during the day find the night market useful to get fresh supplies of foodstuff and other household items.

The pattern of the “night markets” is similar in both countries. Rows of makeshift stalls and carts are lined up, brightly lit by fluorescent and halogen lamps to induce an almost “carnival-like” atmosphere. Most traders can be seen selling an assortment of goods ranging from fresh produce and dry goods to cooked food, cakes, cookies, household items, trinkets, clothes and accessories. Peddlers selling toys, candies and balloons try and tempt children while adults are often lured by the sale of household goods and gadgets. The night markets have become a landmark of a particular place.

In this article, a study that was carried out at Sungai Dua, located near the main campus of University Sains Malaysia. This is one of the locations of the Night Market in the Southeast Region of the island. The night market starts as early as 5.00 p.m. and continues until 11.00 p.m. The street is closed to traffic, allowing only pedestrians. These streets are usually underutilised or the venue that has been agreed upon by the community in the neighbourhood. Most of the patrons are students and road users along Sungai Dua and the residents of the vicinity. The secondary road that stretches

about 70 meters is where the stalls are located, bright with colourful bulbs. Most of the vendor sellers are those who work in the formal sector during the day and sell cooked food or household items to the visitors at the night market. The ambience and pattern of the night market portray the local culture - from the food and handicraft they sell. It is an initiative introduced by the government to improve the economic situation of low-income urbanites. The night market is managed by a committee consisting of stall operators. The ambience is a display of highly amplified music, street musicians, beggars and the noise of cooking utensils and the sound of stall operators hawking their ware. To the residents in the neighbourhood, it is the most awaited event of the week.

The Night Market is a weekly event in Malaysia intended to encourage urbanites to participate in the business sector with an effort to curb urban poverty. The physical setting is a typical part of Malaysian life. For a small family or those who just starting a family, the Night Market is a place to get fresh vegetables and fish as during the day both parents work. Since the night markets are within walking distance it is easy to get household supplies.

In contrast, the night market at Sanehanusorn and Prachathipat Road, Hat Yai, Thailand, is located at the city centre. The night market has been established informally for years and attracted hundreds of people daily especially Saturday nights. During the day, the atmosphere is relatively quiet and peaceful. The formal sectors

operate from 9.00 a.m. until 9.00 p.m. At around 6.00 p.m. the operators begin to line up the street and set up their makeshift stalls and items for sale. At about 7.00 p.m. the atmosphere changes significantly. There is vibrant shopping activities at the bazaar and shopping malls are full of local patrons and tourist shoppers. This establishment is linked to the “night market” and this space becomes the centre of festivities for local urban dwellers and tourists alike. The presence of hawkers and street vendors

during the night starts at about 7.00 pm changes the atmosphere totally. They occupy the piazza in front of Lee Garden Plaza especially the side-walks, but the area is not transformed into a formal pedestrian mall. There is a contestation of space which is negotiated informally by the city dwellers. Majority of the hawkers sell local food and drinks to tourists who stay around the Sanehanusorn and Prachathipat Road. Buyers get good bargain and can even find items not sold elsewhere.



Figure 2. Scene of night market at Sungai Dua Road, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia



Figure 3. A night market scene at Sanehanusorn and Prachathipat Road, Hat Yai, Thailand

Advantages and Disadvantages

The result of study indicated night markets have advantages as well as disadvantages. The positive aspects of the night market show that urban space has become a social ground for most urban dwellers in their daily routine. A night market which takes place in the public space reveals basic and social needs that can be accommodated in a constrained space. The sustainability of the activities and the 'life' of the public space are also reflected by how people

negotiate with each other to share their place, time or 'exploiting' the space. The negative aspect is that the existence of the phenomenon is frequently 'disturbed' by the 'authority' or others urban dwellers, including the irresponsible pedestrians. It is thus necessary to implement a good plan to solve the negative problems that may arise from such 'spontaneous activities' and allow the people to gather and interact. Table 1 shows the advantages and disadvantages of the night market in both study areas.

Table 1
The advantages and disadvantages of night market

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Induce the local economy to thrive.	1. No feasible parking space and trigger illegal parking spots within the neighbourhood.
2. Develop social interaction.	2. Very noisy.
3. Economic activities help to alleviate poverty.	3. Becomes garbage dumping ground after activities end.
4. Stimulate tourism activities and establish meaning for locals.	4. The question of hygienic food, expired foodstuff, authenticity and low-quality products.
5. Opportunity for family members to get fresh produce	5. Over crowdedness
6. Reduce reliability on private cars	6. Encourage other unhealthy activities such as pick-pockets and social ills
7. Encourage the people to exercise by walking	
8. Giving vibrancy to the neighbourhood	
9. Encouraging the ingenuity of the locals	

It is observed that space has a significant influence and impact upon the people as suggested by Carmona et al., (2003, p. 106). This was evident in this case study. They change the unused space into a *street-ballet*. The atmosphere of the scene changes dramatically from an empty unused urban space into a "*mini fiesta*". The spatial relationship between the people and night market shows a continuous two-way process

- the street-vendors and visitors participating actively and transforming the unused space into a place. Simultaneously, the conditions of the unused space obligate the informality of night market activity. With respect to this, the street vendors become creative in developing their 'kiosk' by designing a makeshift stall that can be dismantled and erected in any condition.

CONCLUSION

Both in Malaysia and Thailand, night market is a new informal phenomenon that takes place at a specific urban space. It is an economic lifeline for many people who are not drawing enough income to support their family and provides economic sustainability among the people. The informal sector helps to energise the vibrant life of urban dwellers that is reflected in the urban spaces within the city. These activities are established naturally and a product of limited employment opportunity. The night market also helps to sustain economic activities that help to contribute to economic growth in addition to being a venue for the locals who lack accessibility to formal economic activity. Thus, the understated activities of the “night market” should not be underestimated by the government that focuses only on formal economic activities.

The ‘night market’ is also an important activity for low income urbanites in Malaysia and Thailand. It is not only a set of economic exchanges, but a weekly (daily – in Thailand) event that adds interest, enjoyment and interaction to people’s lives. In this sense, the market is a key element in developing the town’s sense of community and place. From a phenomenological

perspective, these activities are a good platform for encouraging the urbanites to participate in businesses and increase their socio-economic status. Indirectly, these activities encourage interaction among the locals.

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