

The Safety of Public Space for the Community: A Case Study of Merdeka Square Park in Medan

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ABSTRACT

Safety and security of the community is only achieved when there is a common agreement and understanding of certain norms related to it. Safety of public space, such as streets, squares and parks are very important for the community for continuity. These public spaces are created in tandem with the ebb and flow of human exchange. The vitality of public space is characterised by the frequency of its usage. Public open space is part of the urban structure that forms the core of the city. It is difficult to conceive a public space without its social dimension to provide context. This paper attempts to examine the quality and safety and security in Merdeka Square Park, a popular public open space in Medan. A mixed method technique was used in this research to determine safety and security of public space. A total of 120 respondents and 10 kiosk vendors were interviewed, and a survey was held in a selected area of the public space. Findings showed that security and safety of a public space have a strong impact on the community..

Keywords: Community, Merdeka Square Park, public open space, safety, security

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of safety in public spaces is especially related to overuse of space and disruptive or “disrespectful” behaviour, the latter is a predominant concern in developed countries, while conflict overuse seems widespread in countries of the South which also witness social and economic problems, such as begging, presence of “street children” or informal street vendors.

The importance of providing a sense of security for the people in public spaces cannot be underestimated. Besides being a basic human need, failing to have a sense of security in one's everyday environment can have various negative consequences. The costs of coping with fear or other feelings of insecurity can include anti-social behaviour and attitudes and may even have stress-related outcome.

There are several theories that bear on the relationship between the physical

environment and the issues of insecurity (Jacobs, 1961; Newman, 1972). Studies that have focused on the effect of physical environment on crime and safety, have suggested social factors, such as community solidarity and homogeneity, as significant in explaining crime and fear of crime (e.g. Merry, 1981). This paper attempts to examine relationship of activities and clarify the mediating factors that influence feelings of safety and security in public space.



Figure 1. Merdeka Square Park (MSP) and its atmosphere

This research was carried out at MSP and it focuses on identifying security and safety as attributes in a public open space and their characteristics that influence the user. The MSP is sited at the main street of the city that expands 4.88 hectare wide, within built area around 2.02 hectare. The MSP was linked directly to the major business

district that form the main precinct of the city centre. The latest census indicates that the city of Medan has 2.4 million people, with a density of 2328 people per hectare. However, the total area of the public open space which functions as 'urban green space' is about 744.67 hectare, accounting for only 2.8% of the total area. The Medan

downtown was created and developed by the Dutch government at the end of 19th century, which is almost an ending period of the colonial era in Indonesia. Medan was designed as a new colonial urban settlement. The Dutch government headquarters was in downtown Medan, with MSP as their square. During the colonial era, the Europeans assumed a high social status because they were the rulers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to keep public spaces peaceful and safe (open space and street peace) as the police are not roped in on a regular basis to monitor public spaces (Jacobs, 1961). Their safety is maintained primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of volunteers and enforced by the people themselves.

According to Jacobs (1961), a city street must have three main qualities: to First, it must have clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Public and private space cannot spill over into each other as they do typically in suburban setting. Second, there must be 'eyes' on the street to monitor it; they may be called natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on the street are equipped to handle strangers and to ensure the safety of both residents and strangers, and therefore, the buildings must safe. Otherwise, the buildings cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind. Third, the sidewalk must be used on a continuous basis. It will add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people

in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks. Large numbers of people entertain themselves by watching street activity.

For decades, in the urban design profession, the idea of "safe spaces" has prevailed. Influenced by Oscar Newman's "defensible space" proposition, the focus has been on identifying certain characteristics of the physical environment that, if implemented in the design, would automatically lead to creating a safe place for its users, irrespective of context. Characteristics such as increase in building height are an example of such misconceptions, repeatedly associated with crime and feelings of being unsafe, albeit without conclusive empirical evidence.

This physical determinism ignores the role of other variables such as socio-cultural homogeneity, income, teenager-to-adult ratio, location of crimes occurrence, and types of crime. The impact of these factors on crime and fear of crime has proved to be significant (Schweitzer, Kim, & Mackin, 1999). The cases where increase in building height was associated with crime or fear of crime, involved both social and physical conditions, which taken together, explain the negative effect on behaviour and feelings of safety.

METHODS

This research focused on identifying security and safety in public space. A mixed method technique was applied in this research because urban design discipline is reflected as multi-dimensional aspects (Dolbani,

2000; Lynch, 1960; Yeung & Savage, 1996). Various sources of facts and data were gathered from survey and interview. This method was used based on the assumption that the bias that occurs will be balanced when the sources and methods are triangulated (Creswell, 1994). Triangulation method is important for investigating each layer of phenomenon, finding the meeting point of the data in enhancing the scope and range of the research (Creswell, 1994).

Complementary techniques such as observation and urban character assessments are used in MSP to create a more complete illustration of the general physical presences of the case study area. In this method, the researchers acted as outside observers (outsider), while the activity pattern was documented using photographic and written documents. The urban character defined safety and security. Indicator for each attribute formed for the evaluation is cross checked with literature findings. The format of this assessment is planned based on a 5-point scale derived from the objective quality measurement.

A total of 120 respondents were recruited for this survey consisting of mobile users (60) and static users (60). The static users are mostly shops-owner, shop-keepers and sidewalk vendors whereas mobile users are the visitors, students and local residents who visit MSP. Additionally, ten in depth

interviews were also carried out among respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Security and safety are two main characters closely related to physical and psychological comfort. The results in Table 1 showed that the respondents identified MSP as fairly safe and secure place (average scale of negative statement: 2.93). This study has identified that safety and security of MSP is closely associated with fear of crime, the presence of informal user or sellers, illegal trading activities and unhealthy activities. Meanwhile, the presence of other people (eye on the street), bright places at night and presence of security officer at MSP can provide and increase a sense of security and safety (average scale of positive statement: 3.59, refer Table 2).

Interview with security officers on duty in the area revealed that the number of crimes increased during weekends and public holidays, especially after midnight. It is caused by buyers and visitors who frequent the area. Crimes are often committed by drug addicts and immigrant workers. A feeling of discomfort and fear was expressed by respondents related to drug activity at night affecting sense of security and safety of the public open space and increased vandalism of public facilities.

Table 1
Characteristics associated with security and safety based on average value: Negative statement

Element	Negative statement	AVG Value	
		MSP	Std. Dev
SECURITY & SAFETY N=120	01 The place is generally not safe	3.04	.472
	02 Informal street vendor by sidewalks threaten security	2.98	.820
	03 Pickpocket and rob was still frequent happen	2.96	.491
	04 Youth activity at night causes social problems	2.75	.832
Response format: 1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree		Average Value	2.93

Table 2
Characteristics associated with security and safety based on average value: Positive statement

Element	Negative statement	AVG Value	
		MSP	Std. Dev
SECURITY & SAFETY N=120	01 The presence of people in pedestrian and environment can add the sense of security (eye on the street)	4.03	.472
	02 Presence of police periodically can increase the sense of safety.	2.78	.820
	03 Places with bright lights at night provide a sense of security and safety	3.96	.491
Response format: 1 = strongly disagree 5 = strongly agree		Average Value	3.59

“I am not satisfied with the situation here, handbag and mobile phone snatching are common.”

(Respondent 2: Guard, 5 years of working)

“Youth groups riding motorcycles at night reduces sense of safe and security. Violence is mostly committed by groups on motorcycles.”

(Respondent 7: Shop keeper, 3 years of operating)

The survey suggests that the intensity and continued presence of pedestrians influence the sense of security and safety. The survey found that a variety of activities such as street hawkers, the existence of eateries and the presence of security officer have contributed to a sense of security. It can be associated with psychological comfort due to the presence of a crowd. The presence of the public acts as a natural informal surveillance (eyes on the street) (Rennick, 2003) and the presence of security guards (Dolbani, 2000; Shuhana, 2004), enhances the confidence of the people.

CONCLUSION

Security and safety plays an important role ensuring MSP remains attractive to the people. Results of this study show that MSP is a safe and secure public open space. There are a variety of activities such as street hawkers, the eateries, and the presence of security officer has contributed to a sense of security and safety in MSP. People are not passive; they manipulate and change space according to their preferences. On the other hand, space influences and impacts upon the people (Carmona, Heath, Oc, & Tiesdell, 2003) as seen at MSP. The spatial relationship between the people and the situation at the public space in MSP shows a continuous two-way process of the street-vendors and visitors participating at the public open space. There are 'eyes' in the public space as natural proprietors of the street to manage strangers and ensure safety for "the peace of mind" of the visitors. This will ensure open spaces remain attractive to the people.

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