Stimulate Social Interaction in The Public Realm

Ahmad Faiq Abd Wahid[1], Nurul Liyana Hanapi[1*], Puteri Mayang Bahjah Zaharin[1], Maisarah Ahmad Basirun [2], Fariz Hilmi[3]

[1]*School of Architecture and Interior Architecture, College of Built Environment, Universiti, Teknologi MARA 42300 Puncak Alam Campus, Selangor, Malaysia*
[2]*School of Architecture in Tunku Abdul Rahman,University of Management and Technology 53300 Setapak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*
[3]*Arkitek Fariz Hilmi, 3, 2, Jalan Tengku Ampuan Zabedah J 9/J, Section 9, 40100 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Public realms are viewed as social gatherings between communities where engagement takes place. However, the concept of public realms between Islamic and Westerns remains to be seen, and the similarities and differences in views might lead to different social interactions among them. Thus, this study evaluates the social interaction perspective between Islamic and Western beliefs in public realms. The method employed in this paper is the analysis of literature from previous studies to evaluate social engagement in public realms. Based on Islamic and Western worldviews, this paper demonstrates that 'third places' of social and behavioural characteristics involving inclusivity and social comfort are revealed through empirical fieldwork on social interaction among people in public and semi-public spaces. The main key factor focuses on how these two worldviews define and characterise social interaction and the principles in their spatial organisation that must be considered to achieve social interaction in the public realm. Finally, the findings provide hope for urban design practice by providing fresh insights into creating more dynamic and inclusive public areas.

INTRODUCTION

The Town and Country Planning Act 1976, Act 172, defines open space or public realm as any area, whether fenced or not, intended for use as a park, garden, path, sports and recreation ground, pleasure ground, or public space (Amir et al., 2020). People generally utilise these areas during their free time for holidays, leisure, and outdoor activities. Informal social connections in urban public spaces are both a longstanding practice and a vital element in the flourishing of informal economies within cities (Amir et al., 2020).

People and various social groups congregate in public areas, allowing for the exchange of ideas and information through establishing social networks. Furthermore, public places are more than just a physical experience. People's contacts and experiences will result in communal identity, self-esteem, communal skill

enhancement, and social involvement. Urban designers and philosophers, in general, are considering this interpretation of public areas based on people's social bubbles. Public spaces encompass various social interaction and recreation areas, including streets, parks, plazas, and beaches as seen in Fig. 1 (Bakla, 2023). These spaces are defined by their accessibility and diverse uses, fostering community and leisure (Bakla, 2023).

Fig. 1. Example Showing a Public Space with Various Social Interaction Happening in the Recreation Area.

Source: Memphis River Parks Partnership. (n.d.)

The term "third place" can refer to one public venue for social interaction that provides an environment for companionability, independence, community gathering, and emotional expression (Jaffar et al., 2020). According to Oldenburg's (2001) theory, the third place is a location other than homes and workplaces where the public desires to assemble and engage voluntarily and informally without regulations as seen in Fig. 2. The home is known as the "first location" for leisure, with a "domestic setting," but its upkeep requires effort and money. The workplace is the "second location" where something productive is produced. Meanwhile, the "third place" is being constructed as a location that may improve the local community's quality of life and create social connectedness (Alidoust et al., 2015.).
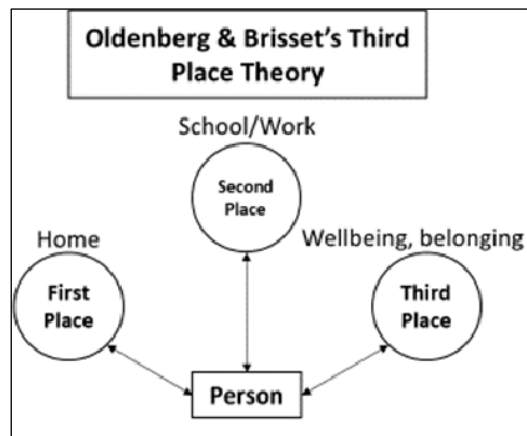

Fig. 2. Oldenberg's Third Place Theory involving "Third Place" as a Public Space for Social Interaction other than the Two Places, which are Home and Workplace.

Source: Oldenburg (2001)

As a result, community spaces with multiple functions are essential to provide a harmonious communal living environment to meet the community's demands and desires. A convivial and effective public place may be identified by its social indicators, one of which is the presence of interactions between strangers. These social connections have an impact on community building and social cohesiveness (Amran & Fuad, 2020).

Creating crucial possibilities for social interactions is one of the most important components of public places. People form deeper bonds with their community and the environment when engaging with others. This element may be examined and evaluated by the existence of various social groups, social networks, and life in a day (Rad & Ngah, 2013).

Discussions in urban planning, like those in sociology, are split into narratives of loss and hope. Particular academics attribute the preceding constructed environment development (escalating urban sprawl, suburbanisation, and privatisation) to causing physical disintegration, societal segregation, and depletion of communal areas (Seamon & Sowers, 2008; Simões Aelbrecht, 2016). Unlike sociology, urban design still lacks a complete theorisation of urban social life, despite increasing recognition of its relevance, particularly in work that takes a more user- and behavioural-centred approach (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016).

Despite this weakness, urban design literature provides an excellent foundation for understanding these modern urban design approaches' conflicts, benefits, and drawbacks. The influence of its legacy is evident in numerous urban renewal initiatives carried out during the 1950s and 1960s, encompassing various developments from residential buildings to commercial spaces and institutional compounds. These endeavours in urban renewal inspire contemporary urban regeneration projects, integrating modernist design principles like substantial proportions, lack of contextual integration, logical arrangement, dynamics, and rigidity (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

This manuscript is based on a theoretical framework that merges sociology and urban planning to investigate the locations and mechanisms by which public social engagement occurs within communal areas. The insights from sociology, encompassing both macro and micro levels, offer an understanding of the dynamics of social exchanges among unfamiliar individuals and the approaches employed to study them. This research will review the existing literature on the fundamental spatial characteristics of public social environments and the techniques utilised to evaluate their physical dimensions.

This study used a non-experimental study design, concentrating on the data obtained from previous literature. Based on the Islamic and western worldviews, the researchers' perceptions and definitions of social interactions in the public sphere are reviewed and analysed to determine the similarities and differences that exist between them. The analysis focused on the characteristics of the public realm that can trigger social interaction between people.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Several fieldwork studies have demonstrated that informal public socialising persists in newly developed public and semi-public spaces, indicating the need to recognise an additional category of informal social environments. These focal points complement the existing realms of social interaction: the home, the workplace, and 'third places' (Oldenburg (2001). Many of these environments have already been recognised as crucial locations influencing social conduct in public spaces. Nevertheless, their micro-social characteristics, particularly those related to interactions among unfamiliar individuals, have yet to be

extensively scrutinised, leading to unresolved issues regarding how urban planning can promote such social interactions.
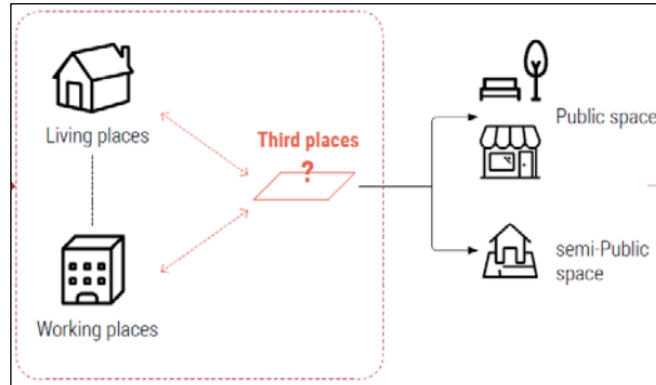

Fig. 3. The 'Third places' which act as Informal Public Socialising Place can be Categorised into Public Space and Semi-Public Space.
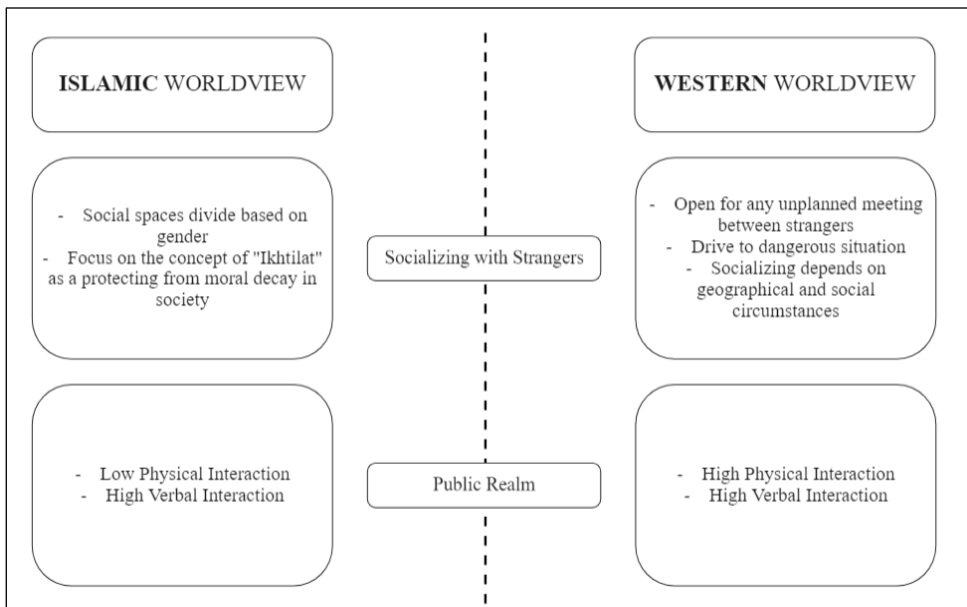
Source: Oldenburg (2001)

Fig. 4. General Comparison of Social Interaction in the Public Realm between the Islamic Worldview and Western Worldview based on the Author View Point.

Source: Authors (2024)

Fig. 4 compares social interaction in the public realm between the Islamic and Western worldviews and how the interaction happens in the public realm. Unlike the Westerners, where social activities and interactions are far more open between genders, the social interaction among strangers from Islamic

perspectives follows the concept of 'ikhtilat'. As a result, social spaces or public realms are segregated according to gender, thus limiting the physical interactions between men and women.

Social Context of Public Realm

Social interaction within the Islamic paradigm emphasises the maintenance of societal order, predicated upon the voluntary acceptance of shared moral principles and conduct by all community members. The Islamic faith has initiated a transformative social movement revolving around personal and communal ethics and accountability. Within the Qur'an, the notion of collective ethics is exemplified through principles such as parity, righteousness, impartiality, fraternity, benevolence, empathy, unity, and autonomy of decision-making. Islam establishes a connection between individual responsibilities and the entitlements and benefits of group involvement. In Islam, individual obligations must be fulfilled before asserting a stake in the communal domain. Prior to a society attaining a fundamental pool of communal entitlements and benefits that can be distributed among its constituents, each individual must uphold their obligations and trust that others will do the same. The principles of fraternity and solidarity imbue within community members a sense of obligation towards the welfare of the collective.

On the other hand, based on the Western worldview, high emphasis is given to social interaction between strangers in public places. First, it relies heavily on geographical and social circumstances (e.g., rules of behaviour and type of users) in promoting social encounters through unplanned meetings with strangers. Second, the relationships among the strangers are more physical than verbal, which provides an ideal criterion for evaluating how space operates mechanically and investigating the limitations and potential of urban planning. It is common in most Western societies to have some areas historically linked with casual social contact. The term "open areas" was first used to characterise these places. Many more concepts that follow are expansions of 'mixed locales' and 'third places' or variants on 'liminal spaces' and 'loose spaces' (Lofland, 1998; Oldenburg, 2001; Shields, 1992; Zukin, 1988; Franck & Stevens, 2006). Despite their differences, they share many social characteristics, like an abrupt shift from daily routines at home and work, a lax adherence to social norms, a welcoming environment for a wide variety of users, and inclusion. Certain spatial features are frequently associated with these characteristics. For example, low visibility, such as bars, facilitates informal uses, high visibility, such as cafés, can welcome specific users, particularly women and children, and 'in-betweenness' in terms of behaviours and functions facilitates variety and adaptability of uses at different times (Aelbrecht, 2022).

Social interaction, defined in the Western worldview, focuses more on the opportunity to feel liberated from the stresses of daily life by passing the time, engaging in social contacts, and reuniting for free expression. Social interactions are the foundation of community in public settings (Rad & Ngah, 2013). The sociability observed in public spaces is rooted in individuals' inherent desire for a feeling of social inclusion and engagement which can be facilitated by a welcoming social environment that offers physical comfort, a sense of ownership, and fair distribution of space (Rad et al., 2013). Social interaction and communication may be defined as a tangible issue, a glance, a discussion, and communication necessary to define the appropriate events and actions as a consequence of sociability.

Physical Context of Public Realm

According to Islamic beliefs, public spaces are considered religious institutions that serve as platforms for social cohesion. These spaces have developed from the communal mosque, also known as the jamek mosque or community mosque. The idea of a communal mosque has existed since the early stages of Islamic civilisation, and the 'Prophet's Mosque' serves as a prominent illustration of a communal mosque in terms of its sustainability and utilisation, as shown in Fig. 5 (Baharudin, Atikah & Ismail, 2014).
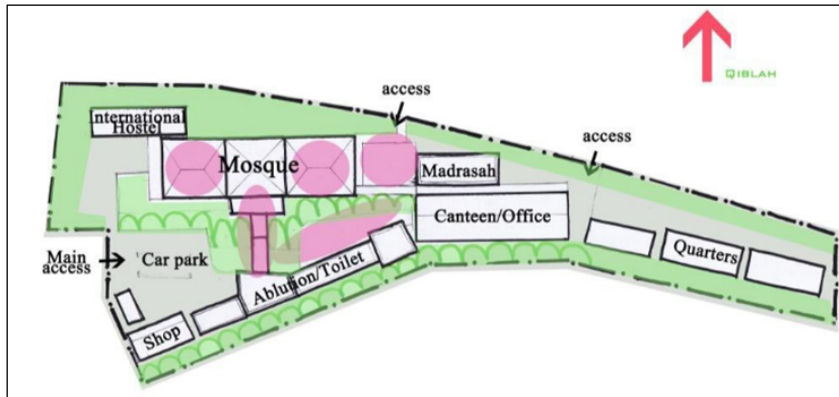
Fig. 5. Sketch Plan of Masjid Seri Petaling on Mixed Used and Accessibility of the Mosque.

Source: Baharuddin et. al. (2014)

Hizan, et al. (2017) agree that the mosque is a focal point for Muslims to engage in religious, political, social, and educational activities under one roof. Previous research has highlighted the importance of spatial organisation and shape and the use of indigenous materials while creating a community mosque. This displays an original picture and imbues the structure with a local character that responds to culture, climate, and surroundings (Hamid et al., 2012). The mosque should be easily accessible and have several entrances (Shorjaee, 2015). The suitable location will provide a sense of welcome to the visitor, make it simple to approach, and guarantee that the mosque is fully utilised at all times. As a result, a religious institution should be a public space open to all, used by all without exception, and survive for one generation.
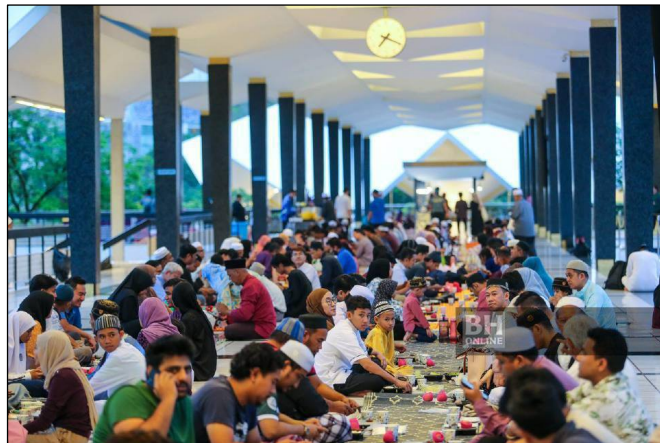

Fig. 6. Example of Mosque as a Communal Space for Muslims to break their fast in the month of Ramadhan.

Source: Amin (2008)

Some Islamic urbanists point out that good urban public places will improve the possibility to participate in communal activities as shown in Fig. 6 (Amin, 2008). In the Islamic worldview, the critical spatial quality will focus on good accessibility for social harmony and a clean and comfortable environment that shapes a productive personality. Accessibility refers to a person's capacity to get the desired services,

commodities, activities and destinations. Proximity, convenience, and social acceptability are all aspects that contribute to the mosque's accessibility. Proxies include short transit distances, linking highways, and mixed-use property. A visible main entrance and guiding signage can create a pleasant atmosphere, thus encouraging local communities and visitors to visit the mosque and public realm often. Apart from the main entrance, signboards are also helpful in advertising and user navigational tools. It gives precise instructions to the place and improves the readability of recognised street surroundings. The comfort and quality of the surroundings impact the community's well-being through the setting of public places, such as air quality, natural ventilation, colour schemes, outside noise, communal space, public services, and parking spots. These elements may be divided into three categories: visual comfort, ventilation, and spatial comfort. In addition, the environment can be enhanced through the sights of the natural environment, such as trees, plants and rivers.
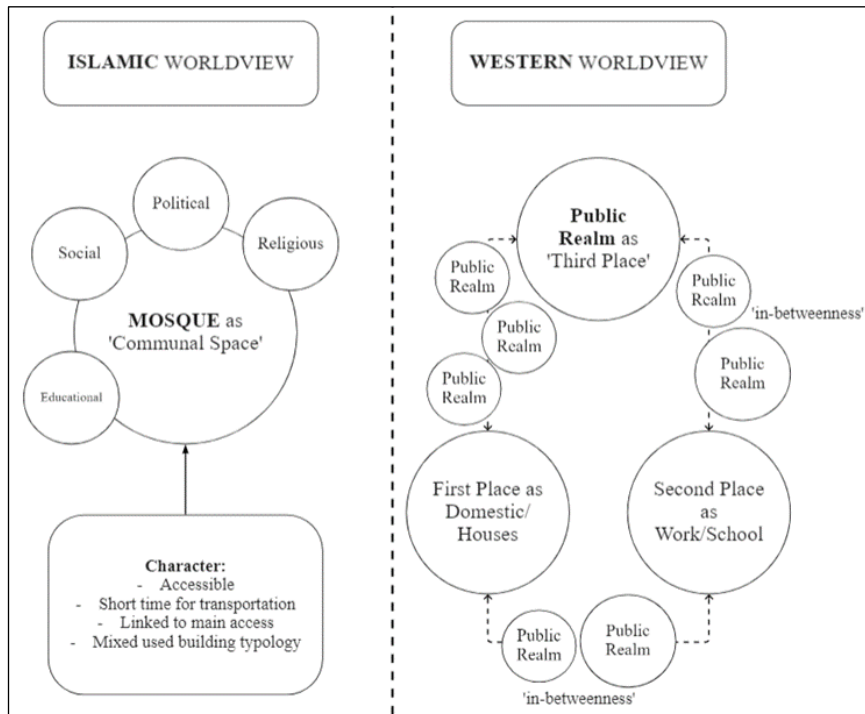

Fig. 7. Comparison in Physical Context on Social interaction in the Public Realm between Islamic Worldview and Western Worldview based on Authors View Point.

Source: Authors (2024)

For the Western perspective, the concept of 'in-betweenness' is a crucial characteristic of 'third places' that significantly facilitates informal social interactions, as depicted in Fig. 7. The majority of locations where strangers encounter is found in transitional areas, such as doorways, borders, paths, intersections, and objects (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016). The spatial 'in-betweenness' is shaped by spatial characteristics such as the uncertainty of shape and function and the versatility and adaptability of uses. Several of these intermediate spaces can also encompass situations of temporal 'intermediacy,' during which unforeseen applications may arise outside or between the intended times of usage. Events and high people density are situations where the concept of temporal 'in-betweenness' is seen to be beneficial which can be seen in Fig.8. Both situations can serve as valuable tools for altering the intended character and utilisation of regular public areas for short durations. Additionally, they can create a friendly and relaxed ambience that enhances

the liveliness of the space and creates unexpected opportunities for spontaneous use and social interaction. Some intermediate spaces may also have the added characteristic of "intermediacy management," which involves the convergence of several control and access systems. This motivates users of these areas to negotiate and creatively adapt to their surroundings continuously. This is particularly evident in regions where the standards of conduct and access become unclear and uncertain, such as at the borders between the private and public realms and in settings where various methods of spatial management are utilised (Simões Aelbrecht, 2016).

Fig. 8. Public Realm in New York City that applied the Concept of 'in-betweenness'.

Source: Car Free NYC (2017)

For Western urbanists, urban public spaces' physical and social dynamics play an essential role in forming public culture (Balducci & Checchi, 2009). However, the dynamics of gathering in and passing through streets, squares, parks, and other public places are more likely to be characterised in terms of their influence on consuming cultures, urban negotiation practices, and social responses to anonymous individuals.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when designing public spaces that encourage social connection, urbanists should consider the nature of the social connection and the spatial quality that can spark social interaction between people. All considerations mentioned in the preceding discussion must be engaged when displaying good public places. Public areas, commonly referred to as 'third places,' should be located by the natural environment and conveniently reachable on foot. Public spaces should be planned to have a versatile area that can serve multiple purposes. An exceptional public space operates as a central hub for human activity, effectively facilitating interactions in various social situations, including encounters with unfamiliar individuals, and offering opportunities for participation that are organic and easily available to everyone. An adequate public area should be accessible for most of the day, welcoming individuals of all social standings and positions to congregate. The design of public areas has a profound influence on enhancing the overall quality of life. The presence of a religious believer is strongly linked to the public community, and natural surroundings also play a significant role in connecting people with their Creator. Therefore, the arrangement of physical spaces, the ease of access, and the range of activities available are vital factors that can enhance one's general level of life.

RECOMMENDATION

The paper's theorisation of 'third spaces' as a category of informal public social contexts allows for optimism in urban planning. It demonstrates how freshly planned public and semi-public areas with modernism and control characteristics may serve as significant forums for social contact between strangers. However, for this to happen, the urban design must integrate agency, question the fixity and long-term goals of urban planning, and prevent prejudice. The urban design was demonstrated in earlier sections by demonstrating that a particular scope remains beyond the construction of master plans. Gaps, overlapping information, and usage adaptability must be accommodated in urban design. The two explored concepts of 'in-betweenness' and 'publicness' have highlighted various ways this may be facilitated, pointing to many scenarios where social contact could be triggered and spatial qualities favouring it. These findings, far from being prescriptive, offer essential methodological and theoretical advances to urban planning and have substantial consequences for practice.

Theoretically, this article has contributed to broadening and geographically developing current social theories concerning the best circumstances for social existence. Although it has been noted that social factors can often create the mood and character of the location, it is indisputable that the spatial elements also play an important part in framing them.

This study has provided new insights into the methodologies and theories that can increase our understanding of the sociability of freshly constructed public and semi-public places, allowing us to create more inclusive and convivial urban spaces using an Islamic and Western worldview. However, because it is based on a single case study, it has limitations. As a result, more study with more case studies in various cultural and socioeconomic situations with diverse planning and design goals is required to generalise or contrast these findings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted without any self-benefits or commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The primary author constructed the paper's framework, closely overseen by the second author to ensure the content's coherence. The third author expedited and proofread the entire text to ensure its cohesion. All authors collaborated on the final manuscript.

REFERENCES

Aelbrecht, P. (2022). 'Fourth Places': The Contemporary Public Settings for Informal Social Life and Interaction. In *Fourth Places: Informal Social Life and Interaction in New Designed Public Spaces* (pp. 223-237). Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07946-7_5

Alidoust, S., Bosman, C., & Holden, G. (2019). Planning for healthy ageing: How the use of third places contributes to the social health of older populations. *Ageing & society*, *39*(7), 1459-1484. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786433916.00011

Amir, S., Azizan, A., Zahari, R. K., & Asmawi, M. Z. (2020). Urban Public Space As Social Interaction Space: Case Study In Petaling Street. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management*, *5*(19), 90–101. https://doi.org/10.35631/jthem.519007

Amin, A. (2008). Collective culture and urban public space. *City*, *12*(1), 5-24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810801933495

Amran, M. F., & Fuad, A. H. (2020, May). The effect of public spaces' physical features on interaction between strangers. Case study: Jurangmangu transit space. In *AIP Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 2230, No. 1). AIP Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1063/5.0002573

Baharudin, N. A., & Ismail, A. S. (2014). Communal Mosques: Design functionality towards the development of sustainability for community. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *153*, 106-120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.046

Bakla, N. M. A. M. (2023). *The Role of Public-Private Partnerships in the Generation of Public Spaces: Case study Al-Narges, New Cairo* (Doctoral dissertation, German University in Cairo). https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.23724.64648

Balducci, A., & Checchi, D. (2009). Happiness and quality of city life: The case of Milan, the richest Italian city. *International Planning Studies*, *14*(1), 25-64. https://doi.org/10.1080/13563470902726352

Car Free NYC. (2017). *Public spaces have the power to connect people and cities* [Photograph]. Earth Day 2017. https://www.carfreedaynyc.org

Franck, K., & Stevens, Q. (2006). Loose space: possibility and diversity in urban life. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2012.01129_7.x

Hamid, G.-G., Mikhail, S., & Estamboli, M. J. (2012). The position of Mosques in Islamic cities and its location design in new cities. Damascus University Journal, 28(1), 49–67.

Hizan, M. H., Ismail, N., & Ispawi, N. S. (2017). The role of mosque library as a knowledge institution. *Research Hub*, *3*(11), 7-16.

Jaffar, N., Harun, N. Z., & Abdullah, A. (2020). Enlivening the mosque as a public space for social sustainability of traditional Malay settlements. *Planning Malaysia*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v18i12.750

Lofland, L. H. (2017). The public realm: Exploring the city's quintessential social territory. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134352

Memphis River Parks Partnership. (n.d.). Memphis' River Garden. Memphis River Parks. https://www.memphisriverparks.org/

Oldenburg, R. (Ed.). (2001). Celebrating the third place: Inspiring stories about the great good places at the heart of our communities. Da Capo Press.

Rad, V. B., & Ngah, I. B. (2013). Public spaces and effective factors on social interactions. *International Journal of Current Engineering and Technology*, *3*(1), 184-188.

Seamon, D., & Sowers, J. (2008). Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph. *Key texts in human geography*, *43*, 51. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446213742.n6

Shields, R. (1992). A truant proximity: presence and absence in the space of modernity. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Spac*e, 10(2), 181-198. https://doi.org/10.1068/d100181

Shojaee, F., & Paeezeh, M. (2015). Islamic city and urbanism, an obvious example of sustainable architecture and city. http://dergi.cumhuriyet.edu.tr/ojs/index.php/fenbilimleri ©2015 Faculty of Science, Cumhuriyet University

Simões Aelbrecht, P. (2016). 'Fourth places': the contemporary public settings for informal social interaction among strangers. *Journal of Urban Design*, 21(1), 124–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2015.1106920

Zukin, S. (1988). The postmodern debate over urban form. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *5*(2-3), 431-446. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276488005002013