

Sustainable city: blending nature with business

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Abstract

Public parks have come a long way since the early days of the nineteenth century. One of the most significant functions of an urban park is to provide an open space for the public to unwind from the hustle and bustle of city life. The famous Central Park in New York, epitomises such idea. In a city where the ratio of open space per population is still low compared to many western cities, the birth of KLCC Park in Kuala Lumpur creates a sigh of relief to many Malaysians. Not only does the park provide green open space for the benefit of the public in an otherwise concrete jungle, its abundant plant species encourage bio-diversity and act as a haven for birds and other local fauna. Located at the heart of Kuala Lumpur's golden triangle, the KLCC Park starkly contrasts with its surrounding. However, the idea of having a park in the middle of Kuala Lumpur has not received full approval from some quarters of the society. Much of the criticism was towards the choice of site and the huge construction and maintenance cost of the project. To them, it was simply not economical. The recent 1997 economic slump did not help with its cause either. Based on interviews and a survey of 300 respondents, this paper examines the benefits of having an open space in a business district and how it can spur better business. The findings also indicate that the extent to which KLCC Park enhances business opportunities to the surrounding area should not be perceived solely in monetary terms. The provision of open space helps reduce congestion, which is important for the well being of the public. It also ensures that the future generation would not be deprived of such vital space in tandem with the concept of sustainability.

1 Introduction

“Urban public park” is generally referred to as an open space or area of land, laid out primarily for the benefit of the public amidst essentially urban surroundings.

However, open space is not a recent idea. Back in Greek times, these gardens were dedicated to the gods. The word "paradise" for example, originally refers to pleasure gardens of aromatic shrubs and blossoming fruit-trees that were presented to the kings of Persia [1]. The earliest recorded private endowment was during Julius Cesar's reign when he presented his own gardens to the public of Rome. It is also during the Roman period that gardens such as the Porticus Livia were laid out for the benefit of the public.

However, it is not until the nineteenth century, during the Industrial Revolution, that the functions of urban public parks are related to what we have today. During that period, the creation of useful landscapes within a city for the use and enjoyment of the public at large was mainly geared towards improving their social and physical conditions. Nothing much has changed since. A lot of the functions of urban public parks now are still similar to what they were two centuries ago.

Parks are often associated with social, biological and psychological benefits. Lewis Mumford [2] stressed that the social role of open space is to bring people together. It is a place where the extrovert and the introvert can find refuge. On the other hand, the biological necessity for open space includes recognising the value of sunlight, fresh air and free movement in promoting health. However, contrary to popular belief, Jane Jacobs [3], argues that the notion that "parks are lungs of the city" is actually a myth. She pointed out that roughly three acres of wood is needed to absorb as much carbon dioxide as four people exude in breathing, cooking and heating. Nor is more air let into the city by a given acreage of green space than by an equivalent area of streets. Adding parks to a city is irrelevant to the quantities of fresh air it receives as air knows nothing of grass fetishes and does not pick and choose for itself in accordance with them.

Nevertheless, other more recent studies indicate support for the relationship between open space and quality of life. Many writers have claimed that parks provide a breathing space and improve public health [2 & 4]. They act as a filter for noise, heat, fumes and smells. According to Whitaker and Browne [1], each five yards' depth of trees absorbed and reduced one decibel of noise. Turning to the psychological importance served by public parks, its contribution seems to be generally accepted. The provision of sight and smell of grass, bushes, flowers, trees as well as open sky is psychologically vital for the well being of humankind.

The need for urban public parks is even greater today, given the rapid development of urbanisation in most parts of the world. The problem is further enhanced by the fact that a growing proportion of people are moving to the city centre. In Malaysia, this scenario is reflected by the increase in urban population. In 1995, 55% of the total population lived in urban areas while the percentage was 62% in 2000. It is estimated that in 2010, 14 million or 65% of the projected population (21.4 million) will live in urban areas and that these figures will continue to increase to 70% by the year 2020 [5]. The increase in urbanisation is due to migration of the population from rural areas in order to obtain better life, the development of new towns as well as expansions of existing town and city boundaries.

However, the increase in urbanisation has not been met with similar increase in the provision of open space. In Malaysia, the Federal Town and Country Planning

Department of 1976 suggested that 6 to 7 acres of space should be provided per 1000 population. However, the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan of 1982 has revealed a rather inferior standard for Kuala Lumpur when compared with other cities. Kuala Lumpur is recorded to have only 1.0 acre (0.4 hectare) of open space available per 1000 population in contrast with many western cities showing a higher standard ranging from 7–8 acres (2.8–3.2 hectares) of open space per 1000 population.

Naturally, one would expect that the addition of KLCC Park in the heart of Kuala Lumpur City Centre would receive positive reactions from all parties. Being built on a piece of land where land prices is estimated to cost at around RM1000 per square foot (USD1-RM3.80), it has been viewed, by some, as a significant public contribution by the owner, Petronas (the national oil corporation). Dr. Mahathir, the Malaysian Prime Minister, when officiating the Petronas Twin Towers in 1999 stressed that Petronas had set aside half of the land for a recreational park for the daily use of thousands of city folks and other Malaysians at the expense of Petronas. It was, according to him, “Petronas’s direct contribution to the people of this country” [6]. Lord Norman Foster [7], a renowned British architect commented that he saw a major initiative in terms of taking advantage of the old race track and using the opportunity to create green space and to offer something back to the city in terms of public space. However, KLCC Park has also received its fair share of criticism. There are some quarters arguing that since land prices are extremely high, it would be more beneficial to build something that could generate more income and there are those who feel that the huge cost of the whole KLCC project was a waste of public money. The 1997 economic slump did not help with its cause either. In line with the concept of sustainable development, this paper explores the benefits it gives to the public and why the park is good for business.

2 Case Study: KLCC Park

2.1 Location

Being built in 1998, the KLCC Park is one of the latest, trendiest and arguably, most popular urban public park in Kuala Lumpur. It is part of a 100-acre mixed-use development project situated in the heart of Kuala Lumpur’s Golden Triangle [8]. The other features of the project include: the 88-storey Petronas Twin Towers, the six-level Suria KLCC shopping centre, the 49-storey Menara Maxis, the 30-storey Menara Esso and the 32-storey Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur Hotel.

2.2 Design Idea

Designed by the late Brazilian Landscape artist, Roberto Burle Marx, The KLCC Park is a 50-acre (20 hectare) open space. His idea was to create the illusion of nature in an urban park. The park, intended to be truly Malaysian in design and function, was to reflect the tropical greenery, vibrant colours and patterns of

Malaysia's rich cultural heritage. KLCC Park is unique compared to the likes of other public parks in the city centre, namely, Taman Tasik Perdana, Taman Titiwangsa. Unlike these public parks, its recreational facilities are world class. However, what makes it distinctly unique is the fact that while other parks are often secluded and detached from their urban surroundings, KLCC Park is uniquely juxtaposed in a business setting. In addition, the design of the park is greatly influenced by the strength and spirit of its architectural surrounding.

2.3 Main Features

The centre of the park includes a 2-acre children's playground, a knee deep wading pool, a playful fountain pool, sculptures, murals, shelters and benches, surrounded by a jogging track set among over 1900 indigenous trees and palms representing 74 species. It also houses a Mosque and two District Cooling Centres that provide air conditioning to the vicinity. The Lake Symphony, located at the esplanade outside Suria KLCC, is a musical fountain programmed to provide over 150 combinations of colourful animations.

3 Public benefit

3.1 The park as a recreational and refuge spot for urbanites

The KLCC Park adds another choice to the list of Kuala Lumpur's recreational and leisure facilities available to the public. The location of KLCC Park in the heart of the city centre has many advantages. Conventional recreational activities such as fishing, camping and hiking are not easily available to all urban dwellers as they are often located far from the city centre. Furthermore, due to limited financial means, low-income families living in the city are often not mobile enough to reach them.

There are also many people in the city who are simply not interested in outlying recreation areas or traditional rural concept of recreation but prefer city-oriented recreation. Therefore, the KLCC Park offers a good alternative. It is an urban park that offers the public a place for refuge, a place in which they can escape from the tensions of city life without having to drive out of the city centre.

The KLCC Park also benefits from Malaysian cultural trend. Malaysians often choose to visit recreational and leisure facilities during public holidays. There have been reports of high numbers of visitors to the park even during festive occasions such as Christmas [9] and Hari Raya Aidil Fitri [10]. One of the reasons that made KLCC Park attractive is the free use of its high-class recreational facilities. This is especially the case with its wading pool, arguably, one of the most popular facilities among children. Recreational and leisure activities are important for the development of a healthy mind and body. It is not difficult to understand why providing quality life is very important. A person that is healthy will be a more productive worker. This makes good economic sense.

4 Economic benefit

4.1 The park as part of a tourist attraction

KLCC Park together with Petronas Twin Towers and Suria KLCC provide a mixture of attractions that appeal to locals as well as foreign tourists. There is a unique combination of different interests for everybody. According to the park manager, KLCC Park is estimated to receive around 10,000 to 20,000 visitors on a normal working day and the figure is reported to increase to about 60,000 to 70,000 during weekends. Popular parks can encourage tourism, which in turns, provides a great source of revenue for the city.

As Galen Cranz [4] once said:

“Beautiful parks make a city more attractive, which is to say, they make a city more of an attraction. When what is attracted to the city is money, in one form or another, then the beauty of the parks can be argued to be of particular social benefit, and anyone to whom this money trickles down is likely to agree.”

Interviews were conducted with the park management group, owners of various outlets and hotels operating within the vicinity of KLCC Park. In addition, a survey was also conducted involving 300 visitors. The findings indicate that nearly half of the respondents (42%) spent some amount of money at Suria KLCC (i.e. the adjacent shopping complex) before entering the park while 21% of them would do so after their visit to the park. However, the results showed that the majority of them (65%) spent or would spend no more than RM100 (i.e. equivalent to £20) on average.

Business in the vicinity could also profit from the events held at the KLCC Park. Various occasions from the celebration of New Year's Day to the organisation of Miss Chinese International Beauty Pageant, have been hosted at the park (Table 1). These events further attract visitors to the park, therefore, enhancing more business opportunities.

Table 1: Various events held at the KLCC Park between 1998–1999

Date	Event	Reported number of visitors
31. Aug. 98	Independence Day Celebration & Concert	10,000
3. Jan. 99	Miss Chinese International Pageant	800
31. Dec. 98	1999 New Year's Day Celebration	3000
2. Oct. 99	Cultural Concert & Exhibition on Crime Prevention	1200
31. Dec 99	2000 New Year's Day Celebration	200,000

4.2 The park as an asset for marketing

The KLCC Park together with the Petronas Twin Towers and Suria KLCC form part of an overall attraction to the vicinity and that these three main features have often been promoted as part of a marketing strategy in bringing business to the area. In a recent press conference in conjunction with its second anniversary, Tan Sri Azizan Zainul Abidin, the Chairman of Suria KLCC Sdn Bhd attributed several factors for the success of Suria KLCC in exceeding its targeted turnover of RM650 million for the financial year April 1999 to March 2000. He cited the location as the main factor, together with market positioning, accessibility, design of the centre, catchment, ambience and management [11]. The results of the survey supported this contention. Visitors were asked about their opinion of the park. The majority of them (34%) favoured the park because of its proximity to other features, especially the shopping complex. Other main factors include: availability of recreational facilities (29%) and strategic location (21%). The survey also found that slightly more than half of the respondents (51%) came to the area mainly because they wanted to go to the park. Despite the fact that the interviews were conducted at the park, there are those whose main destinations were Suria KLCC (34%) and the Petronas Twin Towers (17.5%).

Andreas Matmuller, the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group Operations and Human Resource Director also share this view. In an interview with reporters before the opening of the Mandarin Hotel [12], he stressed that the group is confident that the hotel can be strongly promoted as the best location for conference, meetings and corporate exhibitions. "It is in the centre of everything", he said. In the hotel business industry, where competition for attracting guests can be very fierce, the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur Hotel believes that one of its strengths lies in having picturesque views of the KLCC Park.

Interviews were conducted with the Public Relations Officer of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel as well as Managers of the three cafes overlooking the park. This was done in order to obtain some insight into their views about the park. Focusing on the cafes, the interviews revealed that special considerations were made during the design stage, taking into account the fact that these cafes were overlooking the park. As a result, more outdoor rather than indoor seats have been provided for the customers. This move seems to pay off as they revealed that the demand for outdoor seats is high and that the majority of visitors (ranging from 60 to 80%) prefer to sit outdoors instead of indoors mainly because they wanted to get a scenic view of the park. However, one manager also mentioned that a small number of his customers preferred to sit outdoor because they wanted "to see" and "be seen" in those places. Generally, the only time when indoor seats are popular is during lunch hour in which they cited their clients' preference for air-conditioned areas in order to escape from the afternoon heat. Even then, the number of outdoor seats taken often equals that of indoors.

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel Public Relations Officer also disclosed that the design of the hotel took into consideration the aesthetic values of the park by

maximising the views of KLCC Park from all angles. This can be observed for instance in the arrangements of seats at all three levels of its lounge. Every seat has a view of the KLCC Park. The purpose was to create a sense of relaxation and tranquillity despite being indoors. The price of rooms facing the park is also slightly higher than those not overlooking the park. Despite this fact, it is estimated that over 60% of guests preferred rooms facing the park, overlooking Petronas Twin Towers. In addition, the officer also revealed that many guests felt that the exterior of the hotel blended well with the park and that they were pleased that the park was just a stone throw away. This according to the officer was one of the reasons why some guests chose the hotel over others. It was reported that more than two-thirds of their guests visited the park at least once during their stay.

5 KLCC Park and the concept of sustainable development

There are as many definitions of “sustainable development” as there are many interpretations of this concept. This is not surprising since sustainable development is by nature, an interdisciplinary concept. Generally, the concept refers to any development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. For a development to be sustainable, it must consider social and ecological factors, as well as economic requirements. A healthy environment is integral to the long-term economic interests of a city. Although assessing whether a city is sustainable is an extremely difficult task, sustainable indicators can indicate whether we are moving in the right direction. The Santa Monica Sustainable City Program for example, identified 16 indicators which among them include the provision of public open space as well as trees in public spaces. If such indicators are to be taken seriously than the addition of KLCC Park is in tandem with the concept of sustainable development.

Parks can also provide ecological benefits if it can sustain a significant species of flora and fauna. The KLCC park management revealed that they had planned for the park to be an important link in the “bird corridor” and that much research preceded the selection of indigenous trees for that particular purpose. However, no particular research has been done and that some form of study needs to be undertaken in the future in order to examine how successful the park is in term of providing a suitable habitat for insects, birds and other animal species.

The extend to which KLCC Park contributes and enhances business opportunities to the surrounding area and the city as a whole should not be perceived solely in monetary terms. It is also good in a different sense. The provision of open space helps to reduce congestion due to the presence of traffic and other various built forms. This is important for the well being of the public. It also ensures that the future generation would not be deprived of such vital space.

This is also important in the long run if the city aims to attract visitors in the future. In conjunction with the 25th Federal Territory Day in 1999, the Mayor of

Kuala Lumpur, Tan Sri Kamaruzzaman Sharif set an agenda for the Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) to turn Kuala Lumpur into a “comfortable city”. A city that is clean, beautiful, peaceful, comfortable, prosperous and safe. To this cause, the KLCC Park has contributed its fair share.

“A city is not built wholly for the sake of shelter, but ought to be so contrived, that besides more civil conveniences there may be handsome space left for squares, courses for chariots, gardens, places to take the air in, for swimming, and the like, both for amusement and for recreation [1].”

6 Issues And Problems

For one reason or another, we often see examples of parks which were initially popular and successful, deteriorate over time. Even grand ones like the Central Park in New York have recorded high crime and vandalism problems that made it unsafe by day and lethal by night [1]. In a recent incident in June 2000, more than 50 women have been reported of being sexually harassed at Central Park in broad daylight after a parade [13]. According to Jane Jacobs [14], the public eyes are important in protecting parks from incivilities and crime and that popular use of parks is the best policeman. However, this would be difficult if the public is not present. An unpopular and neglected park has many consequences. It attracts social problems such as mugging, vandalism and vice, which in turn, can directly influence the surrounding areas in a negative way.

One of the key features in maintaining the success of any park is its maintenance. It is important that KLCC Park is maintained in its present condition in order to protect the overall interest of the public, both socially and economically. It was revealed that the park did not experience any serious crime incidence to date and that the level of vandalism was very low. There have been isolated incidences of graffiti at the gazebo areas, signage posts and pergola areas. Whereas neglected parks can decrease surrounding land value, the opposite can also be said about popular parks. Over the years, urban parks like St James’s Park and Holland Park in London have become priceless assets and they enhance the value of properties of the surrounding area. There is every reason to believe that KLCC Park can follow this path.

However, the provision of free recreational facilities such as parking space, wading pool and children playground equipments, which is believed to have contributed significantly towards the popularity of the park, comes with a cost. It was revealed during the interview that KLCC Urus Harta Sdn Bhd, the organisation in charge of the park’s management spend close to RM 1 million a month on maintenance cost. The overall maintenance of the park is borne by the 22 lot owners, of which, Petronas being the main share holder, contributes around 27% of the total maintenance cost. It is not known how far those involved in paying for the maintenance of KLCC Park can continue their current commitment in the future. A repeat of the recent South East Asia economic slump would be a big test to their

commitment. This is because some of the 22 lot owners, who pay for the cost of maintenance, are mainly business organisations at Suria KLCC, operating on the basis of financial gains. While the business operators involved would find maintaining the park a daunting and challenging task under such a situation, Petronas's expenses would also be more subjected to public scrutiny.

Whether experiencing economic crisis or not, the high maintenance cost of the park remains a true fact. The equilibrium of expenses and profit can somehow be maintained just as long as the park can contribute to the business of the vicinity. In particular, this is achievable with the role of Suria KLCC in attracting visitors to spend some money along the way. However, there is always a possibility that the park management will start charging visitors for using the park in the future. Although paying a small amount of money for using toilet facilities would unlikely create any public uproar, there is the danger that by charging visitors in the form of hefty entrance fees or by other means, would result in the park potentially losing some of its glitter. This is mainly because the survey found that nearly half (43%) of the respondents would not visit the park if an entrance fee was required. Arguably, this could possibly be due to the fact that majority of the public are low and middle-income families (75% of the respondents earn less than RM2000) who bring their kids to the park in order to enjoy the free facilities. It is also interesting to note that while 57% of the respondents do not mind being charged entrance fee, they are only willing to pay a small amount of money (i.e. RM1). This is an important issue for the park management to consider, especially since its chairman has declared that "The beautiful park is a gift to the people of Malaysia and to future generation".

7 Conclusion

The provision of open green space in our city centre often receives warm welcome especially by the public whose main interest is in seeing the city green. Urban open space is vital to the well being of urban dwellers that rely on such space for recreational and leisure activities. The birth of KLCC Park in Kuala Lumpur gives a fresh change to its surrounding landscape. Parks have often been overlooked upon in the development of many urban areas around the world and that they have often been sacrificed at the expense of other income generating projects. There are those who believe that parks are simply not economical. It is time for us to recognise the true value and importance of open space. The development of KLCC Park has shown a good example of how economic and public benefits can be gained without having to compromise on one or the other. There has been a move in creating more recreational parks within the reach of urbanites in Kuala Lumpur. Among them include Batu Metropolitan Park, Ulu Pudu Public Park and the Lembah Kiara Park. This is indeed a positive move towards providing quality life for the public, conforming to the DBKL's 1999 agenda of "A Comfortable City".

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