

***Culture and Identity in Public Green Spaces: Story of Suropati and Menteng Park
in Central Jakarta, Indonesia***

Najah Md Alwi, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Changing the role of parks and green spaces to fit into the sustainable city framework are now an ongoing agenda for city planners worldwide. One popular concept is how green spaces promote urban *liveability* and *sociability* among city dwellers. While parks provide environmental benefits, parks are also public spaces that come with historical heritage, culture and social identity of the urban residents. This paper explores the subjectivity of urban life collected from the perspectives of different individuals on how they engage with the conception of living in a megacity and park use. Case study sample selected for this research takes place in Menteng sub-district where the first and oldest urban park located in the Special Capital District of Jakarta Central, Indonesia. The discussion that follows takes three central stories of different themes: 1. the city's relation to memory and perception, 2. Influence of urban life to changing tradition and culture 3. The role of the people in everyday makings of the city. The results presented demonstrate the different styles of meaningful interactions with others within the park, the different "spatial story" to tell within the larger social order of urban life in Jakarta.

Keywords: Urban parks, Culture of cities, Social Space, Jakarta, Livability

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Introduction

In the cities of major developing countries worldwide, there is an increasing interest in studies on the importance of green spaces for sustaining quality of life for cities and the challenges facing cities undergoing densification (Anguluri & Narayanan, 2017; Chiesura, 2004; Haaland & van den Bosch, 2015; Schetke, Qureshi, Lautenbach, & Kabisch, 2016). Negative impacts of urbanisation highlighted by Haaland (2015) included decrement of green spaces, economic disparities and social inequalities that rises with population influx and poor planning which show the highest percentage in Asian cities. Nevertheless, Chiesura (2004) draws the attention mainly back to the critical contribution of urban parks in playing a part in aiding not only for the social but also the economic value for the urban residents.

Undeniably, much of the focus of studies within the disciplines of the built environment still focuses on the environmental solution which green spaces provide. However, the importance of green open space no longer becomes just a matter infrastructure necessity, but also an indicator for environmental performance and a bridge for different disciplines to study together towards a better chance of a future (DE Aldous, 2010). This is especially true for coastal cities that are vulnerable to environmental threats from climate change as well as urban densification issues such as the case for Indonesia's capital city Jakarta.

Discussion put forward by Steinberg (2007) calls for attention on how the former colonial capital of Jakarta became from a "world city" to a "crisis city" with its struggles of modern day infrastructure as well a myriad of environmental challenges such as rising sea levels and annual flooding. Much of studies done on this controversial coastal city shows the source of the rapid development was from the concentration of foreign and domestic investments during the early 1990s (Firman, 1998). Coupled with the dualities between formal and informal settlements (Zhu & Simarmata, 2015), the attempt to hasten the modernisation quickly contributed to a different type of socio-economic problem that can only be compared to other major cities of Latin America and Africa during the 1980s.

Studies by environmental psychologists such as Kaplan(1995), Ulrich (1991) and Kjellgren (2010) have proven the mental benefits and the restorative value of green areas in cities and its residents. Their strategies adopted well into the open green space design criteria proposed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2016 for improving health and well-being. While much of content of the guide is achievable goals for developed countries in the EU, the UK or America, a city with a rapid but short urban development history like Jakarta, requires a more specific understanding of the complex socio-spatial context relating to Indonesian context and local values, before commencing any further with spatial planning strategies.

Related works

Since first appeared in 1950s, the term “*livability*” has been widely used in a variety of context for urban-related projects. According to a historical review by Kaal (Kaal, 2011), the definition of the term urban livability slowly morphed from country to country, discipline to discipline with one main aim to “*improve one’s life quality*”, and yet still covers a broad range of non-definitive or universally agreed definition to “*who’s*” life quality is it really for.

From being the first key issue discussed in the Congress of European Society Rural Sociology in Belgium in 1959 to address agriculture issues and negative impact urbanization had on rural communities, to the 1960s concern of the impact of modernization on the urban spaces (such as Jane Jacobs’s *Life and Death of American Cities* in America), Kaal concluded that the best way to improve the understanding of this term is to contextualize “*where, when, by whom and why, as well as for which reason(s) this concept is applied*” (Kaal, 2011) for changing governance of a place.

This paper aims to discuss the spatial stories existing in the current urban practice in context of 21st Century Jakarta, Indonesia. The study has taken into account the varied multi-cultural and socio-economic background of its residents, as well as the histories that accompanies the selected case study sites.

Study Area

The area of Menteng is a small suburb of Jakarta Central, a sub-district region in the special capital region of Jakarta, Indonesia. This area was the south part of the Dutch Colonial City of Batavi (as Jakarta was formerly known) founded in the 17th century. It was recognised nationwide for the development of Menteng Residential Village, the first planned urban residence in the early 1900s, as part of an expansion plan for the long-standing colonial city. After 1910, when the region was developed for town development, the area became known as Nieuw Gondangdia, a residential zone designed by Dutch Architects P.J.S. Moojen and F.J. Kubatz in 1913.

At that time, the Menteng Project was designed following a European hierarchical system that divided streets and houses into several classes, depending on their hierarchy in the colonial official ranking. The park changed its name to Suropati park after the Independence of Indonesia on August 17th in 1945 (info.jakarta.net, 2015).



Figure 1 Map of the administrative village of Menteng with the location of case study parks (Taman Suropati and Taman Menteng) in highlighted within red boundaries.
(Source: Spatial Planning Master Plan, 2016)

Former *Burgemeester Bisschopplein* or Taman Suropati is located across what is currently the administration office of the Vice President of Indonesia, sits as also opposite of the official residence of the Ambassador of the United States.

The second case study site of Menteng Park was previously a part of a sports stadium known as *Voetbalbond Indische Omstreken Sport* built in 1921 by two Dutch Architects that was also responsible for the developing the Menteng district during the development of the Batavia City (Idris & Yunanto, 2009). According to stadium training grounds for the Dutch colonial officers for their leisure and sporting activities.

After Indonesia's Independence, from 1961 onwards the stadium became training grounds and main headquarters for local football "Persija" Jakarta team (Dundu, 2005). The prestige and popularity of "Persija" team brought followers and fans from all over Indonesia to this stadium to watch a game or see the team train. This iconic stadium generated income not only for the nearby shop housesⁱ and small business in the area but also became grounds for local community building for the youth in pursuing careers in sports and healthy life. The site converted into Taman Menteng in 2007 following a very public dispute that resulted in the demarcation of the Stadium in 2005. (Idris & Yunanto, 2009).

Methodology

For this paper, both quantitative and qualitative approach is adopted to triangulate experience of parks as well understanding underlying issues concerning the governance of green spaces in Jakarta, Indonesia. Figure 2 is a diagram showing a summary of the data collection and early data analysis carried out during the fieldwork. For the purposes of this paper, discussion will focus on the themes founded based on fieldwork data analysis.

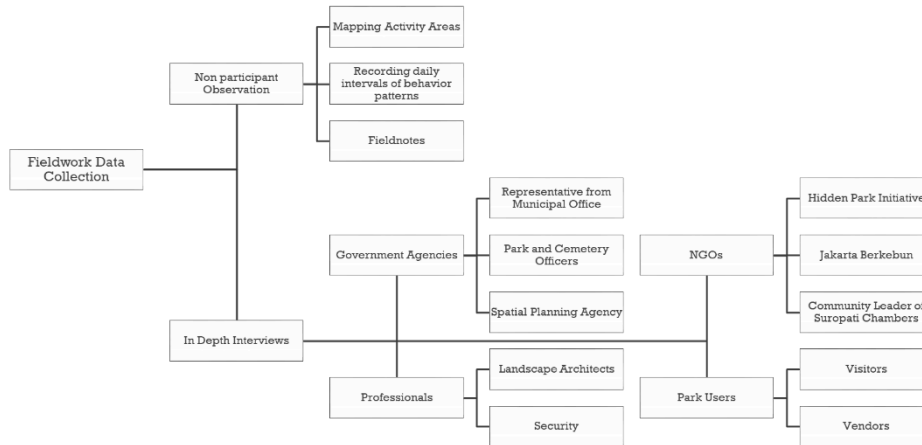


Figure 2 showing the fieldwork of data collection process in Jakarta, Indonesia between August 2015 to April 2016 (Source: Author)

Observations take place between 10 am to 9 pm divided into 2-3-time periods to allow enough rotations of areas onsite. Monitoring times were distributed across several weekdays, Saturdays or Sundays, capturing the range of activity types occurring at different peak and low times at both case study sites.

All in-depth interviews took place between August 2015 to April 2016 with the majority between March and April of 2016. Choice of venue was decided by interviewee for the convenience of time and transport. Majority of the interviews were conducted in a series of semi-structured interview and conducted in an informal, conversational matter. Each question asked are outlined with the established aims for the answering specific research theme. Some interviews were held over more than an hour long especially when the interviewees were telling their personal stories related to the social activities that occur in public parks. In some cases, the interviewees were found that the study was very interesting for them.

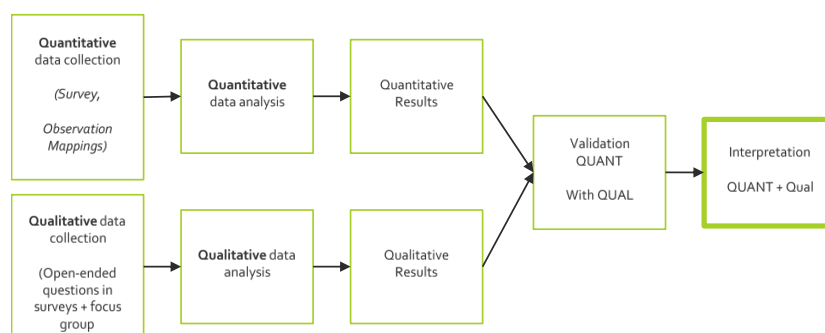


Figure 3 Triangulation of data adapted from Creswell (2013)

To present both the qualitative and quantitative findings from the data collection shown in earlier Figure 2, triangulation shown in Figure 3 is a process of listing components of the study that converge or offer complementary explanations between

This participation narratives (see Table 1) gives an overall idea of the pattern that emerges in the two case study sites from observation and results of the questionnaire surveys. Recurrent activities which happens at different times of day of the week, occupying different areas of the park indicates different types of values park users can identify themselves with. These references made in the surveys were then explored further during group interviews. The discussions about specific activities engaged in the park suggest that they are considered by interviewees as productive spaces which confer value onto place.

Table 1 Simplified taxonomy of participant observation and questionnaire results between the two case study sites. Further evidence of the activities is shown in the images in the continued sections of this paper. (Source: Author)

Activities observed/ mentioned in interviews	Evidence/Presence of activity (Percentage)			100 %	Themes
	Taman Menteng	Taman Suropati			
Arts, culture, heritage events	• 40%	• 60%		100 %	Identifies cultural activities on site
	• 50%	• 50%			Identifies diversity of people
Community Activities (regular meetings, gatherings)	• 50%	• 50%			Identifies community link on site on site
Political events	• 30%	• 70%			Identifies Social movements
Street vendors, flea markets	• 50%	• 50%			Identifies economic opportunities
Religion/Spirituality Events	• 100%	0%			Identifies religious significance
Relaxing (Sitting, lounging, eating, People-Watching)	• 40%	• 60%			Identifies leisure activity
Isolation	• 80%	• 20%			Identifies non-social activity
Sports, active recreation	• 75%	• 25%			Identifies health and social activities

Cultural Activities include traditional or local events involving indigenous tribes of Indonesia such as traditional concert, dance or art shows from specific regions of the Indonesian Archipelago. Taman Suropati is a prime location for such events more than Taman Menteng despite being the smaller, less equipped space for the occasion.

Diversity refers representations of the different demographic groups of respondents on site as well as from observation recorded. This applies to respondents age, ethnicity, religious affiliations and socio-economic backgrounds. In this account, both parks are equally representing Jakarta's multi-cultural dynamics.

Community link refers to the presence of groups that identifies with similar cause either ethnic group, hobbies or activity that is recurrent and ongoing. Although percentage shows an equal distribution, the type of community that exists each park are dependant and limited on the availability of space and existing facilities that came with each site.

Religious significance refers to occurrences related with any specific religious practice on the site itself such as prayers, ceremonial rituals and such. In this regard, Menteng park has an advantage of giving an entire space of the parking building to accommodate for Muslim prayers to its users. Park users in Taman Suropati, however, uses the nearby mosque for their call of prayers.

What does an urban park say about the identity of its residents

Many urban scholars throughout history agree that the urban public space has always been an integral part of the well-being of social life in cities (Bourdieu, 1996; Madanipour, 1999; Schenker, 2002). For Jakarta, like other Southeast Asian cities like Bangkok (Thailand), Manilla (Philippines), or Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), public spaces are not built, but rather a product of socially constructed in-between spaces where the public meets and exchange small, everyday interactions and transactions. (Miao, 2001). Examples of interactions in these developing cities are not unlike Gehl's (2013) typologies of activities of necessary, optional and transitory.

Earlier Table 1 also refers to how in each of the Suropati and Menteng park users can be differentiated by activities, sense of dress code, language spoken, and their public behaviour [on whether or not they adhere to the written rules imposed on both sites]. It is noted in both parks that most visitors look, see their surroundings consistently, and maintain very strong eye contact with everyone they come in contact. Exchanges of waves and smiles, with occasional "*Mau minum?*" (*Do you need a drink?*), are very common from male park users [usually vendors looking for customers] but not always reciprocated or acknowledged by the female [unless it was also directed from another female from the research party].

Depending on the group size, again it usually the male that would be more dominant (in terms of identifying themselves: i.e. loud music, laughter and whistling) than the women will. However, in most of the observation periods, park users tended to focus on their own group and activities, not wanting to disturb others.

The city's relation to memory and perception through urban spaces

What can be seen through the observation phase of the fieldwork is that the selected public park of Taman Suropati and Taman Menteng becomes a place of community for those marginalized and most affected by the urbanization of the city. These include street musicians, vendors, the homeless people and sometimes groups of youth from the lower socio-economic background from the older, more derelict areas of the province. The public parks are the only areas of the cities where they [the

marginalised] are free to express their creative interests and regroup. However, with Indonesia's traumatic history with reformation and political conflicts in public spaces see Kusno (2004, pp. 2382–2383), much of the activities in the public space are still at in constant surveillance of the local governance.

Presence of armed and uniformed officers are also a common sight in the public spaces, even in the case study parks. In Taman Suropati, the proximity to the formal residence of the American Ambassador and the main office of Jakarta Governor means unified surveillance from many angles from areas adjacent to the park. These uniform men are either from SATPOL (Public Order Enforcers) or hired by the Park and Cemetery Agency of Special District Capital of Jakarta (Dinas Pertamanan dan Permakaman DKI Jakarta).

To preserve the peace and comfort of the many diverse populations Jakarta residents, the modifications and upgrade to Taman Suropati appears to be in the form of symbolic arts and cultural activities that the park offers. The walking path from south to the north of the park allows a view of six prominent artworks; three on the left and three on the right with each representing the symbolic friendship and diplomatic ties between Indonesia and its Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. These six pieces include the *“Peace-Harmony and One”* by Lee Kian Seng (Malaysia), *“The Spirit of ASEAN”* by Wee Beng Chong (Singapore), *“Fraternity”* by Nonthivathn Chandhanaphalin (Thailand), *“Harmony”* by Awang Hj Latif (Brunei), *“Rebirth”* by Luis E. Yee Jr. (Philippines) and *“Peace”* by Sunaryo (Indonesia). Each artwork lights up as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 6 Taman Suropati Map of symbolic art features (Source: Author)



Figure 7 Image is showing park users of Suropati on a Saturday night. Visitors are seen enjoying public space with family, friends and loved one despite not having seating arrangements provided. (Source: Author)

Influence of urban life to changing tradition and culture

Opportunities for livelihood and social ties work together in the context of the Indonesian society. According to findings of fieldwork (see Figure 7 and Figure 8), the general people are attracted to people, and word of mouth affirms trust and familiarity among the park visitors.

According to in-depth interviews with park vendors, much of the identification of indigenous culture that came along with the ethnic identities of the respondents still exists in the perception of other vendors [on conflict among the vendors].

However, informal economies such as food vendors and “*walking Starbucks*” are still considered to be part of “*multicultural heart of South East Asia*” identity that Jakarta has [quoted by respondent aged 55], not merely because of the attraction for international tourists, but because it encourages casual encounters between different ethnic groups who would otherwise not come into contact in this megacity. Such exchanges were seen as part of an everyday urban experience since the Dutch colonial era. It is this very every-day ordinary-ness of social mix that is considered the most valued aspect of the province of Jakarta.

Although activities such as public yoga classes, children’s martial arts, health boot camps are a new addition to the 21st-century lifestyle, these activities are still part of an ongoing tradition held together by non-elected communities founded in the parks [Menteng and Suropati].

The role of the urban green spaces in everyday makings of the city

According to the interviews with respondents, trust and familiarity are the two important reasons why both case study parks are successful in provide a harmonious public space. Although only a small percentage of the respondents are regular visitors to the parks, the reputation and image of both case study parks proved enough to

secure and encourage future participations in both venues. From getting local favourites from the street carts of vendors, to allowing their children to join in the groups of sporting or cultural activities on site without planning or impromptu, it was not uncommon among respondents and park users to rely on the resources around the park for their regular needs.

Moreover, a high response rate for “enjoying physical presence of greenery and natural (or semi-natural)” in the multiple-choice question within the questionnaire was also one motivating reason behind going out and heading to the park. This response usually goes together with the popularity of social media such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter as it also gives an opportunity for photographic evidence for their social activities.

While it is acknowledged that enjoyment and well-being by a group of urban residents either enhance or come at a cost to the well-being of another group, balancing multiple demands between different users to ensure that some social groups are not side-lined should be an important policy goal for planners and managers. Yet, despite strict laws and presence of uniform security, the two case study parks have proven to be an important social platform, a place to start fostering communities between the urban residents of Jakarta.

The following quotes are from excerpts from the open-ended question on why respondents feel that there should be more encouraged social and cultural activities in parks like Taman Suropati and Taman Menteng;

"I like meeting up with my friends in here... (pointing over to a different park section-Taman Kodok on opposite street) ... on that side they have a lot of food vendors...gathering chatting and eating at the same time. That is where I want to be."

(Respondent aged between 18-25) -Menteng Park

"It can be annoying to have them [the vendors and street musicians] but without them, it feels empty and lifeless. Doesn't feel like we are in Indonesia..."

(Respondent aged between 25-30)- Menteng Park

"the[this] park allows many chances to meet new people...even in my residential area, I don't really know about my neighbours."

(Respondent aged between 26-35) Suropati Park

" I rarely feel lazy to get to the park, although it is more [likely] that as long as I had friends to go with then I will, no matter where the park is."

(Respondent aged between 18-25) Suropati Park



Figure 8 Among the vendors interviewed in case study park parks during fieldwork March- April 2016 (Source: Author)



Figure 9 Suropati park users participating community activities on a Sunday afternoon (Source: Author)

Conclusive comments

The contribution of this study is to confirm the distinct characteristics of urban parks that play essential roles in supporting urban public life, especially in preserving local traditions of the people and encouraging connections between the diverse population. Moreover, this study contributes additional evidence that suggests the changing roles of spatial planning of green spaces in shaping in urban life, as they can be recognised as primary urban space, as public space, as creative space, as cultural space, and as an urban heritage that should be a mandatory part of city planning.

In summary, these results speak to the power of academic knowledge to structure the production of nature through local planning and interest in human ecology. To be able to plan for a highly populated country like Indonesia successfully, incorporation of personal histories of the residents needs to become a considerable part of the city makings for the future, considering experiences from all residents- regardless income or social status.

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ⁱ Shophouses- A vernacular building type commonly found in Southeast Asia usually two or three storeys. It comprises of a shop front in the groundfloor, with the upper levels designed for inhabitat.