Raising Public Awareness on Green and Public Spaces: Upping the Game for Inclusivity and Engagement

Building inclusive, healthy and productive cities is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today as the world's urban population is estimated to have grown by more than 150 million people (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017). Due to increasing vulnerability as city's regions urbanize, a key to the puzzle in tackling the challenge lies right at the heart of world's urban areas, in its green and public spaces. Green and public spaces are not just easy on the eye, they also help to keep urban spaces safe and biodiverse, while safeguarding our health. The important roles played by green spaces include social, cultural, economic and ecological aspects of sustainable development. Despite positive impacts for many layers of urban society, not everyone is aware of the benefits of having green and public spaces in their community.

A wide variety of definitions and types of green and public spaces should not hinder the opportunity to bring about accessible and inclusive green and public spaces that are safe for women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Access to the green and public spaces is considered to be spaces which are located close to residential areas, easy to walk to, physically accessible, safe to use and provides well-maintained facilities (Balfour and Allen 2014). It is evident that access to green and public space is associated with a range of better physical and psychological outcomes for communities (Mitchell et al 2008; Marmot et al 2010). Unfortunately, in many parts of the world, access to green and public space is unequally distributed, contributing to health inequalities.

Especially in the rush of development in Asia and Pacific (UN-DESA, 2017), it is crucial to think about accessibility and inclusivity of green and public space in urban development. To ensure some integration of green and public spaces in urban planning and management by the local authorities, civil society organisations are key actors. Mainstreaming the ideas on the ground for an increase in equitable access and use of good quality green and public spaces can be done through raising some public awareness that a creation of new areas of green and public spaces while enhancing the quality of existing green spaces. Gathering the public support to push for an increase in accessibility, engagement and functionality of green and public spaces is critical.

Many community movements are working towards shaping public perspectives and gaining support to bring more of green and public spaces in urban areas. Through means of campaign and advocacy, Hello Garden (Japan), PubliCity (Singapore), and Jakarta Car Free Day (Jakarta), are several initiatives trying to target the establishments of more areas that are inclusive and engaging for urban dwellers to enjoy.

Hello Garden (Japan)

In order for the local people in Nishi-Chiba own inclusive and engaging open public space and garden, Hello Garden came to life. Hello Garden was a regular house-plot that changed in to a community space. The garden has a lot of seasonal vegetable and herbs, along with trees and flowers, providing a living green space for the community of Nishi-Chiba. The children in the neighbourhood run freely or play cross-cultural games in the public garden. At times, cooking events and picnics were conducted to allow for social interactions amongst the community members. Every week throughout the year, there is always an event promoting the value of sustainability.

Often times, local authorities cannot do much to help the existing condition. Local authorities are facing financial pressure to sell green space in order to generate the income and/or develop more land for housing the projected population growth. An initiative like Hello Garden is very much needed to display direct benefits of quality and access to green and public spaces to the community across different social groups. It is important for the development of any green and public spaces to avoid the tendency to simply record the average number of visitors without providing meaningful engagement and safe space for women, children, elderlies and persons with disabilities. Hello Garden also understands the need to involve other groups, as part of the campaign of an accessible and inclusive green spaces, by hosting different activities weekly. Working with others allows for campaign to recruit new members, publicise activities and exchange ideas for the betterment of the space for access, engagement and inclusivity (Balfour and Allen 2014). There is also a possibility to gain support from local suppliers, local politicians or even grant aid to ensure the continuation of this work.

PubliCity (Singapore)

There is an increasing trend for community residents in Singapore to have an active role in developing the city (Senthilingam 2016). The positive trend is seen as an important milestone in public participation to promote sustainable practices in planning policies for green and open spaces. Involving all sorts of innovation, pop-up urbanism becomes popular as a tool to utilize potential urban design using temporary installations (Douglas 2016). In Singapore, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) has recognized such interest. Hence, in 2013, the URA created an initiative called PubliCity which focuses on hosting and involving the community to enliven public spaces through design programs. The initiatives that were hosted by URA are:

- Street for People — a community-initiated projects which temporarily transforms busy streets into meaningful pedestrian activities.
- Play Space — a pop up play area for children consisting of 3D jigsaw puzzles
- Play it Forward — a project involving a group of local artists to transform old and unwanted pianos into art pieces and places in public for everyone to play and enjoy music.

The notable interest in creating a participative green and open spaces in Singapore is articulated well by the authority through PubliCity. The initiative is executed by the authority, after years of coordinated planning among Singapore's Ministry of National Development, URA, Land Transport Authority, Public Utilities Board, Housing Development Board and the National Parks Board (Senthilingam 2016). Tackling green and public spaces is indeed not a sectoral issue. The success of implementation and integration of PubliCity as an insight into urban planning and decision-making processes lies in the strong commitment to ensure access, inclusivity and engagement of green and public spaces. Such strong commitment is in part a contribution to the country's ambition in establishing urban sustainability as part of its goal to be the world's greenest city (Kolczak 2017).

Jakarta Car-free Day (Indonesia)

The region of Southeast Asia is home to the megacities of Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta (UN-DESA, 2017). As the largest and densest urbanized areas in Indonesia, Jakarta experiences severe traffic congestion for a quite long time that may cause the potential loss of as much as 65 trillion rupiahs by 2020 (Yudhistira et al. 2016). Hence, the existence of an initiative like Car-free Day has become a well-loved tradition. Every Sunday from 6 to 11 a.m. thousands flock to the main roads normally full of cars and traffic. Along the road women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities gather to run, cycle, skate or simply to stroll leisurely, enjoying the street food and occasional public events. Originally initiated to help reduce pollution, car free day in Jakarta has evolved in to a public showcase of how relaxing and healthy an inclusive, accessible and engaging green and open spaces should be. The initiative has been replicated all over the country to show the support for more green and public spaces in urban areas.

While considerable momentum has been achieved in terms of media coverage, these events turn out to be difficult in actually achieving the outcome of the campaign, which is an effort of mimicking the ideal urban condition where access and inclusivity occur in the capital city. There is considerable uncertainty of the usefulness of the approach to bring about massive transformation. More staging of urban transformation should be phased deliberately. The strategy should be able provide contextual solutions to local planning challenges, contain low risk and bring realistic expectations (Lydon et al 2011).

Making green spaces accessible to as many people as possible should be mainstreamed in planning, design and management. The issue to achieve the goal is not the lack of expertise, but rather the raising of awareness of authorities, professionals in planning, design, urban sustainability and communities themselves in forming a social capital to push for the change. Provision of access and inclusivity in green and public spaces is not merely a matter of competence of the authorities, but also realizing the potential of community to understand their needs and to bring change in real-life planning and development projects; the change that can be at the community scale (Hello Garden), city level (PubliCity), or in a capital city with on-going scale-up projects around the country (Jakarta Free Day).

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