



AicE-Bs2022KotaKinabalu

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10th Asia-Pacific International Conference on E-B Studies
The Magellan Sutera Resort, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 07-08 Sep 2022

Social and Creative Hubs as the Third Places of Post-Covid Era

Syazwani Abdul Kadir ¹, Nurul Nabilah Aris ¹, Nurlisa Ginting ²

¹ Centre of Studies for Interior Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying,
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia

² Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

syazwani179@uitm.edu.my, nabilaharis@uitm.edu.my, nurlisa@usu.ac.id
Tel: +603-3258 6100

Abstract

To support social activities of the post-pandemic, some social and creative hubs in Malaysia have emerged with more positive vibes that may revitalise the community. With these third places revival, there is still a lack of study on what has changed for the design of third places in response to the recent Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, this study aims to examine the design of two social and creative hubs in Kuala Lumpur based on the adaptation of Ray Oldenburg's theory of third places. The research objective is to ascertain the third places' characteristics of the case studies through on-site observation.

Keywords: Social and creative hubs; third places; post-Covid design.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/ebpj.v7i21.3754>

1.0 Introduction

The unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19 has significantly affected human life in many aspects, especially concerning social interaction. During the pandemic, many people have become vulnerable to mental health-related issues due to the restriction on social activities, whether for personal, work or leisure purposes. Recent studies have shown that loneliness and feeling isolated have a negative impact on human physical and psychological health (Holmes et al., 2020; Mel'endez et al., 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). This is crucial most significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic when people are also heavily affected by health, financial and other life issues.

Now that the major social restriction measures have been lifted, people are slowly meeting with families and friends again. To support social activities of the post-pandemic, some social and creative hubs in Malaysia have emerged with more positive vibes that may enliven the community. These social and creative hubs can be considered as 'third places' - the term established by sociologist Ray Oldenburg referring to the places where people spend their time between home ('first' place) and work ('second' place). With the third places revival, there is still a lack of study on what has changed in the design of third places in response to the recent global health crisis (Persson, 2022). Therefore, this study aims to examine the design of two social and creative hubs in Kuala Lumpur based on the adaptation of Ray Oldenburg's theory of third places. The research objective is to ascertain the third places' characteristics of the case studies through on-site observation methodology.

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2.0 Literature Review

2.1 *The Need for Social Interaction Post-Pandemic*

As highlighted earlier, the social restriction measures during the Covid-19 pandemic have taken a toll on human well-being. Even though computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become the medium for social interaction during the pandemic lockdown, it cannot substitute the sense of connection felt through physical conversation (Janson, 2020). Endou (2020), in a study on Japanese festivals' role as the third places, establishes that the global health crisis has made people live apart from each other and become isolated from the community. Moreover, the virtual networks and today's individualised lifestyle have caused less physical interaction for community networking; thus, there is a need for physical establishments where people can freely come and socialise regularly (Llyod, Fullagar and Reid, 2016; Sandiford, 2019).

An individual's well-being reflects his or her sense of belonging to social groups, indicating social identity (Jetten et al., 2009). With the social restriction since the Covid-19 outbreak, people seemed lost in terms of their social identity, and the will to meet more often significantly increased after a few years of the pandemic. People look forward to meeting and spending time together in public places post-pandemic (Persson, 2022). According to Cattell et al. (2008), the rejuvenation of public spaces in the UK, which has been a critical policy, calls for those places to be nurtured more in the aspect of their therapeutic properties for human well-being. As Lee (2021) found that third places may revitalise the psychological implications of the depressing pandemic, third places can be regarded as suitable public establishments that may fulfil the social needs of post-pandemic society. Nevertheless, Finlay et al. (2019) claim that there is still a small amount of research conducted on the relevance of third places to human well-being.

2.2 *The Role of Third Places towards Social Cohesion*

Third places are the relevant public settings for informal social activities that the post-pandemic society needed outside their common compounds of daily life. Ray Oldenburg indicated that the third places environment is filled with "the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (Oldenburg, 1999). A recent scholarly definition of third places refers third places as the "informal public gathering places where people can interact and socialize" within a well-facilitated public domain (Dudek, 2019). On top of that, Magkou and Pélissier (2021) establish the common denominator of various third places is that they are significantly community-driven; where the places "facilitate informal encounters, social interactions, creativity, and common projects".

Active and lively third places play a significant role in social cohesion by enabling, supporting, stimulating and caring for socialisation (Finlay et al., 2019). The spaces provide the opportunity for shared meaning and community participation through the involvement that may stimulate the mind and body of the individuals (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). Thematic analysis in Fong et al. (2021) study proposes that third places support the positive social identity of individuals; thus, representing these identities in third places alleviates a sense of well-being. Third places encourage social activities outside the individuals' family and professional life, thus allowing their community life to develop (Magkou & Pélissier, 2021). As a whole, third places play a significant role in bridging a broader and cohesive community.

2.3 *The Physical and Social Features of Third Places*

Third places are constituted by two main components - the physical features that provide spaces and support for the activities, and the social features that make the spaces come alive. Fullagar, O'Brien and Lloyd (2019) assert that the physical features not only become the location of the social interaction but also contribute to the characteristics of third places, such as accessibility and a sense of security. The physical design of third places also creates the spatial ambience that inspires social interaction among the visitors (Nadizti, Hanan & Syamwil, 2020). Some of the physical features that should be present in the design of third places include the use of personalisation elements to inject coziness and feeling secure, the permeability of public spaces so that they are visually connected inside out, and the provisions of seating variety that offer flexibility in choice and comfort to the visitors (Dudek, 2021). In addition, Joo (2020) manifests that good third places should also provide a comfortable space that allows concentration for visitors who wish to do their work alone while being in an invigorating environment.

Goosen and Cilliers (2020) establish that the third places' physical setting and socio-spatial design can be reckoned from green urbanism, lively planning, and place-making approaches. Some scholars claim that third places' physical and social features are the constructs of place attachment (Tumanan & Lansangan, 2012; Siguaw & Sheng, 2022). Through the practicality of physical settings, there exists an opportunity for involvement in meaningful activities, which moulds the individuals' social identity and their attachment to the place (Ujang, Kozlowski and Maulan, 2018). The connection between the physical and social context of third places with the visitors' spatial experience suggests that third places also contribute to the individuals' identity in relation to the place.

3.0 Methodology

The methodology of this study involved observation of the physical and social attributes of third places in the case studies, along with visual documentation and notes taking. Precedent researches on third places that conducted similar methodology are the studies by Nadizti et al. (2020) and Persson (2022). The research tool was adapted from Persson (2022). The Oldenburg's characteristics of third places included in the checklist are neutral ground, leveller, conversation is the main activity, accessibility and accommodation, and home away from home. Descriptions of the characteristics from Oldenburg's book "The Great Good Place" (1999) were added to the checklist. Besides, some indicators were reworded and re-arranged to better suit the observed attributes. A new characteristic - the digital technology integration was added to the checklist considering the digital literacy advancement of the post-pandemic society. The scope of the study is within the visibility of the observed physical and social context of the case studies and does not involve perspectives from the visitors.

Two social and creative hubs in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, were purposely chosen as the case studies based on their popularity on social media - which suggests that they are accessible, open to the public and social-friendly. The first case study, APW Bangsar, was founded as Art Printing Works, a commercial printing factory in 1952. The printing factory was then converted into an inspiring creative and event space in 2013, with various eateries and retail spaces (APW, 2022). The second case study, REXKL, was once the legendary Rex Theatre located on Jalan Sultan, Kuala Lumpur, before it was revived into a community hub for events, performances, creative showcase, bookstore, retails and a variety of eateries. The historical building was one of the earliest theatres that existed in Malaysia, founded in 1947 (REXKL, 2021).

4.0 Findings

Research findings from the on-site observation are tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings of Social and Creative Hubs Observational Study as Third Places of Post-Pandemic

Third place characteristics	Indicators	APW Bangsar	REXKL
NEUTRAL GROUND	<i>Place where people are free to come and go as they please, where nobody is required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 22).</i>		
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presence of various areas in the third place (indicating a variety of activities) 2. Existence of larger tables/furniture setting that supports multiple users 3. Places to sit without paying for goods and services 4. Physical features discouraging the use of space 	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Very few</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>None</p>
<i>Social Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Space flexibility to suit user needs (arrangeable space for different activities) 2. Provision of different products and services in different price ranges 	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>
A LEVELER	<i>It is accessible to the general public and does not set formal criteria of membership and exclusion (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 24).</i>		
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presence of people of diverse ages 2. Presence of diverse genders 3. Presence of diverse socio-economic classes 4. Presence of people of diverse physical abilities 	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>None but facilities provided</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>None but facilities provided</p>
<i>Social Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to freely behave and involve in activities 2. Presence of posted signs to exclude certain people or behaviour 3. Presence of security guards, ushers etc. (which are intimidating and preventing of activities) 	<p>Yes</p> <p>None</p> <p>Very few</p>	<p>Yes</p> <p>None</p> <p>Very few</p>
CONVERSATION IS THE MAIN ACTIVITY	<i>Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, scintillating, colorful and engaging (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 26).</i>		
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Existence of movable chairs providing different settings for seating and creating the environment for conversation 2. Level of distracting noise (loud music, people talking noise etc.) which may discourage people from staying in that space 	<p>Many</p> <p>None</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>None</p>
<i>Social Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presence of people having a face-to-face conversation 2. Presence of different types of activities for socializing throughout the day 3. Sense of amicable customer-seller relationship 	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Yes</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Yes</p>
ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATION	<i>One may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 32).</i>		
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Control of entrance to public space (presence of lockable doors, fences etc.) 2. Perceived openness and accessibility 3. Visual and physical connection and openness to adjacent street/s or spaces (permeability) 4. Existence of public transportation near the place 5. Existence of parking lot near the place 6. Proximity to other life necessities (convenient shops, restaurants, markets, residents etc.) 	<p>Very few</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>	<p>None</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Yes</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>
<i>Social Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to participate in activities and events in the place without specialized access/ permit 	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Yes</p>
HOME AWAY FROM HOME	<i>Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends (Oldenburg, 1999, p. 42).</i>		
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Presence of comfortable furniture (chairs, couches, tables etc.) 2. Availability of lightning that creates a cosy ambience (windows for sunlight, artificial light etc) 3. Personalisation through physical design features (such as framed photos on the wall, interior plants, natural materials for furniture/interior elements etc.) 	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>	<p>Many</p> <p>Many</p> <p>Many</p>

<i>Social Attributes</i>	1. Different levels of privacy among the activities (sitting alone to work on a laptop vs chatting with a group of friends)	Many	Many
	2. Sense of comfort and fun showed through visitors' activities	Yes	Yes
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION			
<i>Physical Attributes</i>	1. Availability of WiFi for visitors' use	Yes	Yes
	2. Presence of electrical sockets (for digital device charging etc.)	Many	Many
<i>Social Attributes</i>	1. Presence of people using smartphones, laptops or other digital devices	Many	Many
	2. Presence of people sharing their photos/activities at the place (*this is observed through the case studies' Instagram account)	Many	Many

In general, both case studies indicate positive connotations with third places' physical and social attributes. The case studies' physical setting supports the social attributes of each characteristic being observed: neutral ground, a leveller, conversation is the main activity, accessibility and accommodation, home away from home, and digital technology integration. The social environment of both case studies is seen alive throughout the day, as shown in Fig. 1 (a) and (b). This shows that the post-pandemic society is no longer restricting themselves from going out and meeting people face to face; instead, they adhere to the measure of wearing face masks when being inside a building or among the crowd.



Fig. 1. (a) APW Bangsar; (b) REXKL.
(Source: Authors, 2022)

It is also important to note that the furniture in the case studies (most evident in REXKL) was designed with post-covid design features such as the element of social distancing, use of easy-to-maintain materials and finishes, simpler form, and flexibility in use. This can be seen in Fig. 2(a) and (b).



Fig. 1. (a) Furniture design at APW Bangsar; (b) Furniture design at REXKL.
(Source: Authors, 2022)

5.0 Social and Creative Hubs as the Third Places of Post-Covid Era

5.1 A Space Within A Space Within A Space

The findings show that the physical attributes of third places, such as the various spaces located in the social and creative hubs, the flexibility of furniture configuration, the facilities and the attractive design of the spaces, are the enabler of the social attributes of the case studies. This is similar to the finding by Nadizti et al. (2020), which signifies that the physical setting of third places and their social features are still relevant in the digital lifestyle of today's generation. The social features can be the lively group communication and the persons who spend some me-time while sitting in an invigorating environment. Slater and Hee (2010) highlight a similar finding whereby some respondents did not particularly look for face-to-face interaction but simply wanted to be in public within the social environment.

This study also asserts the importance of digital technology integration in the third places of post-pandemic due to the digital lifestyle of current generations. Digital technology facilities such as WiFi for the public usage and free-to-use electrical sockets for devices' charging purposes are available in both case studies. Such facilities and accommodation foster the individuals' digital lifestyle, including taking photos and sharing activities with their social media followers. This act of self-expressiveness via social media is mediated through the design of third places that reflect their identity and personal style (Joo, 2020). The physical space and virtual realm are diluted through these interrelated spatial experiences of third places (Magkou & Pélissier, 2021).

The digital media may also create digital networks that allow social connection with and among the third places' social media followers and be the platform to promote the programs being held at the hubs. This attracts people to keep coming and makes the spaces continuously alive. Communication on social media makes the third places not only spaces for social interaction but also spaces of collective initiative and community sharing (Magkou & Pélissier, 2021). Parallel to the findings of this study, some previous research also found that the usage of digital technology may support and enhance the physical and social context of third places (Kutlay, 2019; Hadi & Ellisa, 2019). By engaging in social activities within the physical setting and virtual realm, the third places' visitors unintentionally create their own space within a space, within a space.

5.2 The Inclusivity and Equality of Third Places

Another highlight from the findings is how these community-driven third places project inclusivity and equality values, especially in a multicultural society. These values became stronger after the pandemic crisis when people are more aware of humanity issues and started to support the inclusive movement even more. From our findings, it is apparent that the flexibility in the furniture type and arrangement, the variety of spaces and facilities that support the users' needs, and the diverse programs offered to the visitors foster a convivial environment within the case studies. Similarly, Sandiford (2019) and Ujang et al. (2018) also claim that community-driven social activities encourage inclusive participation in third places.

Third places act as the melting pot as they do not discriminate against people of different cultures, ages, backgrounds, gender and socio-economic status. This finding is in line with Morgado et al. (2022) study that highlights how a public library offers equal access to literature for its surrounding community. The inclusiveness of third places is especially befitting of the diverse Malaysian culture that various space programs and social activities existed in harmony in both case studies. The different eateries in both case studies also co-existed well within the open and permeable layout. As Wessendorf and Farrer (2021) put it, food plays a significant role in intercultural conviviality. Moreover, creative and arts expression also breaks the language and cultural barriers among the diverse society in both case studies.

5.3 Third Places Supporting New Way of Working

Third places are not only the place for social activities but also the platform for independent businesses and artists. Besides the permanent business spaces, the case studies also offer flexible event spaces for independent arts and cultural programs. With post-covid impact on people's financial issues, such as losing their salaried job, the social and creative hubs provide spaces and opportunities for independent artists, for instance, to showcase their talent and therefore generate income. Third places also provide audiences and markets for the creative people - they act as the 'survival platform' for the post-covid society (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020). Other programs held at both case studies such as analogue photography workshops and artisan markets also support this new trend of post-pandemic entrepreneurship. Fang and Slaper (2022) establish that the essential ingredients of entrepreneurship include social interaction and relationship building - which can be facilitated through urban third places.

This is parallel to some recent studies on third places, for example, Magkou and Pelissier (2021) refer to this phenomenon as the evolution in the way of working and describe how this opportunity allows "the co-existence of interdisciplinary artistic practice". The supportive third places fosters collaborative programs and collective initiative within the creative community. Besides, social media and technology have also shifted the working preferences of the new generations towards entrepreneurship and working independently. This new way of working together embraces the life of post-pandemic. Beyond the dynamic people-place relationship and the inclusiveness of third places which assist social sustainability, this study proposes that the social and creative hubs are also the generator of economic sustainability post-pandemic.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study found that the social and creative hubs support the social and economic sustainability of the post-pandemic through three approaches: the co-existence of the physical and social setting within the virtual spaces, the inclusive social activities within the community-driven environment, and the supportive initiative for new ways of working in the post-covid era. Although this study is limited by the observational methodology, the data collected when the physical and social context are in their natural state best describes the

actual condition of the case studies. Significantly, the pandemic has shifted the value of architecture and the creative world toward a more emphatic design and more people-oriented. This is actually in favour of third places whose main objective is for the betterment of the community.

Some initiatives can be made to improve the case studies and other third places. First, the design of third places can include the community's opinion in the early phase of the design process. Second, the social and creative hubs could add more programs such as arts and plants workshops that involve older groups of people. These two recommendations may enhance the inclusivity of third places, particularly for the community well-being in the post-pandemic. Future research may be conducted by looking at the visitors' experience and their outlook of modern-day third places through questionnaires and interview methodology.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study highlights the role of the social and creative hubs as the third places of post-pandemic in helping the community rebuild their social connection with others and sustain their work-life balance.

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