World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Architectural and Environmental Engineering
Vol:10, No:02, 2016

The Functions of Spatial Structure in Supporting Socialization in Urban Parks

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Abstract : Human evolution has designed us to be dependent on social and natural settings, but designed of our modern cities often ignore this fact. It is evident that high-rise buildings dominate most metropolitan city centers. As a result urban parks are very limited and in many cases are not socially responsive to our social needs in these urban 'jungles'. This paper emphasizes the functions of urban morphology in supporting socialization in Lake Garden, one of the main urban parks in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It discusses two relevant theories; first the concept of users' experience coined by Kevin Lynch (1960) which states that way-finding is related to the process of forming mental maps of environmental surroundings. Second, the concept of social activity coined by Jan Gehl (1987) which holds that urban public spaces can be more attractive when they provide welcoming places in which people can walk around and spend time. Until recently, research on socio-spatial behavior mainly focused on social ties, place attachment and human well-being; with less focus on the spatial dimension of social behavior. This paper examines the socio-spatial behavior within the spatial structure of the urban park by exploring the relationship between way-finding and social activity. The urban structures defined by the paths and nodes were analyzed as the fundamental topological structure of space to understand their effects on the social engagement pattern. The study uses a photo questionnaire survey to inspect the spatial dimension in relation to the social activities within paths and nodes. To understand the legibility of the park, spatial cognition was evaluated using sketch maps produced by 30 participants who visited the park. The results of the sketch mapping indicated that a spatial image has a strong interrelation with socio-spatial behavior. Moreover, an integrated spatial structure of the park generated integrated use and social activity. It was found that people recognized and remembered the spaces where they engaged in social activities. They could experience the park more thoroughly, when they found their way continuously through an integrated park structure. Therefore, the benefits of both perceptual and social dimensions of planning and design happened simultaneously. The findings can assist urban planners and designers to redevelop urban parks by considering the social quality design that contributes to clear mental images of these places.

Keywords : spatial structure, social activities, sketch map, urban park, way-finding
Conference Title : ICCA 2016 : International Conference on Constructivism and Architecture
Conference Location : Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Conference Dates : February 11-12, 2016