A Comparative Study of the Malaysian Garden Concept (MGC) Criteria Application on the Public Parks

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Abstract

Today there are public parks that are named with the Malaysian Garden. Researchers need to determine whether the design of the public parks is following the MGC guidelines provided by the National Landscape Department. Public parks that use the name of the Malaysian Garden / "Taman Malaysia" will be an example of MGC gardens. The main objective of this study is to find out the level of use of MGC criteria in public parks that have used the Malaysian Garden as its name. In this paper, researchers have used qualitative methods, namely, observation and interview experts. The results of the study found that the application of MGC criteria is placed in the weak category. However, three main factors are the cause of non-compliance with the MGC criteria. Furthermore, this study has explained to us the criteria that underlie the design of the MGC.

Keywords: Malaysian garden concept, public park, Taman Malaysia

1. Introduction

Public parks are built not just for aesthetic purposes. Public parks today have a variety of functions. As much as we appreciate the creativity in designing a garden, it will be a successful development. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said, "Landscaping is a new type of industry, and many businesses are providing everything needed to beautify parks and landscapes whether in residential or building areas" (translated) [1].

There are several popular landscape concepts and themes today. If we want to come up with a concept that is very close to Malaysia, it should be the "Balinese Garden Style" (BGS). BGS is a phenomenon for the lovers of tropical-style gardens. BGS as its name is designed for development only in Bali, and that factor makes it easier to commercialize. The BGS is located within a small area and is focused on one subject matter. Besides, the factors that contribute to the success of this concept are "Tourism" and "Culture." Bali is known to be one of the world's leading tourist destinations. The early history of the existence of BGS was pioneered by a garden designer named 'Made Wijaya.' He has also produced many books on Balinese landscape design and architecture. Mr. Wijaya thinks the park is like a theater. Designing a dramatic scene is essential. A scene will be softened using flowering and fragrant plants [2]. Smart use of hardscapes is like a classic sculpture, and for him, what is more, outstanding is design in harmony with nature. In Malaysia, the BGS concept is prevalent in the development of resorts, hotels, and residences.

Also, there is another popular garden concept in Asian countries called the Japanese Garden Concept (JGC). Among the main features of a Japanese Garden are (1) miniaturization; (2) hide-and-reveal; (3) borrowed scenery; and (4) asymmetry [3]. Nature physically and visually depicted within the rectangular framework of the garden wall [4]. In the pre- and early-modern periods, the designer of the Japanese Garden had a rather daunting task of aligning natural and spiritual forces, they must create a beautiful garden in all seasons. For fans of the JGC, they need to understand each philosophy behind the design itself. The current scenario in Malaysia can be
seen with the demolition of a public park built using concepts such as the Japanese Garden in Ipoh and Bukit Tinggi.

Figure 1. The process of creating the concept of Malaysian Garden (MGC)

The developmental history of the idea to create a concept of a park to be called the "Malaysian Garden" began in 1997 [5]. After a long time, the concept was discussed, finally, in 2009, a basic guideline of the "Malaysian Garden Concept" (MGC) was successfully released by the National Landscape Department (NLD) [6]. The production of this concept has gone through various processes, such as organizing seminars, expert conferences, the production of a sample of garden design, exhibitions, and provision of guidelines. Refer to Figure 1. The development of MGC aspires to inculcate a sense of love and pride in the Malaysian community towards the park environment that has a Malaysian identity [7].

2. Literature Review

There are several readings and terminology that must be understood by the researchers for the study. These references and reading materials are partly focused on the landscape and park development scenario in Malaysia at present.

2.1. MGC Formation Criteria

There are eight (8) criteria of MGC formation, as stated in the basic guidelines published by the NLD in 2009. These criteria are (1) Genus Loci / Local Spirit; (2) Local Plants; (3) Architectural Structure and Local Elements; (4) Culture and Heritage; (5) High Intrinsic Values/refinement and originality; (6) Adaptability to Local Weather; (7) Security Elements; and (8) Managed and Comfortable. The specialty of the criteria stated above, the construction of the park must be molded tropical garden concept and apply the elements of the cultural heritage of the Malays as the indigenous inhabitants of Malaysia. As Abu Bakar (one of the MGC experts) has pointed out, the design of MGC should emphasize the features of the Malay Garden, as agreed in the Malaysian Garden Seminar [8].

2.2. Cultural Landscape

The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group [9]. Landscape deliberately designed and created by man [10]. Humans will transition over a period that has intellectual value, culture, or civilization [11]. The cultural landscape has a lot to do with the uniqueness of a nation and its civilization. Many researchers have conducted studies on the Cultural Landscape, something that has always been on their mind is "sustainable development." Culture is a complex one; it involves many aspects of the present and past society structure. Culture has been the key ingredient in the formation of MGC. Furthermore, it indirectly has an advantage because the Malays are the people who are well-mannered and cultured. Introducing and preserving the Malay culture is worth, and without it, people will remain to derive other's way of life without a clear direction [12].
2.3. National Landscape Policy

The National Landscape Policy (NLP) is a guide to provide the direction of national landscape development, encompassing strategic policies, and action plans that serve as catalysts for the National Development Policy (NPP). The formulation and implementation of the National Landscape Policies are intended to make "Malaysia National Park Beautiful 2020". Basically, it can indirectly lead the country towards achieving a high-quality living environment. Besides, it promotes a strong and unique Malaysian identity in the eyes of the world [13]. According to the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, "In conjunction with the National Landscape Day 2019, I hope that sustainable and quality landscape development efforts will be enhanced," [14]. He added that Malaysia was endowed with favorable weather and fertile soil that facilitated the cultivation of various crops and flowers. The advantages that should be used wisely to beautify the landscape in our country. With the existence of NLD, it is seen to facilitate the future implementation of MGC. Besides, this is results when various programs are promoting the beauty of the landscape in Malaysia.

2.4. Landscape Design

Landscape design is an autonomous discipline and a tradition of design and art, practiced by landscape designers, incorporating nature and culture. Landscape design is a process that expresses the notion of landscape as a material project [15]. Garden and landscape design can be defined as the arts of composing these elements to create commodity, firmness, and delight in outdoor space [16]. In landscape design, the past and future must be related [17]. Landscape design is seen as contributing to the social, environmental, and ecological aspects of a place. Useful landscape design not only attracts visitors to a public park, but it is also seen as providing economic returns for the locals and becoming a tourism product.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to data acquisition. Observation methods and experts' interviews were conducted throughout 2019. Researchers have used the 'Concept Sampling' method to obtain observation sites. Two (2) public parks were selected, Taman Malaysia Seremban (Seremban Malaysian Garden) and Taman Malaysia Tapah (Tapah Malaysian Garden). Both public parks use the name in hopes of adopting MGC. Three (3) specialists were selected for interviews in this research. The interviews were conducted using a "semi-structured in-depth interview" approach, in which the researchers had questions to guide the respondents to focus on the subject. The questions asked to the interviewee were open-ended. Voice Recorder and Digital Camera were used to record conversations with respondents. Researchers have transcribed all conversations and included them in NVIVO12 software. The software has helped researchers create data coding processes for analysis purposes.

4. Results and Discussion

The selected public parks are located in two (2) different states in Malaysia. The Local Authority and the NLD have developed both public parks. The results show that these two parks have significant differences in design. As previously noted, this study aimed to measure the level of use of MGC criteria in public parks. Table 1 shows the results obtained during the observation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Garden Project (MGC by Park Name)</th>
<th>The Malaysian Garden Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Genius Loci</td>
<td>(1) Local Plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Local Plants</td>
<td>(2) Architectural &amp; local Elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Culture &amp; Heritage</td>
<td>(3) High Intrinsic Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Manageable &amp; Comfortable</td>
<td>(4) Local Weather Compatibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Safety</td>
<td>(5) Manageable &amp; Comfortable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Observational studies using MGC Criteria for selected public parks

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Figure 2. Seremban Malaysian Garden (Taman Malaysia Seremban)

Figure 3. Tapah Malaysian Garden (Taman Malaysia Tapah)

The above assessments used the scale, as shown in Table 2. These scales were developed by the researchers considering the validity of the on-site assessment.

Table 2. Level scales to assess the use of MGC criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Point</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Symbol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36 - 40</td>
<td>follows</td>
<td>It's there and dominant</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>ED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 - 35</td>
<td>a bit follows</td>
<td>It's there but a bit</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 31.6</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 - 19</td>
<td>weak</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 - 11</td>
<td>not follow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information from the table has shown that both public parks do not meet the criteria for MGC development. However, the Seremban Malaysian Garden almost meets its criteria when three (3) out of eight (8) items are followed in the design and planning. The other three (3) are about to meet the MGC criteria. The park has problems with criteria number seven and eight from the MGC guidelines. From design and planning, it almost certainly inspires a park that highlighted elements of the Malay heritage. However, the less noticeable aspect is the maintenance, which has made the park almost useless due to unnoticed damage. For the record, during a site visit, researchers discovered that there were processes for upgrading that were being carried out by the Local Authority.

For the Tapah Malaysian Garden, it is a different scenario from the park, as mentioned earlier. Otherwise, the design of the public park is said to be less than 50% in compliance with MGC criteria. The most notable weakness of the park is its compliance with criteria number 3, 4, and 5 of the MGC guidelines. The researchers found that the designer is less sensitive to the elements of traditional Malay society. From that starting point makes the Tapah Malaysian Garden look more like a regular public park (without using the term Malaysian Garden). The use of local
plants is also poorly implemented in the design of this garden. The evident is when the use of the "Pokok Doa" (*Bucida molinetti*) seems to be dominant in the garden.

Table 3. Matrix Coding Query - MGC EXPERTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Respondent A</th>
<th>Respondent B</th>
<th>Respondent C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Current issues</td>
<td>7 (20.62%)</td>
<td>13 (68.63%)</td>
<td>13 (47.04%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Landscape Design Concept</td>
<td>1 (6.63%)</td>
<td>3 (6.47%)</td>
<td>1 (0.99%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Identity</td>
<td>17 (62.58%)</td>
<td>3 (21.43%)</td>
<td>9 (45.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Heritage</td>
<td>3 (5.54%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (2.55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Existence Status</td>
<td>1 (4.63%)</td>
<td>1 (3.47%)</td>
<td>2 (3.86%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The amount has been quoted / Discussion Percentage

There were five (5) topics discussed during the interview session with the MGC experts. Through this interview, the researchers found two (2) topics that have gained the attention of experts, which is related to the MGC identity and current issues. A total of 29 times were discussed about the identity of the MGC during the interview session. Also, the current issues have been discussed 33 times. Both topics were hotly debated throughout the interview (refer to Table 3).

'The identity of MGC' by respondent A:

"...brings back the idea of wild nature because if we look at the root of the tropical landscape, the Malay Garden concept comes from the village, originally if we saw the castle, the materials to build the castle are from the forest and so on. That is the mother nature of the Malay Garden tropical landscape. The tropical landscape of Bali will not be the same as the tropical landscape in Malaysia..." (translated).

This respondent used the Malay Garden Concept term as contained in the MGC guidelines. It has been stated the traditional elements of the Malays as the main character of the design. Identity is something that is found to be non-compliant with the MGC guidelines and makes the parks less able to highlight its privileges and uniqueness to the users.

'The current issues' by respondent B:

"...I think this is the responsibility of the government because it is our identity; it is a Malaysian identity. So, if the Malaysian government does not intervene, do not intervene in doing something, it will not go anywhere..." (translated).

This issue is closely related to the ability to manage the development and maintenance of a park that will apply the MGC criteria. Although the NLD and the Local Authority have been funders of these projects, they have not demonstrated sincerity and maturity in design. It does not seem to have sufficient monitoring and a lack of expertise in applying the MGC concept to both client and designer.

'The current issues' by respondent C:

"...there must be expertise, which means that a landscape architect must have the expertise, of course, this expertise in many forms. I think to create a park, we need the collaboration of all professions, it is just not a landscape architect, but landscape architect plays a major role in it..." (translated).

This issue is relevant to the knowledge and expertise of landscape designers in Malaysia today. To design other popular concepts may not be a problem for them as there are many reference materials such as books and websites, but to apply the MGC is difficult due to the lack...
of references at this time. They must work with other professions to produce work that complies with the MGC criteria.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study can be divided into three (3) issues: (i) the use of names, (ii) social responsibility; and (iii) knowledge and understanding. All these factors have been debated in this study, and the researchers found there are things that we are not currently able to explain in detail. The use of the concept name is excellent, and it is believed to be one of the advertising mediums as well as promotion to the public. Promoting the name of the Malaysian Garden is a social responsibility that can be carried out by various parties such as the NLD, local authorities, developers, and institutions. However, this social responsibility requires the parties to understand and have enough knowledge about the MGC guidelines. In this case, the researchers do not blame certain parties as it arises by two (2) factors, namely "park construction before MGC guidelines" and "park construction after MGC guidelines." Researchers found the Seremban Malaysian Garden is a park that was built before the existence of the guidelines. Compared to the Tapah Malaysian Garden built after the existence of these guidelines. Interestingly, the results of this study found that the design of the Seremban Malaysian Garden was more "in line with the MGC criteria." Researchers disagree with Respondent C’s opinion that the MGC concept could be developed due to financial factors:

"...If you want to know how long it is based on the government, whether they have money or not. I do not think private can fund this. That is an initiative..." (translated).

Researchers have found that the NLD or the Local Authority funds both public parks. It is a great initiative to create a public park for local users to enjoy. Having money or funds cannot guarantee that MGC guidelines are fully implemented without the enforcement of the parties involved.

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