



**ASSESSING INFLUENCES OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE ON WELL BEING OF
LOW-COST HOUSING RESIDENTS IN MALAYSIA POST COVID-19**

By

HARITH BIN MOHMMAD ZIN

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science**

August 2023

FRSB 2023 7

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Supervisor : Nor Azlina Abu Bakar, PhD
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Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI) 2020 reported that the well-being of low-cost housing residents was inimical due to the loss of opportunities for recreation because of movement control order (MCO) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents were restricted from moving, including visiting public open space (POS), which affected them physically and mentally because of the poor condition of their living space, such as overcrowding and poor ventilation. Therefore, this study aims to assess the importance of adaptable POS on physical and mental well-being from the perspective of low-cost housing residents during and post pandemic. This study employed a qualitative research method using three case studies at *Projek Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR) in Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur representing low-cost housing development. Semi-structured interviews and field observations are the primary methods for data collection. In total, 15 POS users were purposively selected for the interviews and observations were conducted at different times and days. Findings were analysed using ATLAS.ti v22 software and content analysis. The results show that the pandemic negatively affected low-cost housing residents' physical and mental well-being because of the limited space for recreation and social activities. The residents needs POS and appreciate it more than before. Therefore, POS in low-cost housing needs physical and social improvement by implementing design principles that are adaptable to shocks and stresses for a good well-being of residents.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**MENILAI PENGARUH RUANG TERBUKA AWAM TERHADAP
KESEJAHTERAAN PENDUDUK PERUMAHAN KOS RENDAH DI
MALAYSIA PASCA COVID-19**

Oleh

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Indeks Kesejahteraan Penduduk Malaysia 2020 melaporkan kesejahteraan penduduk perumahan kos rendah adalah pada tahap yang sangat tidak memuaskan berpunca daripada peluang untuk berekreasi yang terhad dalam tempoh perintah kawalan pergerakan (PKP) semasa wabak COVID-19 melanda. Penduduk disekat untuk bergerak bebas termasuklah untuk mengunjungi ruang terbuka awam dan mempengaruhi fizikal dan mental penduduk dek keadaan rumah mereka yang sesak dan kurang pengudaraan. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk menilai kepentingan ruang terbuka awam yang mampu beradaptasi terhadap kesejahteraan fizikal dan mental penduduk perumahan kos rendah semasa dan pasca COVID-19. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan bersama tiga kajian kes di Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) di Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur bagi mewakili pembangunan perumahan kos rendah. Temu bual separa berstruktur dan kaedah pemerhatian diguna pakai sebagai kaedah utama dalam pengumpulan data. Secara keseluruhannya, 15 pengguna ruang terbuka awam dipilih secara persampelan bertujuan untuk menyertai temu bual, manakala pemerhatian di lapangan dijalankan pada hari dan masa yang berlainan. Dapatan daripada kajian ini dianalisis menggunakan perisian ATLAS.ti v22 dan juga analisis kandungan. Kajian ini mendapati pandemik memberi kesan yang negatif kepada fizikal dan mental penduduk perumahan kos rendah disebabkan oleh ruang yang terhad untuk melakukan rekreasi dan juga aktiviti sosial. Ini menyebabkan penduduk memerlukan dan menghargai kepentingan ruang terbuka awam terhadap kesejahteraan mereka. Oleh yang demikian, ruang terbuka awam di perumahan kos rendah memerlukan penambahbaikan secara fizikal dan sosial dengan menggunakan prinsip reka bentuk yang mampu beradaptasi dengan pelbagai potensi kejutan dan tekanan untuk kesejahteraan penduduk perumahan kos rendah.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I praise to Allah for all the blessings, knowledge and strength granted from Him for me to complete this study. Nothing can be achieved without His blessings and grace.

My heartfelt appreciation to my dedicated supervisor Dr. Nor Azlina Abu Bakar, and co-supervisor Ar. Aznida Azlan, whose expertise were invaluable in guiding my study journey. It was a roller-coaster ride, but they made it fantastic. I truly appreciate their endless support, feedback and encouragement for me to complete this study. They are truly the best role model and mentor. To all examiners, thank you for the constructive feedbacks.

To my precious parents, Haji Mohammad Zin and Hajjah Sakira, I am extremely grateful for the never-ending love, understanding and immeasurable sacrifices while I complete this study. Slowly but surely, your son is graduating! I also truly appreciate my sisters, brothers, in laws, nephews and future nieces that never fails to put smiles on my face, never let me down and no one could take you place. To all my friends who always bringing rainbow and happy distraction, I really hoped that you are all blessed. Thank you for trusting me throughout my study journey.

My gratitude and heartfelt thanks to my research peers, Dr. Hedieh Takhmiri and Dr. Izyan Ayuni for the endless support and encouragement. To Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH), enumerator and all respondents from PPR Kerinchi, PPR Pantai Ria and PPR Sri Pantai, I really appreciate your cooperation in providing valuable insights for this study.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) by Ministry of Higher Education for providing generous allowances for my studies and made this research possible. Also, I would like to thank me for believing and doing the best.

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIDB	Construction Industry Development Board
CIS	Construction Industry Standard
CMCO	Conditional Movement Control Order
FDTCP	Federal Department of Town and Country Planning
KLCH	Kuala Lumpur City Hall
LCH	Low-cost Housing
MCO	Movement Control Order
MP	Member of Parliament
MVPA	Moderate to vigorous physical activity
NP	Neighbourhood park
PA	Physical activity
POS	Public Open Space
PPR	<i>Projek Perumahan Rakyat</i>
RO	Research Objective
RQ	Research Question
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Since Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, Kuala Lumpur has experienced high urbanisation at an unprecedented pace following urban densification principles, causing undesirable consequences on people's lives (Yigitcanlar et al., 2020a). Consequently, massive rural-urban migration occurred because of economic, social and cultural activities, technology and education. Kuala Lumpur is estimated to become denser, with a 2,254,000 population by 2040 (KLCH, 2020). In any urbanization with a massive population, space is one of the most significant drawbacks affecting urban dwellers' attitudes and values (Ahmad et al., 2009).

As the population increase, urban land receives tremendous pressure to be developed as more affordable housing or to provide recreational areas due to space and land scarcity in the city centre (Suratman et al., 2020). In fact, both are important for a decent living and improved well-being. Urbanization requires massive housing development, yet the biggest challenge recently is providing affordable housing and decent low-cost housing. In line with Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan (KLSP) 2040, decent housing needs public open space (POS) as an outdoor recreational and physical activity opportunities to increase health and well-being for a vibrant and healthy city.

The provision of urban housing will further cause the limited land supply and the increment of land value; thus, houses remain unaffordable in urban areas even with the reduced house prices (Annuar, 2019; Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Further, land shortage and high land value make adequate POS provision difficult, especially in a low-cost housing development (Wahi et al., 2018). Omar et al. (2017) emphasized that the need for POS as recreational facilities increases as the population increases. Besides challenging efforts to provide more affordable and low-cost housing due to land shortage, the population demand for POS remains an obstacle. Population growth is a critical factor behind the increase in land shortage.

While POS is necessary for positive psychological and human development (Ismail et al., 2020), low-cost housing residents' well-being is inimical since their houses tend to be overcrowded. As a result, they need outdoor open space for various outdoor activities. N. F. Azmi et al. (2019) and Solari and Mare (2012) pointed out that living in overcrowded conditions may affect people negatively

such as health hazards (Zainal et al., 2012), social stress (Ventriglio et al., 2021) that may persist throughout their life and influence their socioeconomic and human well-being. Therefore, low-cost housing residents need proper POS planning within the neighbourhood for outdoor activities and greater well-being. As previous study proved that proper POS could enhance the well-being of residents, more attention is needed to develop adaptable POS to enhance the well-being of low-cost housing residents. Hence, POS should allow the users to improve their well-being through its environment, setting and organised activities. Besides, this study is crucial because cities that are undergoing rapid urbanisation usually degrade and convert POS to other land use (Wu & Kim, 2021). Therefore, this study is needed to justify the importance of adaptable POS to urbanites especially on low-cost housing residents' well-being.

1.2 Problem Statement

Up to 25% of Malaysian population who experienced mental stress such as depression and anxiety during COVID-19 pandemic are *Projek Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR) residents (Shukor, 2020). Regarding the situation, the Malaysian Well-being Index (MyWI) 2020 disclosed 15.7% of well-being declination among PPR residents is due to limited opportunities for recreation and entertainment as the pandemic strikes (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021b). Mokhtar et al. (2022) also reported the social distancing degraded the residents' quality of life especially due to lessened recreational activities.

PPR is one of the Malaysia affordable housing type that fall under low-cost housing scheme specially for gross household income below RM3,000; which deemed as poor under Malaysia Household Income Classification (DOSM, 2020d). Therefore, majority of residents that reside PPR scheme are classified as poor.

During that unprecedented event, residents were hindered from visiting any open space to curb the infectious disease. However, PPR residents with limited indoor spaces need POS as buffer space from crowded and stressful living conditions (Noor Hisham & Md Amin, 2020). The function of POS as a stress reliever should not be neglected to enhance mental and physical well-being even during hard times (Mayen Huerta & Cafagna, 2021; Moulay & Daouia, 2020). Based on the interviews by Shukor (2020), PPR residents agreed that opportunities to have open green space within neighbourhood is crucial to minimize the incidence of mental stress.

Despite the need for POS, The Sun (2021) reported that PPR struggles to meet residents' demand on POS (Supramani, 2021). The residents are unsatisfied with the poor condition of POS that resulted in underutilized, thus, deteriorate

health (Bakar et al., 2016). Moreover, the usage of POS dropped significantly during COVID-19 (Mohd Razali & Abd. Shukor, 2022) and lead to sedentary lifestyle that might resulted in more serious health issues (Fleckney & Bentley, 2021). This calls for POS re-assessment on residents' well-being as mooted by Lembah Pantai MP, Fahmi Fadzil (Annuar, 2019). Therefore, the provision of POS in low-cost housing needs for re-assessment to meet community needs for recreational and outdoor activity opportunities even during hard times.

However, there is limited information on the well-being declination due to COVID-19 on the physical and mental well-being of low-cost housing residents related to POS and outdoor recreational activities. POS and well-being were widely studied in Australia, Europe and North America (Nath et al., 2018). Although the importance of POS during COVID-19 were also studied in Malaysia, nevertheless, qualitative research on the influence of POS on low-cost housing residents' mental and physical well-being is scarce in Malaysia. Furthermore, they are limited to capture the effect of POS during pandemic based on low-cost housing residents' perception. Therefore, this study assesses the influence of POS on the physical and mental well-being of low-cost housing residents during and post COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3 Aim of the Study

This study aims to assess the influence of public open space (POS) on the mental and physical well-being of low-cost housing residents during movement control order (MCO) and post COVID-19.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does public open space (POS) contribute to the mental and physical well-being of low-cost housing residents during and post COVID-19 restriction?
2. What are the existing guidelines and the current conditions of POS for low-cost housing in Kuala Lumpur?
3. What are POS improvements required in low-cost housing in urban areas to deal with vulnerabilities (ex: COVID-19, poverty)?

1.5 Research Objectives

1. To identify the influence of public open space (POS) on the mental and physical well-being of low-cost housing residents during and post COVID-19 restriction.

2. To assess current guidelines, implementation, and the issues related to POS in low-cost housing in Kuala Lumpur.
3. To investigate adaptable (able to cope with vulnerabilities such as COVID-19 and poverty) POS for low-cost housing in the urban area.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The assessment of POS in low-cost housing during and post-pandemic period is needed, as it provides better understanding on low-income communities' needs and preferences particularly on the design and planning as it influence well-being and contribute to quality of life. Similarly, this study is significant in improving the quality of low-income communities' living by providing functional and quality POS that can offer activities for mental and physical well-being enhancement. The findings are also significant in enhancing POS policy and direction towards high quality implementation in low-cost housing in Malaysia. Lastly, this study is vital to achieving Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040, goal number 3, for a vibrant and healthy city by providing quality open space that is accessible for a variety of activities in housing development including low-cost housing.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study only focuses on two factors which are POS and well-being of low-cost housing residents during and post COVID-19. Therefore, the scope of this study is mainly to investigate the influences of POS design on the mental and physical well-being of low-cost housing residents during and post COVID-19. Another scope of the study that worth mentioning is stated as follows.

COVID-19

Novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an unprecedented contagious outbreak caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus since December 2019 that has created tremendous effects on global health. The infected patient may have mild to moderate respiratory illness and usually get better without specific treatment. However, the vulnerable such as older people and person with critical illness e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease, serious respiratory illness, and cancer may develop chronic disease. The infected person at any age may get sick and die due to this pandemic. As of August 2023, more than 6.9 million confirmed deaths globally (WHO, 2023).

The best way to slowing down the COVID-19 transmission is to stay away from other people at least one (1) metre, wearing mask while in public area, and

washing hand or sanitizing frequently. Responding to the crisis, most of the government introduced lockdown and movement control order (MCO) as an early non-pharmaceutical prevention including Asian country like Malaysia in combating the infectious diseases (Ahmadpoor & Shahab, 2021). The outbreak causes unpreventable disturbance on people's normal lifestyle in psychological and physical perspectives since people are prohibited to be physically engage like before. The vaccination also recommended to people so that they are immune or develop less sickness to the infection.

Lembah Pantai, Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur or The Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur is selected as a geographical location in this study because it represents the most urbanised city in Malaysia with the highest provision of low-cost housing (KPKT, 2016; Omar et al., 2017a). It was initially a mining site in 1870s and now become a global city with growing economy in Southeast Asia and leading financial and economic centre, cultural hub in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, Lembah Pantai is a parliamentary constituency and sub-district in The Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia that locates about five PPR (KLCH, 2020). Based on OpenDOSM Next Gen launched on 12th January 2023, Lembah Pantai population is about 148,094 people made up 7.47% of Kuala Lumpur total population with 50.9% are male and 49.1% female according to My Census 2020 (DOSM, 2020a). Lembah Pantai is chosen as it situated near to high-urbanizing city centre of Kuala Lumpur and surrounded by rapid development. One of the residential areas in Lembah Pantai is Pantai Dalam which located south-west of Kuala Lumpur. Bangsar South is one of popular area under Lembah Pantai constituency where a well-known reputable residential and entertainment area is located.

Between the wealthy Bangsar South and the working class of urban Malays, Pantai Dalam serves as the ideal dividing line. The former is mostly living in thriving neighbourhood that promotes new lifestyle experience. For the latter who residing low-cost housing or PPR, the luxury living are symbols of ambitious. Furthermore, they are vulnerable to high cost of living, social problem, crime, environmental deterioration, unemployment, poverty (Siwar et al., 2016) and the latest shock of COVID-19 pandemic (Megat Muzafar & Kunasekaran, 2020). Since Lembah Pantai is among the highest district locates low-cost housing and most of the population living in low-cost flats, it is chosen as a case study site.

Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR)

According to Ministry of Housing and Local Government of Malaysia, PPR is one type of affordable housing scheme delivered by Malaysia Government which fall under low-cost housing development (Ministry of Housing and Local

Government, 2023). The provision of PPR is to house lower income people whose household monthly income below RM3,000 (DOSM, 2020d). The selection of this housing is appropriate to this study as it provide controlled parameters to answer research questions in term of socio-economic status of residents which are low-income communities.

Public Open Space (POS)

POS in this study refers to the free accessible open space for people to have recreational activities and social interaction, specifically among low-income communities residing *Projek Perumahan Rakyat* (PPR). The recreational space for various social and outdoor activities for a population between 3,000 to 12,000 is categorized as a neighbourhood park (FDTCP, 2011). Therefore, based on the population numbers of the studied area, POS in this study refers to “neighbourhood park”. Hence, the term “POS” and “neighbourhood park” will be used interchangeably throughout this study.

This study focuses on the physical component and design elements of POS and the external factor that may influence its utilization. Since the previous researcher reported various external factors might influence POS usage, this study also focuses on how POS planning can affect utilization amid COVID-19 and further affect well-being. It is also noted that POS utilization depends on individuals and awareness; thus, this study did not claim that it will change people’s perceptions or the community’s behaviour. Nevertheless, this study tries to provide the best POS planning and design to encourage people to use and enhance their well-being, emphasizing the element of adaptable POS.

Well-being

Besides the multi-dimensional of well-being, this study only refers to respondents' mental and physical well-being for several reasons. According to United Nations (2023), COVID-19 has significantly triggered mental health issues by 25% among the world population due to disturbance of daily routines, uncertainty about the future and loss of income. This psychological distress also common during pandemic (Lee et al., 2020).

Moreover, the stay-at-home order depicted in the world population has resulted in a sedentary lifestyle closely related to the emergence of non-communicable diseases to mental issues (Fleckney & Bentley, 2021). Hence, physical inactive may relate to other serious health issues, including mental disorders. Mental and physical well-being are both important and complimenting each other. For instances, mental issues increase the long-lasting physical illness, while the severe physical conditions increase the risk for mental illness (National Institute of Mental Health, 2018). Therefore, this study focuses on these two as they are prevalence during COVID-19 in affecting the health and well-being of people.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted during COVID-19 when some movement restrictions were still mandated. Therefore, some issues and problems are relatively new to researchers in the field. References are lacking; hence in-depth data is required. Though data and recommendations cannot be generalized to other urban areas globally, the findings of this study are essential to guide future research. The movement restriction and social distancing also influence the data collection process. Participatory activities are believed to be much needed to apply a more holistic and people-centred approach.

1.9 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into five chapters as follows:

CHAPTER 1 explains the background of the study, issues, problem statement and significance of the study. Then, the research aim and objectives are highlighted to answer all research questions. The limitation of this study is also explained, which can be a recommendation for further research.

CHAPTER 2 presents the theoretical and conceptual reviews on the subject of this study. This chapter is divided into three parts: introduction to POS, issues related to POS implementation in low-cost housing and preferred POS by residents. The literature's content is reviewed to develop a framework for this study.

CHAPTER 3 elaborates on the research strategy inquiry implemented in this study. This chapter also highlights the step taken during data collection, together with the justification of the sampling technique and unit of analysis. The data analysis process using ATLAS.ti software is further explained in this section.

CHAPTER 4 presents the analysis and discussion of case study findings from semi-structured interviews with POS users and site observation. The analysis using ATLAS.ti software helps to present the frequency of codes that emerged from the quotation.

CHAPTER 5 summarizes the research findings and highlights this research implication, contribution, and recommendation for future research

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