

The Impact Of Neighbourhood Built Environment To The Sense Of Community In Malaysia: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract— Communities play a significant role in human existence because they provide individuals with a feeling of identity and purpose. It is necessary to investigate this link further since the physical surroundings of neighbourhoods have a significant impact on individuals' sense of community. There is currently little knowledge on how this occurs, and which physical variables have the most systematic influence, even though research has proven that the physical built environment may affect neighbourhood sense of community. This qualitative study, conducted after the COVID-19 pandemic, explored how the neighbourhood-built environment shaped the sense of community among residents in Malaysia. Between June and October 2024, we interviewed 12 related professionals, including urban planners, architects, housing developers, landscape architects, local authorities, and policymakers, to capture their perspectives and experiences. Five key themes emerged from the thematic analysis: Defining and operationalizing sense of community, the role of physical design in fostering community, community engagement and feedback, challenges and success stories, and future visions for community-oriented planning. The findings suggest that various physical design elements in the neighbourhood, such as the availability of community spaces, street connectivity, and access to amenities, play a crucial role in shaping the sense of community among residents. Participants emphasized the importance of incorporating resident feedback and community engagement in the planning and design process to ensure the built environment aligns with the community's needs and preferences. The study also highlights the challenges faced by professionals in promoting a strong sense of community, such as limited budgets, competing priorities, and resistance to change. Overall, this qualitative study provides insights into how the neighbourhood-built environment can be leveraged to foster a stronger sense of community, which is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context where social connection and community resilience are crucial for public health and well-being.

Keywords: Sense of Community; Neighbourhood built Environments; built environment; qualitative; physical activity.

I. Background.

Establishing a strong sense of community is a fundamental goal in urban planning and design, as it has been linked to various positive outcomes, such as enhanced social cohesion, improved mental health, and increased civic engagement (Francis et al., 2012). However, the specific mechanisms by which the built environment influences the sense of community remain unclear, particularly in the context of developing countries like Malaysia. (Cohen, 2013)

The neighbourhood-built environment has been recognized as an important factor in shaping the sense of community among residents. Several studies have explored the relationship between various built environment characteristics, such as the availability of public spaces, street connectivity, and access to amenities, and their impact on residents' sense of community. (Ellery & Ellery, 2019). The built environment of a neighbourhood has a significant impact on the sense of community experienced by its residents. This is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where rapid urbanization and development have led to significant changes in the physical landscape of many communities. (Mohammad & Abbas, 2012) Understanding the relationship between the built environment and sense of community can provide valuable insights for urban planners, policymakers, and community stakeholders to create more inclusive and cohesive neighbourhoods.

However, most of this research has been conducted in Western contexts, and there is a need to understand the dynamics of this relationship in diverse cultural and geographical settings, such as Malaysia. Malaysia, a rapidly urbanizing country in Southeast Asia, provides a unique context to explore the intersection of the built environment and sense of community.

People's perceptions of their neighbourhood may be significantly impacted by the built environment. People may be more likely to feel pride of their community if it is well-kept,

has lovely architecture and is green. In a similar vein, having access to public parks, meeting spots, and other facilities may promote a sense of community (SOC) by providing people with a setting for gathering and socialising. Greater research on the link is required since communities' physical surroundings have a substantial influence on people's sense of community. The results of several research suggest that while the physical built environment may influence a neighbourhood's sense of community, little is currently understood about how this happens, or which physical characteristics have the most consistent effects. A sense of community has been associated with several physical characteristics, but it is still unclear which of these characteristics is the most recent and must be taken into consideration in more recent research.

This qualitative study aims to explore the impact of the neighbourhood's-built environment on the sense of community among residents in Malaysia. The study examines the specific design features and elements that contribute to or hinder the development of a strong sense of community, as well as the challenges and limitations in promoting community-oriented built environments. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how the neighbourhood-built environment shapes the sense of community among residents in Malaysia, with a particular focus on the perspectives and experiences of urban planning professionals. By gaining insights from a range of experts, including urban planners, architects, housing developers, landscape architects, local authorities, and policymakers, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationships between the physical environment and community dynamics. This study's fundamental premise is that the built environment in the region may be classified, provide useful physical variables, and have an influence on a sense of community. This study examines a thematic assessment of the effect of the neighbourhood's-built environment on a sense of community from semi-structured interview with 12 professional that related to build environment and housing planning.

This study assumes relevance in the post-COVID-19 era, where the importance of community resilience and social connectedness has become more pronounced. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances and complexities involved in fostering a sense of community through the built environment, which is essential for informing future urban planning and design practices in Malaysia.

II.Literature Review.

The concept of "sense of community" has been widely studied in the fields of environmental psychology, urban planning, and community development. Sense of community refers to the feeling of belonging, connection, and investment that individuals have towards their local community. Previous studies have highlighted the role of the built environment in shaping the sense of community (Du et al., 2023; X. Li et al., 2021; Molana & Adams, 2019; Sun et al., 2019; W. Wang et al., 2023). For instance, research by Kim & Kaplan (2004) has shown that new urbanist communities, which emphasize

walkability (Farahani et al., 2022; Huertas-Delgado et al., 2022; S. Li et al., 2019; McCormack et al., 2019), mixed-use development (Farahani & Lozanovska, 2014; X. Li et al., 2021; Saadallah, 2020) and public spaces (Farahani & Lozanovska, 2014; X. Li et al., 2021; McCormack et al., 2019), tend to foster a stronger sense of community among residents compared to traditional suburban developments.

The availability and quality of public spaces, such as parks, plazas, and community centres, have been identified as particularly important in creating a sense of community (Farahani & Lozanovska, 2014; Hooper et al., 2020; McCormack et al., 2019; Saadallah, 2020). These spaces provide opportunities for social interaction, recreation, and community engagement, which can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging and connection among residents (Hooper et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; McCormack et al., 2019; Saadallah, 2020). Similarly, the design of residential areas, including factors such as the density, layout, and accessibility of housing, has been found to influence the sense of community (Hooper et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; McCormack et al., 2019; Saadallah, 2020). Neighbourhoods that are designed to be more pedestrian-friendly, with well-connected street networks and a mix of housing types, tend to promote more social interaction and a stronger sense of community.

Furthermore, the incorporation of natural elements, such as greenery, water features, and community gardens, has been linked to a heightened sense of community, as these elements can provide opportunities for leisure, relaxation, and social activities (Hooper et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; Willer, 2022). However, the existing literature on the relationship between the built environment and sense of community has primarily focused on Western contexts, with limited research on the Malaysian context.

New Urbanism and Neighbourhood

New Urbanism, an architectural and urban planning approach that gained prominence in the United States at the turn of the century, aimed to address the challenges of urban sprawl. The guiding principles of New Urbanism emphasize the development of mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly, and transit-oriented neighbourhoods (Hooper et al., 2020, 2020; Kim & Kaplan, 2004). These design principles can be applied to a variety of scales, including individual structures, parcels, blocks, cities, regions, communities, districts, and corridors. The Charter of the New Urbanism outlines the 10 essential design components of this approach, encompassing elements such as transit-oriented development, walkable urbanism, and sustainable design (Davies & Townshend, 2015; Talen, 2002).

In the context of neighbourhood design, New Urbanism promotes the integration of residential, commercial, and institutional uses within a well-connected network of streets and public spaces (Alias et al., 2011; Hooper et al., 2020; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; Park, 2017). This integrated approach is believed to foster a stronger sense of community among

residents by encouraging social interaction, physical activity, and civic engagement.

Existing research on New Urbanist communities has found that residents in these neighbourhoods often report a greater sense of community, stronger attachment to their community, and a heightened sense of identity compared to those living in traditional suburban developments. (Kim & Kaplan, 2004)

The relationship between neighbourhood design and sense of community is further examined in the study by Chavis & Wandersman, (1990); Wood et al., (2012), which compared a New Urbanist community with a traditional suburban development. The findings suggest that the physical features of the built environment, such as the presence of natural elements, open spaces, and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, play a significant role in shaping the sense of community.

Sense of Community

People, places, and communities make up society. The communities in which people live and work have an impact on their social lives. By interacting, participating, acting, sharing interests, and resolving issues, people create norms of society and culture within their communities (Du et al., 2023; Molana & Adams, 2019; Saadallah, 2020; D. Wang et al., 2019). People live in communities, which are made up of their homes, places of worship, and places of business. The architectural characteristics of any community may reflect how its citizens see or express themselves, the environment in which they live, the social context in which they interact, and the impact that this has on the environment and communal life (Affandi et al., 2019; Jamaludin et al., 2014; Kim & Kaplan, 2004; X. Li et al., 2021; Nallathiga et al., 2021). Community psychologists contend that a community is a dynamic system with both structural and functional elements. The McMillan & Chavis (1986) sense of community theory, depicted in Figure 1 was examined. This hypothesis included four characteristics of a community: shared emotional links, group membership, mutual influence, and shared ideals. These four elements may help to develop a vibrant community. Residents are more likely to feel secure and at home, engage in local events, and help one another out when they're in need when there are strong community links (Farahani & Lozanovska, 2014; Hooper et al., 2020; Molana & Adams, 2019; Saadallah, 2020). It also helps to lessen stress in the community and enhances wellbeing, satisfaction with life, and self-esteem (Farahani & Lozanovska, 2014; Kaczynski & Sharratt, 2010; X. Li et al., 2021; Saadallah, 2020).



Figure 1. Four characteristics among community members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

A sense of community (SOC), defined by McMillan & Chavis (1986), is the belief that each group member is essential to the success of the group and that their demands will be met because of their devotion to one another. Two distinct writers Sarason (1974) and Darlaston-Jones (2007) define the sense of community. According to Sarason, (1974) it is the attitudes that members of a community have about each other and the neighborhood. It was described by Darlaston-Jones, (2007) as the sense of community and group identification that was formed via meaningful contacts with others. Only a few of the impacts at the neighborhood level that a vibrant neighborhood community has been associated with include a fear of crime, community participation, and greater collective resilience (Cope et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; Obst & White, 2004).

In today's fast-paced environment, people usually priorities their own goals and professional objectives over forging bonds with others around them. However, creating a sense of community in a community has several advantages that both a person and the community may enjoy. For instance, studies show that communities with a strong sense of community frequently have fewer crime rates and better security measures (Ishak et al., 2018; X. Li et al., 2021; Mendelson et al., 2010; A Ross et al., n.d.; Saadallah, 2020; Wood et al., 2010). A sense of community may also improve a person's mental and physical health. People who have strong relationships to their community are more likely to vote, recycle, assist others, and give because these connections make them feel at home (Hedayati Marzbali et al., 2021; X. Li et al., 2021; Mohamed Aris et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2017). Strong social links promote empathy, self-assurance, and fulfilment (Davidson & Cotter, 1986). According to different research Farahani & Lozanovska, (2014); Molana & Adams, (2019), the basic requirements of the complex are satisfied, there is safety and security because of the family's continuing existence, and there are high-quality public and green spaces. By taking part in neighborhood events, volunteering their time to neighborhood organizations, and mingling with their neighbors, individuals may forge links and build a strong feeling of community (X. Li et al., 2021; Saadallah, 2020). By performing something to benefit themselves and those around them, people may contribute to the creation of a comfortable and secure environment (Molana & Adams, 2019; Saadallah, 2020). In developing nations like Malaysia, there are now many housing developments being built. Given the importance of the local community's sense of community, which provides numerous benefits, this study is essential to developing a community which is both psychologically and physically healthy.

Neighbourhood built environment (NBE) factor and variables.

To get a response to the question on which aspect is current and requires examination in the most recent research. Next, a thorough analysis of the physical variables affecting SOC will be provided. According to the study, there are a variety of physical elements that influence the Sense of community (SOC). Among the well-known are Ashraf, Ayad, Saadallah, et al. (2017); Farahani & Lozanovska (2014); Kim & Kaplan (2004) and more researchers. To determine the proper physical components for this study, various theories and physical factors

in related theories should be mentioned first, followed by a study of the similarities between all of them. This section discusses the neighbourhood-built environment categorise that impacts the sense of community.

As stated by New Urbanist planning ideas Kim & Kaplan (2004), The way streets separate and connect a neighbourhood has an impact on the movements of people and activities inside that area, and one of its primary goals is to improve the sense of community. (M Southworth, 1993). Kim & Kaplan (2004) illustrates these concepts by showing how each of the four areas influences residents' feelings of community. By feeling at home (community attachment), connecting with others (social interaction), feeling a part of the community (community identity), and having access to local exploration (pedestrianism), residents can foster a stronger sense of community and Kim & Kaplan (2004) have disclosed that with physical features of the built environment contains both built environment variables (transport, safety and danger, overcrowding and privacy) and physical qualities (danger, crowdedness, privacy, and crowdedness). In their research, Kim & Kaplan (2004) looked at the impact of a total of seventeen (17) different physical features on people's feelings of belonging in a community. Residential density, lakes and greens paths, distance between sidewalks and homes are the first three variables. The 4th to the last variable being architectural style, continued with block size, clubhouse/recreational facilities, overall layout, street trees and landscaping the overall size, the arrangement of houses, street width, location of the garage, on-street parking, lot size, mixture of housing types, overall design quality of houses and finally, the street's layout.

Ashraf et al. (2017) used three (3) main factors namely Aesthetics, Streets and services, and Buildings as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** Major attractions, aesthetic pleasantness, artists' involvement in building detailing, harmony, architectural style, and regional and distinctive features are some of the physical aspects that fall under the category of aesthetics. Streets and services, the second major factor, also has a few specific components, including a mixed-use neighbourhood, community services, accessibility, public parking, public transportation, walkable streets, activities like street vendors and squares, parks, services, and shops, as well as recreation. Other factors include the duration of residence, the availability of affordable housing, the building line, window sizes and solid-to-void ratios, the building frontage, human scale in high-rise buildings, and lower floors that are visually separated from the upper floors fall under the category of buildings. Arundel & Ronald (2017) applied the five (5) physical factors to examine the impact of urban form on community sustainability. Local stores are the most important component, followed by the length of shoreline in each neighbourhood, the prevalence of automobiles, the size of the housing size, and finally, residing in historic structures.

There are some similarities among the researchers cited after examining several physical parameters that have an impact on SOC from various experts. To describe the similarity of related physical characteristics, Kim & Kaplan's (2004) list of the major physical factors are employed. It was also chosen because the study by Kim & Kaplan (2004) listed seventeen

(17) physical characteristics, the highest number among comparable studies.

III.Methods.

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 12 professionals from various disciplines, including urban planning, architecture, housing development, landscape architecture, local authorities, and policymaking in Malaysia. The participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in shaping the built environment and understanding community dynamics in the Malaysian context.

The interviews explored the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the impact of the neighbourhood's-built environment on the sense of community among residents. The discussions focused on identifying specific design features and elements that contribute to or hinder the development of a strong sense of community, as well as the challenges and limitations in promoting community-oriented built environments in the Malaysian context. A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. The interviews aimed to understand the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the role of the neighbourhood-built environment in shaping the sense of community among residents in Malaysia.

The interview data was transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Key themes were identified through an iterative process of coding and categorization. The interview questions covered topics such as the specific design features and elements that contribute to or hinder the development of a strong sense of community, the challenges and limitations in promoting community-oriented built environments, and the influence of cultural and demographic factors on residents' perceptions and engagement with their local environment. The sample size of 12 participants was considered sufficient (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Similar sample sizes are reported in other neighbourhood environment interview-based research (Elsawahli et al., 2017) and has been approved by the The Universiti Teknologi Mara Research Ethics Board.

Study design.

This qualitative study was undertaken in Setia Alam and Bukit Jelutong, Shah Alam Malaysia. Located in the Petaling District and just a small portion of the adjoining Klang District, Shah Alam is the capital and metropolis of Selangor, Malaysia. As a result of Kuala Lumpur's 1974 designation as a Federal Territory, Shah Alam took over as the state capital of Selangor in 1978. Following Malaysia's independence from Britain in 1957, Shah Alam became the country's first planned metropolis, has a [tropical rainforest climate](#), and a population of approximately 438,745 (2023). Shah Alam, which has a total area of 290.3 km², is situated in the state of Selangor, in the districts of Petaling and part of Klang. It is bounded to the east by the major towns of Subang Jaya and Petaling Jaya, to the west by the district of Klang, to the north by the district of Kuala Selangor and Selayang, and to the south by the district of Kuala Langat as a result of its recent growth. Because the Klang River passes through it on its route westward to the Strait of Malacca, Shah Alam is also a prominent city within the Klang Valley, a

region in Malaysia that includes Kuala Lumpur and its suburbs, as well as nearby cities and towns in the state of Selangor.

IV. Data analysis.

The study employed a thematic analysis approach, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke: 1) familiarizing with the data through thorough reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts; 2) generating initial codes by systematically coding relevant and meaningful features of the data; 3) identifying potential themes that captured broader patterns and meanings; 4) reviewing and refining the identified themes; 5) defining and naming the final themes to capture their essence; and 6) producing the research report by synthesizing the findings and incorporating relevant participant quotes. The research team engaged in regular discussions, comparisons, and revisions to ensure the reliability and validity of the thematic analysis. These are the list of questions used in the semi-structured interview with expert panel in the related industries like planners, architects, designers, or local authorities related the built environment that impact to the sense of community as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

The eight primary question in the semi-structured interview.

No	Question	References
1	How do you incorporate the concept of 'sense of community' when planning or designing a neighborhood?	(Francis et al., 2012)
2	Can you share any examples where your design or planning initiatives led to a stronger sense of community?	(Talen & Shah, 2007)
3	Which physical attributes do you consider most influential in facilitating a robust sense of community?	(Kim & Kaplan, 2004)
4	How do you accommodate community feedback within your design or planning processes?	(Talen & Shah, 2007)
5	What challenges have you encountered in building neighborhoods that encourage a sense of community?	(Forrest & Kearns, 2001)
6	Can you recall any specific strategies or designs that failed to stimulate a sense of community? Why do you think they failed?	(Freeman, 2001)
7	Can you provide an example of a successful case where community planning/design fostered a sense of community effectively? What factors contributed to its success?	(Chavis & Wandersman, 1990)
8	Looking ahead, how do you envision integrating the idea of 'sense of community' into community planning/designing?	

V. Results.

The responses cover a range of topics including examples of successful designs, physical attributes influencing community interaction, community feedback, and challenges faced by developers and planners.

Table 2.

Key insights overviewed from the responses.

key insights overviewed from the responses.	Incorporating 'Sense of Community' (SOC) in Planning
	Challenges in Building SOC
	Physical Attributes Influencing SOC
	Incorporating Community Feedback
	Successful Examples
	Looking Ahead

The key insight overview from the responses as shown in Table 2 as a result from the interview data. The sense of community is not solely about physical spaces, but also involves social aspects like social media, communal activities, and shared experiences (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; X. Li et al., 2021). Successful community design often strikes a balance between public spaces, leisure facilities, and commercial areas.

Some key challenges in building a strong sense of community include inconsistent integration of public spaces, lack of maintenance, and conflicts between commercial and residential areas. Certain design approaches, such as those in Putrajaya or dense, non-mixed areas, can fail to foster a sense of community due to a lack of interaction among residents (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; X. Li et al., 2021; Rugel et al., 2019). Developers may also focus more on maximizing units and profitability, reducing space for communal engagement. Cultural and social divisions can also affect the success of building a sense of community in certain areas.

Elements like shared gardens, playgrounds, and clubhouses encourage interaction, while proximity to parks and green areas is important for relaxation (Agboola et al., 2017; Can, 2016; Farahani et al., 2022; X. Li et al., 2021; Vaandrager & Kennedy, 2016). Commercial areas that blend with residential spaces can also draw people together, fostering social interaction.

Community feedback is typically integrated through surveys, public hearings, and Social Impact Assessments. However, in some cases, there is a disconnect between what communities want and what developers can afford or are willing to provide. Ensuring that designs meet the needs of diverse groups and incorporate flexible spaces for different activities is key.

Developments like Desa Park City, Setia Alam, and Bukit Jelutong are frequently mentioned as examples where the integration of communal spaces has worked well. Strategies that include mixed-use spaces and strong communal amenities have led to stronger sense of community (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; He et al., 2021; Hooper et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; Rugel et al., 2019).

Future planning should integrate ideas of sense of community from the very beginning, considering both physical and social elements. Developers should consider incorporating sense of community as a unique selling point in their housing designs, as it can have a significant long-term impact on property values and resident satisfaction. The evolving urban environment will need to ensure that developments are not just profitable, but also genuinely improve the quality of life for their residents by fostering connection and community.



Figure 1. Theme from the interview data.

Theme from the interview data.

The analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes that shed light on the impact of the neighbourhood-built environment on the sense of community in the Malaysian context. The themes are as follows:

1. Defining and Operationalizing Sense of Community

Sense of Community (SOC) refers to the feelings of belonging, connectedness, and mutual support among residents within a particular area. However, the definition and operationalization of SOC can vary across different cultures, environments, and personal experiences.

Many experts mentioned that a sense of community goes beyond physical spaces and includes "software" elements, social connections facilitated by shared activities, technology (e.g., WhatsApp, social media), and collective experiences. SOC isn't just about proximity, but about how people engage with each other in those spaces (Agboola et al., 2017; Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Sun et al., 2019).

Some experts argued that creating a sense of community involves both intentional design (e.g., communal areas, playgrounds) and organic social processes (e.g., events, community programs). It's about fostering an environment where individuals feel safe, included, and part of a larger whole, regardless of their background (Agboola et al., 2017; Ashraf et al., 2021; Du et al., 2023; Hooper et al., 2020).

Operationalizing SOC means turning abstract ideas into tangible, measurable elements in urban planning, such as designing for interaction, inclusion, and accessibility, while also considering the social dynamics that drive engagement.

2. The Role of Physical Design in Fostering Community

The physical design of a neighbourhood or community plays a significant role in facilitating or hindering interaction between residents. Several experts pointed out that communal spaces like parks, clubhouses, playgrounds, and shared gardens can create opportunities for people to meet, socialize, and build relationships (He et al., 2021; Kujawski, 2019; X. Li et al., 2021; Allison Ross et al., 2020).

Mixed-use spaces that combine residential, commercial, and recreational areas encourage more people to gather in public spaces, fostering spontaneous interactions (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Ashraf et al., 2021; He et al., 2021; Hooper et al., 2020; Huertas-Delgado et al., 2022; X. Li et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2019). For example, a commercial hub or café within a residential development can encourage socializing and create a community vibe.

Conversely, certain urban designs, such as gated communities, too much emphasis on private property, or overcrowded developments, can restrict social interaction, lead to isolation, or even contribute to social divides (Khemri et al., 2020; Lusk et al., 2019; Mariadas et al., 2019; Allison Ross & Searle, 2019; Saelens et al., 2003).

Experts also noted the importance of balancing aesthetic and functional aspects in design. Green spaces and well-maintained public areas have a significant impact on the community's well-being (Agboola et al., 2017; Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Hooper et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2019). Thoughtfully designed spaces that consider comfort, accessibility, and safety help to enhance SOC by inviting people to spend more time outside, engage with each other, and form bonds.

3. Community Engagement and Feedback

Community engagement is vital in ensuring that the design and planning of spaces meet the real needs of the people who live there (Chuweni et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2021; Mokhtar & Md. Dali, 2017; Allison Ross & Searle, 2019; Samsudin et al., 2021). Experts highlighted that including residents in the planning process, through activities like surveys, public hearings, and Social Impact Assessments (SIA), helps ensure that the developments are aligned with community expectations and priorities.

Feedback loops through digital platforms like social media or apps allow for ongoing interaction with residents, allowing planners and developers to adapt designs based on community input.

However, challenges were noted in some areas where feedback is collected but not fully acted upon, leading to a disconnect between what the community desires and what developers or authorities deliver. Additionally, the feedback process may not always capture the views of marginalized groups or those less likely to engage in formal surveys, which can lead to unequal representation in community planning.

Successful community engagement results in spaces that people are more likely to use, as they feel involved in the creation of their environment. This can lead to a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility, fostering more vibrant and supportive communities.

4. Challenges and Success Stories

The experts shared a range of challenges they encountered while trying to build communities that foster a strong sense of community. Some of the most common challenges include:

Commercial pressure: Developers often prioritize maximizing profit through density, which can lead to limited space for public areas and communal spaces.

Cultural and social divides: Different socio-economic or ethnic groups may have varying expectations about what community should look like, making it difficult to design spaces that foster inclusivity.

Maintenance and sustainability issues: Many community spaces, once created, fall into disrepair due to lack of funding or attention, leading to decreased utility for residents.

Gated developments: While they can offer security, they can also create physical and social barriers, isolating residents from the broader neighbourhood.

Success stories were highlighted in projects like Desa Park City, Setia Alam, and Bukit Jelutong, where mixed-use designs and a variety of communal spaces, such as parks, lakes, and multi-purpose halls, created opportunities for residents to interact, form connections, and create a true sense of community. A key success factor identified in these examples was the intentional integration of commercial, residential, and recreational spaces, as well as the inclusion of public feedback in the design process. These elements fostered more cohesive and socially integrated communities.

5. Future Visions for Community-Oriented Planning

Future planning aims to enhance community integrating the principles of sustainability, inclusivity, and adaptability. Experts envision a future where urban developments are not only about maximizing space or profit but also about creating environments that foster well-being, connection, and a sense of belonging.

The future of community-oriented planning requires an emphasis on sustainability: incorporating green spaces, sustainable transport options (e.g., bicycle lanes), energy-efficient buildings, and socially responsible development that adapts to changing demographic needs.

There is also a growing recognition of the importance of technology in future communities. Digital platforms can facilitate communication between residents and authorities, as well as provide space for organizing social events, feedback mechanisms, and ongoing engagement. These tools can bridge the gap between physical and digital communities, ensuring that

people feel connected even in the most densely populated urban settings.

In the future, there's also a call for more inclusive designs, considering the needs of all residents, including the elderly, disabled, and marginalized communities. A future-oriented design would focus on accessible spaces, public services, and public health initiatives, making urban living healthier and more cohesive for everyone.

Finally, experts emphasized the need to revise planning guidelines to be more flexible and responsive to evolving social needs, ensuring that the development process prioritizes social connections as much as economic goals.

By focusing on these themes, future urban developments can better integrate community-oriented principles and create environments that are supportive, inclusive, and socially connected.

Summary of the theme.

The key themes identified in the analysis include: 1) Defining and operationalizing sense of community as both a physical and social construct and creating measurable ways to foster it. 2) The role of physical design in fostering community through elements like green spaces, mixed-use areas, and communal amenities. 3) The importance of community engagement and feedback to ensure urban planning meets residents' needs and fosters a sense of ownership. 4) Recognizing the challenges faced while highlighting successful examples where community design has strengthened the sense of community. 5) Envisioning future urban developments that prioritize sustainability, inclusivity, adaptability, and technological integration to enhance the sense of community. The interview findings suggest that cultivating a strong sense of community requires a holistic approach that considers both the physical design of the built environment as well as the social dynamics and lived experiences of residents.

Discussion and Conclusion.

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that the neighbourhood-built environment plays a crucial role in shaping the sense of community among residents in Malaysia. The participants' perspectives highlight the importance of physical design elements, such as community spaces, street connectivity, and access to amenities, in fostering a strong sense of community.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for a collaborative and community-oriented approach to planning and design, where residents' feedback and engagement are actively incorporated to ensure the built environment aligns with the community's needs and preferences.

The challenges and success stories shared by the participants provide valuable insights for professionals and policymakers

seeking to promote a stronger sense of community through the built environment, particularly in the post-pandemic context where social connection and community resilience are paramount for public health and well-being (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Ashraf et al., 2021; He et al., 2021; X. Li et al., 2021).

Future Visions for Community-Oriented Planning and Design: Participants shared their visions for the future of community-oriented planning, which include a greater focus on inclusive design, collaborative governance, and the integration of technology to support community engagement and social cohesion. These visions align with emerging trends in urban planning and design, where there is an increased emphasis on co-creating public spaces and fostering a sense of place with and for the community (Akcali & Cahantimur, 2022; Hooper et al., 2020; X. Li et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2010).

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides valuable insights into the role of the neighbourhood-built environment in shaping the sense of community among residents in Malaysia. The findings highlight the importance of physical design elements, community engagement, and collaborative governance in promoting a strong sense of community, which is particularly relevant in the post-pandemic context where social connection and community resilience are crucial for public health and well-being (McCormack et al., 2023; Wenander, 2024). The study's findings contribute to the growing body of research on the relationship between the built environment and community well-being, and offer practical implications for urban planners, architects, and policymakers seeking to create more liveable and inclusive neighbourhoods in Malaysia and beyond.

Study limitations and strengths.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the qualitative nature of the research means the findings may not be generalizable to all Malaysian neighbourhoods. Additionally, the sample size, while appropriate for a qualitative study, may not capture the full diversity of perspectives within the population.

However, the study's strengths lie in its in-depth exploration of the topic, incorporating the insights of various experts and stakeholders in the field of urban planning and community development. The findings provide a nuanced

understanding of the complex relationship between the built environment and the sense of community, offering valuable insights for policymakers, urban planners, and community leaders. Accordingly, the findings of this study can inform the development of more community-oriented urban planning strategies that prioritize the well-being and engagement of residents.

Future research directions.

This study opens up several avenues for future research. Expanding the study to include a larger and more diverse sample of residents and communities would help validate and strengthen the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of the sense of community in relation to changes in the built environment over time would provide valuable insights. (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2009) (Zhen et al., 2019). Integrating quantitative measures of community indicators, such as survey data on residents' perceptions and behaviors, could also complement the qualitative approach.

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