Revisiting Strategies to enhance Social Interaction in Urban Public Spaces in the context of Malaysia

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Abstract:

Malaysia is a democratic and a multiracial country which gained its independence over 5 decades ago in 1957. However, ethnicity issues remain one of the most controversial issues as mixing and interaction mostly occur inside same ethnic group. Consequently, one of the government policies, 'One Malaysia', has been introduced to promote greater integration among the multiethnic society. In line with this goal, this paper looks into how proactively a public urban space can contribute to this issue. Urban public space is considered as a mixing point of different ethnic groups, and architecture can play a role in social interaction. However, while traditionally a designed space can only create opportunities of interaction in a passive way, study shows that there is need for other stimuli to create active interaction. This paper investigates several popular activities those can stimulate interaction between people irrespective of ethnicity, and revisits strategies how they can be incorporated in public urban space in the context of Malaysia so that the nation can bring out the maximum benefit from a multi-racial network.

Keywords: Social Interaction, Ethnicity, Group Behavior, Public Urban Space, Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is a unique melting point of multiethnic and multiracial country with a history of colonial reign. It is one of the most plural and heterogeneous countries in the world. It consists of three major ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indians. Besides, there are several other indigenous tribes. The Malays are the dominant group which comprises approximately 63.1% of the total population. The Chinese are around 24.6%, the Indians around 7.3% and the indigenous tribes around the rest 5% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The majority Malays, the sizeable Chinese, and the relatively smaller Indian community have its own distinct identity, beliefs, and traditions. The pattern of democratic politics permits each race to maintain its individuality in terms of traditions and community structures that is expected to contribute to a diverse heritage and rich cultural mosaic.

However, even after more than 5 decades of independence, the unity issue among races is still being raised as a major concern. By reviewing the history of the formation of Malaysia, it is found that ethnic disintegration was initially influenced by the 'divide and rule' strategy of the British colonial regime, which indirectly widens the social gap among races (Hamzah bin Ali, 2003). Besides that, economic tension between the Malays and the Chinese is believed to be responsible for the communal riot in 1969 (Oo Yu Hock , 1991). Under the rule of Malaysia's 4th Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir bin Muhammad, government identified that tackling poverty is the major issue, and adopted policies to narrow down the economic inequality between ethnic groups and improve the living standards of every Malaysian (Mahathir Mohammad, 1998). That was followed by the introduction of the slogan 'One Malaysia' by current Prime Minister YAB Dato Sri Mohd Najib on September 16, 2010, targeting the awareness of unity as the main priority among Malaysians. One Malaysia is defined as a platform to nurture unity and improve the relations among multi cultural society in Malaysia regardless of racial, religious or cultural backgrounds (Hasnul Mohamad Salleh, 2011).

This issue is not uncommon in many other countries in the world. The US, India, Nigeria, or South Africa have been experiencing similar situations in their history (Hamzah bin Ali, 2003). Focusing towards the context of Malaysia, empirical evidence shows that the different ethnic communities are willing to give concessions to each other, but they still lack the method that can unite them as even a stronger force together. That suggests that though learnt from examples from elsewhere in the world that such integration is very much plausible, social interaction at present is likely to continue to happen mostly among the same ethnic groups. Therefore, it is a challenge for Malaysia to integrate various ethnic groups in order to make substantial progress as a nation. The purpose of this study is to investigate what different strategies can be adopted in the context of Malaysia in order to enhance social interaction among different ethnic groups.

1. Social Interaction

The term 'Social' refers to human beings living together in organized groups (Askdefine, 2012). The concept is built upon mutual relations that can bring to welfare to individuals. The word 'Interaction' carries different connotations in various disciplines. In sociology, it refers to dynamic actions between two or more actors (Latour, 1996). The degree of interaction can vary. At its minimum level, it can involve only two actors with each having reciprocal actions. However, there can be more than two actors with each being involved in dynamic action with either of the actors at varying degree and with varying intervals (ibid). The form of action can be through verbal or non-verbal communication, and it can take place in real-time space or in virtual space (Example: Internet) (Bailenson et al, 2004).

Goffman (1963) showed the rules of interaction in public life. He described a range of mechanisms and rules that govern how social gatherings are structured and how people interact in these situations. In the following figure, his foundational concepts are presented that reflects the design for social interaction.
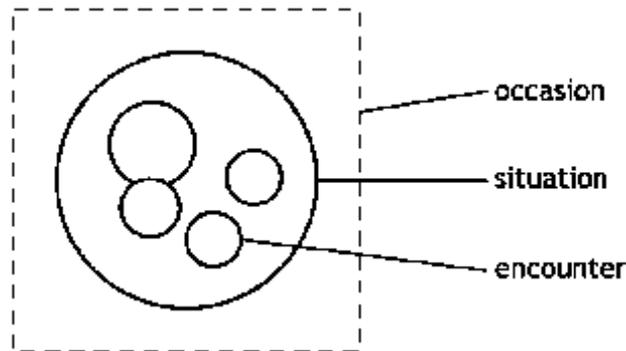
Figure 1: The concept of Occasion, Situation and Encounter

(Source: Ludvigsen, 2006)

The 'occasion' is the social construct that provides the reason for gathering. In relation to space and place theory, occasion can be interpreted as 'place', where 'place' is the notion that offers the dimensions for live experience, interaction, and used by its inhabitants (Hornecker, 2005), similar to what 'occasion' has to offer. 'Situation' is the specific manifestation of the 'occasion'. It is an environment that opens up possibilities to interact between the people gathered already because of the occasion. In relation to the space and place theory, 'situation' is similar to 'space' which refers to the structural and geometric qualities of a physical environment, or a user interface for a virtual environment (Harrison and Dourish, 1996).

An 'encounter' involves a more dynamic set of activities which can form, change, and disappear in flux at the situation. Therefore, if a 'situation' is the social 'space' that provides the opportunity to gather, an 'encounter' is the actual interaction that takes place.

However, Goffman (1963) argues that being present in a 'space' for an 'occasion' already opens up opportunity for dynamic activities. Even though people do not actually interact with each other, a situation can still be regarded as in a stage of 'passive' interaction, while if they start activities, i.e. they start encounter, they can be regarded to be engaged in a stage of 'active' interaction. He also identified two levels at each stage. Level I in stage I (Passive) is 'co-presence', where only gathering takes place and people may have their own focus, which are different from each other, a notion he labeled as 'distributed attention'. Level II is 'co-attention', when some event at the space can draw everyone's attention towards that though no one actually interact with other. This has been labeled as 'shared attention'. For example, a performance in the public space can attract everyone's attention towards that single point though people may not bother who are just next to them. A designer can create a space with spatial qualities that can give nice experience to people who can move around and enjoy by themselves, thus creating distributed attention. A designer can also create a focus point, where something interesting can draw attention from the people, and hence create shared attention. But it is not that straightforward in the next two levels at stage II.

Figure 2: A diagrammatic representation of the conceptual framework of social interaction

(Source: Ludvigsen 2006)

At level III in stage II, people in small groups start dialogue with each other by sharing an object and influencing one another's experience. Here the term 'dialogue' refers to a two-way communication, which was not present in any of the levels in stage I. For example, stimulus such as a touch sensitive pedestrian walkway can generate surprise, amusement or excitement among those people who at that particular moment are sharing that walkway. Momentarily they can share their feelings to each other, thus creating a dialogue. While they move away from that walkway, they may not interact any more for the rest of the time they spent in that space.

Just as was in level II of stage I, level IV in stage II urges people towards some goal, and demands interaction. Here people open up dialogue with others because of the shared goal set up by the situation at the space. This is not momentary, but might be long enough to bring up acquaintance at some point. For example, a particular children activity can pull the parents together to react to the same stimulus for a considerable amount of time together. Another example is 'brain storming' exercise in a public space which can propagate a goal oriented 'collective action'. This is regarded as the final stage of active interaction which can have long impact among the participants.
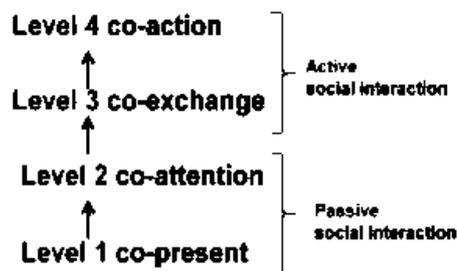

Figure 3: The two stages and four levels of social interaction

(Source: Authors)

However, all these stages refer to spatial interaction and hence offer challenge to architects to create a 'situation' where all four levels can take place. Virtual interaction is a bit different as it refers to an intangible space, and therefore out of the scope of architects, hence out of the scope of this study.

2. Types of Activities

The first challenge, however, is to figure out what kind of activities are suitable to generate higher level interaction in public space. Gehl (2011) states that activities can be divided into three categories:
− Necessary activities
− Optional activities, and
− Social activities.

Necessary activities include those that are pretty much compulsory, happens everyday or in routine intervals. For example, studying or going to school, eating breakfast, preparations to go to sleep etc. They are not likely to be performed in public spaces.

Optional activities are those which one wishes to do if time and space allows. For example, taking pictures while walking, doing some exercise, moving around etc. Depending on the 'occasion', and if 'situation' allows, optional activities can take place in public space, but due to the unforced pattern of the activities, it is more likely to create only passive interaction (co-presence and co-attention).

Social activities are those people like to do in the presence of others. These are often termed as 'resultant' activities as the pattern of these activities are generated by the surroundings (Gehl, 2011; Therakomen, 2001). Social activities are bound to take place in public space and are likely to create 'encounter', and therefore create co-exchange and co-action. Examples include dining out, take part in a performance etc.

However, even an understanding of activities in public space may not be adequate enough for architects to design an interactive space, as social studies show that the same activity can be done differently if people do it individually and if they do in groups (Kocher and Sutter 2002). Since in a public space people are likely to behave in groups, a brief understanding of group behavior might also be useful at this stage of this study.

Figure 4: Different activities in urban public spaces in Malaysia: from left, [1]Famous Mamak hawker stalls in Malaysia, [2]Night market (Pasar malam), [3]Outdoor performance at night, namely 'ge tai' to the local
(Source: [1]Sixthseal 2012, [2]Aznanie 2012, [3]Sim 2012)

3. Group behavior

In a public space, when people are pulled there through 'occasions' during co-presence and co-attention, and might also be engaged in interaction through 'encounter' during co-exchange and co-action, they tend to form groups. Though there are several stages of group formation, in public space where people stay momentarily, only the first stage of 'forming' is likely to happen (Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman (ibid) also states that though the group formation may appear spontaneous and neutral, several forces act behind these. The dominant forces are ethnicity, age, and gender. For example, a person being tired of walking may look for a seat. If it has to be to sit next to or close to some other person, and there are more than one option, choosing between them may involve any one or more of those forces, and this is an example of group forming during passive interaction, which can also be termed as passive group formation. In another example, people may be asked to form a group to participate in a competition during a stage show. A particular activity can indicate a particular force to be dominant for group formation. This is an example of active group formation.

During the basic stage of group formation, the potential members have to feel that the conflict is low between them. If the situation is not totally new, experience also plays a major role to identify potential members to form groups, not only the forces. However, the effect of stimuli cannot be totally ruled out in any situation (ibid). In fact, one can argue that in order to open up possibilities to make the other forces stronger and to dilute the force of ethnicity, the stimuli have a big role to play in forming groups both in passive and active interaction. However, it is our physiological senses that actually respond to the stimuli. Therefore, the role of senses is necessary to study group formation.

4. Role of visual sense in group formation

While designing a real time space, a designer needs to think about how the space can stimulate response to our physiological senses. Though the strongest sense can vary from person to person, our visual sense is the key to give us the perception of the physical quality of a space (Albers, 2012). However, dragging them to the space may be the first step, but once people are in that space, the stimuli starts generating possibilities of passive interaction (co-presence and co-attention) as well as of active interaction (co-exchange and co-action). Interestingly, our visual sense plays a big role for detection of group members as well.

As mentioned in the previous example of choosing a seat where one needs to sit beside a sitting person, it is our visual sense that is likely to detect the forces first; either it is ethnicity, gender

or age. If the person was blindfolded, it may not be possible to identify ethnicity or age through another sense such as auditory sense. Gender could be detected through auditory sense after, say for example, a little conversation. Thereafter, the blindfolded person might decide that same gender is preferable, and therefore, forms a group. Even in a situation of active interaction, a group formation can be totally determined by our visual sense. In the previous example of active interaction, depending on the actual act to perform, one can choose a partner of same age, gender or ethnicity, and visual sense is the most prompt to make the decision here as well.

However, active stimulus might still have the power to impose the decision making while group formation. For example, an activity may ask to form a group of females versus males, and therefore, people are compelled to mix ethnicity or age because of the demand of that instance, though it might be different if they had enough time or authority to decide by themselves.

Therefore at this point it seems necessary to dig deeper into the context of Malaysia, to find strategies so that gender or age can become dominant forces rather than ethnicity in order to form the groups.

5. The two major challenges
There are two major challenges to ethnically unbiased group making in the context of Malaysia.

5.1   Challenge 1
The first one is the influence of necessary or optional activities, which are performed or nurtured in private places, and influences social activity in public places. In the context of Malaysia, these two activities are very much inclined to particular ethnic groups. For example, turning to necessary activity such as schooling, Malaysian primary education is divided into two categories i.e. national and vernacular school. Vernacular school (*Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan*) uses either Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction, whereas national primary school (*Sekolah Kebangsaan*) uses Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction for subjects other than English, Science and Mathematics (Yap, 1992). The educational system has its pros and cons. The disadvantage is that it indirectly separate mixing of different ethnic groups during their childhood. Therefore, in a public space, a Malay is more likely to find it more comfortable to respond to a stimulus that is particular to Malays, while an Indian or Chinese would find it more comfortable if it were in their specific culture. Therefore, even if the stimuli try to enhance other forces in group forming, it may not be that successful if it fails to address any common elements among the three ethnic groups. For example, food habit is a result of necessary activity, and it is different from Malays to Chinese or Indians. Therefore, a food related competition that is associated with a particular ethnic group's food habit may not be that attractive for other groups, and therefore group formation would have ethnical bias. So, it is obvious that necessary activities have strong influence on ethnically biased group formation in public space.

In case of optional activity, though less, it can still create ethnic bias in group forming. While it includes unforced activities such as walking around, sitting idly etc., it can also include activities related to human skills such as gross or fine motor skill, and soft skills. Gross motor skill are usually learned skills that need postural control such as jumping, stretching etc., while fine motor skills involves small muscles and parts of body (ex. fingers) such as writing, playing piano, painting etc. Soft skills reflects Emotional intelligence and can be expressed through traits such as responsibility, common sense, and through abilities such as communication, manners etc (Rouse, 2012). If any particular ethnic group is inclined to any such particular activity, any attempt to create an ethnically unbiased group through that activity is most likely to fail.

Social activities, however, may give more options that can create ethnically unbiased group formation. Social activities are mostly related to soft skill which tests both traits and abilities.

Enjoying media in public space, dine-out at open public space in the evenings etc. can reflect abilities, while participating in stage performances, or responding to emergency situation etc. can reflect traits. At this point, a survey was carried out to check which kinds of activities are specifically popular in public spaces to specific ethnic groups, age groups, and gender. At least one kind of activity was selected that can represent each of the four levels of interaction. These activities were selected based on empirical observation as they appear to be poplar in public spaces in Malaysia. They are correlated with the skills following Macrae and Costa (1987)'s examples. Three basic age-groups were selected namely teenagers, adults, and elderlies. The following table shows the basic information.

Figure 5: Examples of outdoor activities in urban spaces of Malaysia: from left: [1]Football match watching in mamak stall, [2]Free outdoor concert in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur

(Source: [1]Allmalaysia 2012, [2]Komunitikini 2012,)

Table 1: Activities chosen for the survey

Types of Activities	Types of Interaction	Levels of Interaction	Types of stimuli	Skills	Activities
Optional Activities	Passive Interaction	Co-Presence	Unforced		Stroll around / Sit idle
		Co-Attention	Unforced		Shop
			Forced	Gross motor skill	Exercise/ Play
				Fine Motor Skill	Enjoy Performances like Music, Arts
Social Activities	Active Interaction	Co-Exchange	Unforced	Soft Skill (Ability): Communication	Enjoy Media
				Soft Skill (Ability): Sociability	Open-air Dine Out
		Co-Action	Forced	Soft Skills (Trait): Extraversion	Participate in performances
				Soft Skills (Trait): Conscientiousness	Face emergency situation

Source: Authors

Table 2: Response from different Ethnic groups (Bold ones show critical values)

Activity	%	Malay	Chinese	Indian
1. Stroll/ Sit Idle	Female	70	90	85
	Male	50	90	75
	Total	60	**90**	80
2. Shop in Sale	Female	**40**	70	70
	Male	**10**	80	50
	Total	**25**	75	60
3. Exercise/ Play	Female	**40**	70	**15**
	Male	70	70	50
	Total	60	70	**30**
4. Enjoy Performance	Female	70	80	90
	Male	**40**	90	90
	Total	55	**85**	**90**
5. Enjoy Media	Female	70	80	70
	Male	40	80	100
	Total	55	80	80
6. Open-air Dine-out	Female	90	90	80
	Male	90	70	90
	Total	**90**	**80**	**85**
7. Participate in Performance	Female	90	90	80
	Male	40	70	75
	Total	65	80	80
8. Face Emergency Situation	Female	**30**	15	5
	Male	15	15	**25**
	Total	20	15	10

Source: Authors

KMO test using SPSS (version 16) was done to check the adequacy of data, which had values more than 0.5 for sub-groups inside ethnicity and gender. A value less than 0.5 meant the teenage and elderly age-group was not adequate to be interpreted; therefore, only the adult group was interpreted. There were several interesting findings from the survey. It has been listed following each activity. The percentages are rounded off to nearest integer of 5 for the sake of simplicity. The results bring in mainly responses from adults; however, elderly and teenagers are mentioned only if they demanded qualitative interpretation.

1. Strolling around or sitting idle is popular among Chinese and Indians, while Malays are less interested in it. However, if we take only females, a high percentage of Malays (70%), Chinese (90%), and Indians (85%) females reflect that this activity is at least popular among females from all ethnic groups. If we consider elderly, it is popular among all groups with an average of 95%.
2. Shopping, especially during sale, is popular among the Chinese (75%) and Indians (60%), but not that popular among Malays (25%). If we consider only the females, still the Malays are less interested (40%) in lengthy shopping hours.
3. Enjoying gross motor skills such as doing physical exercise or other athletic sports are not very popular, and it is especially unpopular among Malay (40%) and Indian (15%) females. However, if we consider only males, a relatively popular situation can be seen with Malays (70%), Chinese (70%), and Indians (50%) are more or less interested. Teenagers of any age or gender from all ethnic groups are significantly not interested.

4. Enjoying performances by appreciating soft skills are more popular among Chinese (85%) and Indians (90%), however, Malays are less interested in it (55%). However, if only females are considered, the Malay females are also quite interested (70%).

5. The Chinese (80%) and Indians (80%) seem to enjoy media quite well, while the Malays do not seem to enjoy that much (55%). However, if we again take the females, Malay females enjoy quite well (70%).

6. Open-air dine-out is very popular among all groups as shown by the percentage of Malays (90%), Chinese (80%) and Indians (85%).

7. Participating in performances is popular among Chinese (80%) and Indians (80%), while the Malays are less interested (65%). However, if we consider females only, Malay females are very much interested (90%).

8. In case of emergency situation, such as fire, there are active responses from all three groups to considerable extent (Malays 20%, Chinese 15%, Indian 10%). However, Malay female (30%) and Indian males (25%) show more concern than the other sub-groups.

From the analysis, it is clear that though there are differences in responses between different ethnic groups for all these activities except dining-out, at least one gender of every ethnic group can be attracted though these activities. For example, in participating in performances, even if Malay males are not interested, Malay females are likely to join with the other ethnic groups. Similarly, in gross motor skills, Malay and Indian females may not be that interested, but at least males from all ethnic groups can be attracted through it. Therefore, all these activities have the power to dilute the force of ethnicity and enhance the force of gender in group forming. Therefore the idea is to bring in more of those activities that considers gender, age, or other specific forces rather than ethnicity.

5.2   Challenge 2
The second major challenge is the religious affinity with ethnicity in Malaysia. In countries with heterogeneous ethnicity, same religion can almost unnoticeably remove a big barrier of mixing of ethnicity while group forming. For example, in India, Hinduism prevails across the country even though there are different ethnic groups; while in Canada, Christianity prevails. Therefore, it becomes comparatively easier to attract different ethnic groups under same platform as the sensitive issues due to religious diversity do not arise (CHIN 2009). In Malaysia, Malays are affiliated with Islam, Chinese mainly with Buddhism, and Indians with Hinduism (Department of Statistics of Malaysia, 2010). Therefore, in any activity or stimuli, one has to make sure to avoid any religiously sensitive issues in order to avoid possible pull out of any particular ethnic groups. For example, taking the city of Johor Bahru as a case study, Plaza Angsana at Tampoi is considered as Malay dominated public space, which is more popular for dresses that suit predominantly the Muslim religion. Therefore, empirical observation shows Malay concentration there. While in Sutera Mall, which is famous for its cuisine, many non-halal foods are available there, and therefore it is unlikely to attract the Muslim Malays. It is not to say that zones for specific ethnic groups or specific religious groups are not desirable, in fact it is a good practice to cultivate the cultures of all groups. However, in terms of a common platform for all groups, it is necessary to identify the right stimuli.

5.3   Summary and discussion
From the first challenge, it is obvious that several necessary activities could create ethnical bias in group formation, but that can be resolved though the force of gender. It can happen both in the cases of unforced or forced stimuli. However, when combined with the second challenge, several of them may create ethnically biased group formation. For example, in practicing gross motor skill, religious restrictions might discourage a particular ethnic group to take part even though apparently a particular gender from all groups could be interested. Therefore, combining these two challenges, a list of 'must-do's and 'must-not-do's can be developed. For the ease of understanding, these can further be grouped under the four levels of interaction in order to give ideas which kind of stimulus needed for each level.

A good example is Juru Autocity, Penang, which is able to attract all ethnic groups together. It is a largest automobile center which has become a hub for food, entertainment, shopping, and outdoor events. Empirical observation states it follows certain 'must do's and 'must-not-do's in their policy.

Figure 5: Juru Autocity, Penang, during day and night time: from left: [1]Food street of Autocity during day time, [2]Performance during event celebration, [3]Flea market during night time

(Source: [1]Intropropertes 2012, [2]Project Penang 2012, [3]Sheohyan 2012)

Table 3: A tentative list of 'must-do's and 'must-not-do's developed from the survey

	'must-do's	'must-not-do's
Level I: Co-presence	– create a good visual quality of the space through visual connectivity between its route and destinations, as it is a critical issue to generate the potential of a space to become lively (Ching, 2007) – provide physical facilities of modern urban space for all age-group (children and elderly friendly), and both gender.	– create spaces where activities repulse people of particular religion, such as, Taboo animals for certain religion should be present in public space
Level II: Co-attention	– use media to telecast common issues (such as football game) – arrange performances that addresses common issues for all ethnic groups (ex. gross motor-skill)	– use media to telecast ethnic/ religious biased issues (for example: music during prayer time) – arrange public performances that hurts feelings of any specific ethnic group – avoid activities related with fine motor skills that are not very popular among all ethnic groups
Level III: Co-exchange	– encourage children learning activities – arrange dine-out spaces – promote shopping (for example: sale) – provide open exercise areas – provide high-tech stimulus (for example: sensory elements)	– insensitive use of ethnic language – mix halal and non-halal zones
Level IV: Co-action	– arrange interactive group participation through forced activities using the elements from level III	– consciously avoid conflicting issues on all those activities listed above while conducting forced activities

Therefore, it can be concluded that activities that can dilute the ethnic bias and enhance gender or age or other bias, should be brought in as many as possible. In addition, the list of 'must do's and 'must not do's need to be continuously upgraded to avoid the conflict from religious perspective.

9. Role of Architecture

Last but not the least, though it appeared during the middle of the investigation that architecture may only play a role to create passive interaction, it is clear that the activities that generate active interaction also need a physical space or at least a sense of space to accommodate them. Therefore, a traditional 'zoning' concept that separates activities and put them in strict hierarchy may not be the most efficient method if social interaction within a heterogeneous society like in Malaysia needs to be maximized. For example, a separate zone for food, learning, and entertainment may handicap the possibility of enhancing active interaction. Since visual sense plays the biggest and promptest role in group formation, a mixing of zoning both horizontally and vertically can generate immense options for activities to take place while letting viewing possible for other groups in order to generate create interest among them. Hertzberger (2010) showed that a big space is not necessarily the solution for people to enjoy, but the interaction between the spaces both physically and visually, can create the interest for people to use one space while sustaining interest to enjoy other. Same applies if one activity takes place in one space and is visually and physically connected to another space where other activities might be taking place.
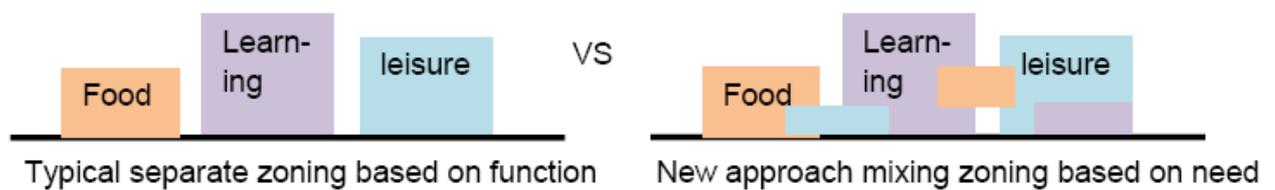
Figure 6: Typical and new approach in zoning in public spaces

(Source: Authors)

Therefore, architecture can act proactively as the hardware that not only gathers people in order to create passive interaction, but also provide spaces to accommodate the software that generate active interaction. The higher the efforts to generate other forces to attract people, the more are the chances to dilute the force of ethnicity while group forming, hence the more are the chances of mixing between different ethnic groups.

Conclusion

Malaysia is indeed privileged for their multicultural background. That have given them an edge as they are multilingual, their adaptation and tolerance level is higher. Each group is working within their capacity to push the nation ahead by using their own trademark efficiencies. Now it is time to step up a gear and show real time interaction in order to create a much needed people power, the power of unity that will forge the nation further ahead.

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