

Assessment of Urban Public Spaces within Shopping Malls: Youth Perspective in the City of Colombo

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Article history: Received: 8 May 2020 Received in revised form: 13 July 2020
Accepted: 21 August 2020 Published online: 9 December 2020

Abstract

Cities are the engines of economic growth. With urbanization, the pressure on urban lands for production and consumption based land use is increasing. In this context, most cities endeavor to keep public spaces for people interaction especially in the form of open public space; and in this setting, urban dwellers tend to use alternative public spaces such as leisure parks, malls and arcades. This study seeks to identify the role of urban public spaces (UPS) in shopping malls in the city scale by comparing the use of five (5) internal and external factors - namely physical features, social activities, accessibility, land use mix, and also memories and experiences. The key user group considered was youth between the age group of 18 to 30 years and questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted in a span of 08 weeks. Analysis of the primary data was conducted through SPSS statistical software and narrative inquiry assessment was conducted to validate the survey outcomes. The findings revealed that internal features including physical and social factors were the most significant aspects for the youth to sense shopping malls as urban public spaces (UPS). Also the youth has been influenced by the surrounding leisure & recreation facilities to gain a sense of the shopping malls. Urban public spaces in shopping malls could be identified as a better alternative space for public parks and playgrounds from the youth perspective. This research revealed that size and activity mix within public spaces in shopping malls have played a significant role in the long term sustainability of functional efficiency.

Keywords: Urban public space, shopping malls, youth, sense of place

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Land scarcity is one of the key issues in urban areas of the world. With rapid urbanization, population concentration into urban areas poses extra pressure on space for leisure & recreation. Provision of urban public spaces is one of the key responsibilities of planning agencies in cities where there are legal mandates to provide public spaces based on population density (Goh & van der Veer, 2016). At the same time, economic activities have become the center of attraction in cities and shopping malls have become a fundamental urban element, where citizens can get together and spend with leisure, structuring time, developing relations and engaging in cultural events (Miller et al., 1998). It is known that public open spaces create a sense of place for community in the urban context (Inroy, 2000). With urbanization, the demand for public spaces has increased and the private sector has tapped this opportunity to facilitate social interaction so as to improve the revenue base. Coffee shops and restaurants have led the way to become social interaction hubs to facilitate the public spaces which was demanded by the urban community (Oldenburg, 1999). With modernization and economic growth, privately owned space has become new urban public space (UPS) to show publicness was not determined by ownership of the space (Johnson & Glover, 2013). Unlike public parks, shopping malls contain a comparative advantage due to safety, security, inclusiveness, commercial flavor and comfort for the users (Erkip, 2003). In addition, urban lifestyle has created more attraction towards shopping malls (Al, 2016). Interactive activities and iconic shapes of shopping malls were given priority to attract people further towards shopping malls (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015). With the economic and social status-co of urban dwellers in cities, UPS has become a key design element within shopping malls where commercial and recreation activities are combined together (Ghapar et al., 2016). Since urban public space is determined by the freedom for users to access and enjoy, UPS within shopping malls was considered as the common space provided for public to gather, enjoy and to interact. This was also validated through surveys as conceptualization by the users was defined as public space (Johnson & Glover, 2013). There are various factors that have influenced public attraction towards shopping malls both internal and external to the location. Various researchers identified internal factors such as physical form, social inclusiveness, subjective experiences and external factors such as accessibility to the mall, land use mix and activities around the mall (Gehl, 1971; Hashemnezhad et al., 2013; Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015; Maitland, 1985).

Youth population aged 18-30 years old was selected for this study. Based on the literature in the Sri Lankan context, it was identified that the perspectives of youth are given comparatively less attention in terms of shopping mall users, although the shopping malls have

prioritized the youth population as a key target group in promoting their products. Therefore, it was imperative to assess the youth perspectives on the sense of urban public space within malls. This study aimed at understanding the role of common space provided in the shopping malls as urban public space and to study the performance of urban public space as a determinant factor for functionality of shopping malls from the youth perspective. The study was conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka by considering three shopping malls as case samples.

In Colombo, various shopping malls receive different attention from users based on the perceived conceptualization. Perera and Sutha (2018) have studied the shopping experience in Colombo from hedonic factors and personal experience perspectives. But limited research has been conducted on the use of common areas such as urban public spaces, to conceptualize the shopping malls. This study attempts to evaluate the sense for public urban space within shopping malls. The intention of this study is to provide an alternative viewpoint to evaluate shopping malls as a part of the urban fabric, to serve public space requirements instead of pure economic or financial assessment. It can be seen that contradictory arguments are noticeable among shop owners and UPS users due to financial returns. Generally, people make purchasing trips at shopping malls while making social and recreational bonds within it. However, the mall expects customers to purchase goods and services to match with financial requirements. There is a mismatch between the management where shop owners seek profit, while youth seek a better environment with safety, privacy, social events, attractive spaces to gather etc. This has been assessed through this research study to understand different perspectives of stakeholders and its implications to functionality.

■ 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sense of Place, Urban Public Space and Shopping Malls

There is extensive research conducted on the topic by various researchers in different contexts. This research is focused on the use of public space within shopping malls as UPS to determine the functionality and different influential factors for adolescents to use shopping malls. Therefore, the literature is confined into the concept of 'sense of place' in relation to UPS within shopping malls and how youth perceive it to determine the effectiveness of the mall as an alternative public space in the urban context.

Sense of place is a subjective perception of people about their environment and their conscious feeling about a place (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013). There can be various factors that determine the sense of any particular location. Furthermore, it is identified as an umbrella concept of place attachment, place identity and place dependence (Ghapar et al., 2016). Public spaces can simply be defined as places where everyone has the right to access with utilization and participate in ownership and management (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982). The level of interaction within and outside forms a sense of specific location for the general public. In the urban scale, there are varieties of public spaces ranging from sole recreation oriented spaces, to commercially oriented private spaces as well as infrastructure based spaces such as railway and bus terminals. Over the time, public spaces have been reshaped to suit urban development (Kongphunphin et al., 2018; Xue et al., 2012).

Further, UPS has been identified as a place for people to enjoy nature and provide gathering places for social events. UPS improves the quality of the urban environment, promote people to exchange, reminiscent urban history and culture and for the sense of identity and belongingness to all (Ramlee et al., 2015). Further, it emphasizes that this space is owned by the public and it should accommodate changes and people from every background should have access (Qamaruz-Zaman et al., 2013). According to Ercan (2007), UPS can be viewed as a setting which encourages social relations and a sense of place and it can be an indicator to show the social status of urban community. With modernization, a number of private shopping malls have created space for the community to experience UPS functions, where ownership of space and accessibility was questioned by researchers in doing so (Stormann, 2000; Taylor, 2003). But it has been identified that ownership has not determined the conceptualization of public space within users (Johnson & Glover, 2013). Therefore, private commercial spaces are used for leisure and recreation purposes in many global cities. It is identified that consumer purchasing intention also depends on the image, positioning, retail infrastructure and business mix within shopping malls (Makgopa, 2016; Sneed et al., 2011). This is no different in Colombo where the number of shopping malls have increased along with the demand for it. Also, the public spaces in shopping malls are privately owned and ownership determines the level of access, public space size and the type of activities to engage in. But, public perception on leisure spaces was not governed by the ownership of a particular space (Johnson & Glover, 2013). This has given the pathway to develop market based approaches to develop the UPS with shopping malls; and competition between different shopping malls has created innovative UPS to attract consumers through a mix of activities. This is an important interaction for UPS to change and adapt to changing societal needs and inject dynamism in nature.

2.2 UPS and Youth

Leisure and recreation within shopping malls is an integral part of modern lifestyle. In establishing a shopping mall, aspects like tenant mix which includes small, specialist, up market traders, eating places and physical form and location which has strong and memorable physical features are considered (Maitland, 1985). Moreover, it has been identified that consumer purchasing intention at the shopping mall depends on image, positioning, business mix and sense of place (Sneed et al., 2011). In addition to that, shopping malls indicate the cultural, social and economic behaviour in terms of the human activity pattern which are unique to the selected spatial entity.

The young generation below the age of 30 are considered as key actors of malls, and have an attraction and a positive trend to spend time in shopping malls during their spare time and the mall environment serves as one of the settings that influence their lives (Arslan et al., 2010). The youth or adolescents tend to explore the world with less parental supervision while experiencing biological, cognitive and emotional changes to realign with the same or opposite gender (Kipke, 1999; Ozer & Piatt, 2017). There is no difference to the Sri Lankan context and hence a prime reason for selecting youth to assess the use of public space in an urban context. The sense of place for youth

depends on physical factors, memories and experiences, place satisfaction, interaction and activity features, the time, social, personal, cultural, branding and promoting, image and identity and so on (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015).

2.3 Identification of Factors for the Assessment

Various scholars have identified several factors to determine the sense on a particular geographic location. For the study purpose, three internal factors and two external factors were considered. The rationale for selection of factors is as follows.

- Correspondence with the study objectives
- Frequency & similarity in the published literature
- Nature and activities observed in shopping malls
- Cultural and urban factors unique to the Sri Lankan context (Colombo)

Table 1 Selection of factors to assess Sense of Place

Internal Factors	External Factors
- Physical features of mall	- Accessibility
- Social interaction and activities	- Land Use Mix/ Features
- Memories & experiences	

Physical factors in terms of the sense of place is referred to the architecture and interior design of shopping malls. Interaction and activity features are investigated under the social factors. The image of the shopping mall was considered as a sub category of the physical factor. From user perception, physical factors are embraced with grouping, circulation arrangement, thematic shapes, etc. (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015; Xue et al., 2012). Physical factors influence on the attraction to a particular urban setting and enhance the satisfaction level of the place (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013; Stedman, 2003). Social factors are the interaction between youth and family members, friends, visitors in the mall and shop owners. Social interaction is important to develop features like togetherness, enjoy the mall atmosphere while being with others (Kusumowidagdo et al., 2015). Social factors are influenced by the physical environment and a positive relationship with the physical environment could result in place attachment and sense on that setting. Subjective experiences are unique and vary from person to person and mostly common in comparatively older shopping malls where relationships occur with temporal effect. This is based on memories, experiences, mall design, unique activities as well as a safe and comfortable environment, that fits into the culture, ethnicity, race, gender, power, liberty and social class. According to the principles of the Schultz model of Sense of Place “Land Use” has been identified as the most influential factor for the sense of place. Typology, Topology and Morphology are the main criteria used for assessment. The factors like landscape, building complexes, space and character are few of the attributes among them (Ghoomi et al., 2015). Conversely, accessibility factor is an important element for the functionality of a shopping mall. From the mall’s management perception, consumer purchasing intention depends on image, positioning, business-mix and a sense of place (Sneed et al., 2011). Location is a determinant factor for a shopping mall to enhance its revenue base.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The research was framed by using exploratory design to frame a basis to identify common spaces in shopping malls as urban public spaces. Case study was focused on the Colombo City for its unique geographical area where the demand for urban public spaces (due to population density) and reduction of public open spaces (due to development pressure) are relatively high. Judgmental sampling as a non-probability sampling method was entertained for the youth survey to obtain user perception. Questionnaire survey from youth was the primary data source to assess sense of place parameters and semi-structured interviews with shop operators and management of the mall were obtained to understand the planning and operational considerations. In addition to that, planning agencies and the designers of malls were interviewed to consolidate the findings and verification of the results. Qualitative analytical tools were prioritized to assess the sense of place due to place attachment, dependency and identity being subjective terms. The key research instruments used in the study with justification is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Research instruments used in the study and rationale

Instrument	Justification
Questionnaire Survey	To evaluate the attitudes, behavior and preferences in a short period, both closed ended and open ended questions were raised and an online questionnaire survey was carried out for a majority of data to avoid misinterpretation of real facts and also due to time constraints.
Interviews	Beyond ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions, the stories behind the responders were covered using this method. As the study focused on youth sense on a particular location, interviews provided qualitative data to understand the factors of attachment with genuine feedback.
Focus group discussions	Focus group discussions were carried out with shop owners and the management, to evaluate the factors prioritized in the planning of shopping malls. Also the outcomes

	were used to check whether the responses have been adequately addressed in the planning of such commercial projects.
Observations	Observations were used to identify the specific locations and time periods that youth visit most (hours/ weekdays or weekends), their behaviour and movement patterns that can be easily captured through observation.
Spatial Mapping	Spatial structure, pattern of built environment and its impact to the functionality of UPS was assessed through the space syntax technique.

The questionnaire survey focused on the youth as users of shopping mall and 477 responds were obtained. Out of the total, 200 responses were received from direct questionnaire surveys and the rest were received from online questionnaire forms. Stakeholder interviews focused on their thoughts on existing UPS and the level of satisfaction from a businesses and activity perspective. Focus group discussions were mainly carried out with the management and shop owners of the mall as they are the people who manage UPS as a part of their business. Field observations are another method used to assess the quality and the level of satisfaction provided in an urban public space. Based on the time spent within the UPS and by observing the behavior pattern of youth, major spatial attractions within the mall was identified. Observations were conducted in different times of the day and at different functions during weekdays and weekends.

SPSS Statistical software was used to understand the overall satisfaction of the provided UPS within the mall and chi-square technique was adapted to assess the relationship between categorical variables used to evaluate each and every variable as perceived by the youth. Chi-square test revealed the most significant indicators for the youth in sensing UPS. External factors such as accessibility, surrounding land use and transport linkages that would support cognitive identity of shopping malls were identified. To study these factors, spatial relationship in the built environment was required. The Space Syntax method was used to analyze how the street network around shopping malls affect the user behavior to be attracted into shopping malls. Space syntax tool can be used to understand the street design and activities to govern sense of place (van Nes, 2014). Since space syntax could be directly used to measure street connectivity (Koohsari et al., 2019), the tool has been used to identify the relationship between youth preference and connectivity among each mall. In addition to that, Arc GIS tools and spatial mapping was employed to assess the relationship between factors such as accessibility and the surrounding land use with malls attachment.

3.2 Case Study – Colombo, Sri Lanka

The study focused on the city of Colombo where financial and commercial activities were concentrated. By considering the existing shopping and retail land use activities, three shopping malls were identified for the survey. Majestic City (MC), Liberty Plaza (LP), and Arcade Independence Square (AIS) were selected as case studies which are located within 6 km distance from city center. These case studies were selected considering the factors like similar business mix, leisure oriented spaces like cinema, restaurants, open gathering areas in different scales and operational period, differences of the number of floors. Further, these three malls are located within a 5km boundary to each other. There are different factors in selecting these malls as UPS in terms of the sense of place. Figure 1 shows the location of three malls in the Colombo City.



Figure 1 Location of shopping malls in Colombo, Sri Lanka (Source: <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>)

Majestic City (MC) was constructed in 1991 and it is a seven storied shopping mall and UPS provided in the ground floor. Compared with the other malls, a moderate level of UPS can be observed and it is not a well-defined seating arrangement. It has steps without a backrest. At one time it can accommodate 20 to 30 people for sitting and it is not sufficient for the existing inflow. Hence, it was observed that youth have converted stairs as their gathering places. Figure 02 illustrates the existing UPS at MC.



Figure 2 Urban public space inside Majestic City (MC) Shopping Complex – Case 1
(Source: Captured by author)

Liberty Plaza (LP) was established in 1980 as the first shopping mall of Sri Lanka. It is a four storied shopping building and has been in operation for 40 years. UPS within the mall has been provided in the first floor, but well-structured and only provided sitting areas in a dispersed manner. At once, it can cater around 20 to 25 and compared to other malls, the seating arrangement is not satisfactory. Provided UPS and its condition is illustrated in the figure 3.



Figure 3 Urban public space inside Liberty Plaza (LP) Shopping Complex – Case 2
(Source: Captured by author)

Arcade Independence Square (AIS) is located in Colombo 07, which was regenerated as a shopping arcade in 2014. It is a two storied shopping building and has a courtyard and larger UPS compared to the other case studies. It is observed that existing seating arrangements were not fully occupied during week days and weekends. Figure 4 shows existing UPS at AIS.



Figure 4 Urban public space inside Arcade Independence Square (AIS) Shopping Complex – Case 3
(Source: Captured by author)

■4.0 ANALYSIS

Qualitative and quantitative analytical methods were used for data analysis. In order to identify the significance and relationship among factors, statistical models were used and to analyze the impact of accessibility and surrounding land uses, spatial analysis and space syntax was employed. Narrative inquiry was used to investigate the subjective experience using NVivo software.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Participants for the questionnaire survey were initially analyzed for descriptive evaluation which included 306 females (64%) and 171 males (36%) for the demographic categorization of youth. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the survey.

Table 3 Frequency distribution of demographic character of the survey respondents

	Male	Female
Age		
18-22 years	24	76
23-26 years	104	170
27-30 years	43	60
Education/Job status		
Studies only	47	171
Employed	64	68
Studying while employed	60	67

Through the observations and survey findings, it was revealed that the youth visit shopping malls as groups. 48% out of the total visited shopping malls with friends, 23% with lovers, 11% with family and kids while 8% with parents. 90% responders stayed more than one hour which was considered a positive indicator of using shopping mall as UPS. Under the frequency of visits, 70% of the youth visited occasionally (48%) or monthly (22%). So, youth did not visit shopping malls as a necessary activity. 64% responded that they do not engage in shopping during every visit. So it indicated that youth visit shopping malls to gain experience. Further, 62% was engaged in social activities in addition to shopping purposes. Overall, the most preferred shopping malls in terms of urban public space use were identified as MC and AIS which were collectively voted by 73% of respondents. The shopping mall preference is shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5 Shopping mall preference based on urban public space use
(Source: Captured by author based on questionnaire survey)

Chi-square test using SPSS was employed to understand the relationship between sense on mall and eleven indicators which represent five major factors. Among them five indicators were significant, proving that physical and social factors make statistically significant relationships on sense on malls. Table 4 shows the most significant ($p < 0.05$) indicators based on the survey results. Also, the questionnaire survey revealed that 64% (307 responses) of the sample have indicated that the youth do not shop in every visit to the mall. This revealed that the youth prefer to enjoy the UPS instead of shopping at every visit.

Table 4 Chi-square analysis findings

Factor	Indicator	Level of significance
Physical	Mall structure	.000
Physical	Availability of restaurants	.002
Social	Public gathering areas	.000
Subjective experience	Privacy within the mall	.834
Social	Identity within the mall	.153
Subjective experience	Personal experiences	.491
Social	Can spend with others	.307
Social	Safe environment	.411
Accessibility	Easy access	.068
Physical	Available space for leisure	.002
Social	Cultural & entertainment events	.001

There is a significant relationship between the sense on a shopping mall and the shopping behaviour of youth. $\chi^2(3, N=477) = 28.08$, $p=0.000$. Table 5 further elaborates the relationship.

Table 5 Chi-square test of selection of mall and engagement of shopping activities by youth

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	28.084 ^a	3	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.912	3	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.291	1	.038
N of Valid Cases	477		

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 14.26.

As an external determinant, surrounding land use has created a significant impact on sense of place within malls. Out of the total, 49% of youth were attracted to a respective shopping mall due to the surrounding land use. Figure 6 further illustrates the types of activities that caused the attraction for a specific shopping mall.

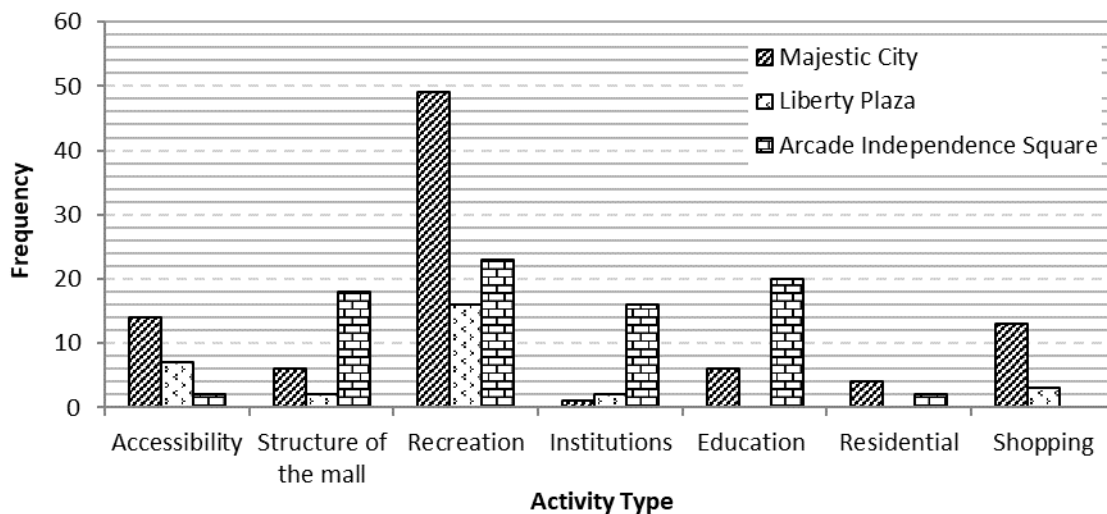


Figure 6 Internal and external activity types to attract youth
(Source: Captured by author based on questionnaire survey)

Residential and commercial land use activities are the majority around MC. Frequently mentioned land use were beach, parks, offices, commercial properties like the Unity Plaza shopping complex, educational institutions and housing apartments. Similarly, land use around LP was also the residential and commercial activities. Youth have frequently mentioned that the surrounding land use such as transport terminal, cinema, offices, hotels and beach have served to determine the mall’s attraction. According to figure 6, recreation activities around the mall was the reason of attraction to every mall considered. It was evident that nearby leisure & recreational activities acted as a

catalyst for the usage of shopping malls. On the other hand, shopping activities were not comparatively significant to attract into shopping malls. Also it was revealed that accessibility and mall structure had similar potential to attract people to malls.

4.2 Spatial Analysis

Unlike MC or LP, 500m surrounding of AIS is occupied by government institutions and residential uses. Further, most responders who picked AIS as the most preferable place out of the three case studies, mentioned Independence Square – public park adjacent to the mall, pleasant environment created through the calm atmosphere, administrative offices and educational institutions. Space syntax tool was utilized to identify the connectivity and the integration of selected location in terms of accessibility. Based on interviews, accessibility was one of the fundamental reasons for mall owners and mall users considered in selecting a mall location. Further, based on the responses, 42% mentioned that they sense on mall due to easy access. Also, public transportation modes were used to travel into the mall by 47% of the youth. Results from connectivity revealed that LP and MC are more connected and integrated malls than AIS. So in terms of accessibility LP was located in the highest potential location. Figure 7 further illustrated the accessibility level. MC has integration of 23% due to road access and railway station location.



Figure 7 Connectivity analysis of MC, LP & AIS
(Source: Compiled by author by using Space Syntax software)



Figure 8 Integration analysis of MC, LP & AIS
(Source: Compiled by author by using Space Syntax software)

4.3 Narrative Inquiry Findings

Narrative inquiry was focused on stories of individuals in the survey sample. 70 responders gave their experience, story, memory or any other special event within each case study. There was false information given by two responders that was eliminated during the analysis.

Responders at Majestic City (MC) highlighted childhood memories and they were revisiting this place as a result of those memories. The positive concerns on MC were business mix, efficient service and easy access. Responders suggested uplifting the structure and interior design of the mall, business mix and entertainment events as necessary improvements. Further, it proves that their requirement expected from the mall varies from generation to generation and the mall needs to adopt accordingly, to make sense on the shopping mall among youth.

MC is full with childhood memories. I've visited MC with my friends or family. Compared to the past, the service is getting poor and provided sitting arrangement is not sufficient and not comfortable as all the time it is full with people. I think this is the time for MC to have a new look too. (Young girl - 23 years old)

I think all the things that need to be included within a shopping mall are there. Most of the time, with friends we take some selfies and photos. But attractive places are not there anymore and next thing is the seating arrangement. If those two improvements are done MC is the perfect mall for me. (University student, aged 22 years)

Survey responders at Liberty Plaza (LP) were dissatisfied on the available UPS within LP. Further, youth suggested improvements on sanitary facilities, new brands, quality of food and goods, proper navigation within the mall, etc. so as to create better sense on existing UPS.

For me in LP, a space for leisure or places to stay for a chat is not available. I just feel passing the series of shops when I walk along the corridors. Often I visit LP with my girlfriend for shopping. For leisure activities, we visit either a park or beach. (23-year-old employed boy)

I visit LP because of the business mix of the mall. New fashion updates and I can taste new food too. The key improvements that I suggest for lift navigation and sanitary facilities. Though I often visit this mall sometime I get confused as there are no proper navigations to lift lobby. (25-year-old employed girl)

Out of the three case studies, AIS has provided a comparatively larger area as urban public space so youth attraction was evident. But the pricing strategy of AIS has restricted the youth from purchasing products. Key suggestions that the youth made for better experience from AIS were, improvements on sanitary facilities, waste management, new affordable brands, more food outlets, reduced security restrictions etc.

I visit AIS daily. I prefer the appearance and the quiet environment within the mall. I am waiting until my kid finishes his school. On some special days I come for dinner with my family. This year I celebrated my wedding anniversary at Arcade Independence Square which was an unforgettable night. (Young lady - 27 years old)

We visit AIS when we get a break to have a meal and enjoy. This has easy access and good locations to take photographs with my friends. We never do shopping as those brands are very expensive and cannot afford. Although we pay for sanitary facilities they are not maintained properly. Some security officers blame us when we laugh or shout within the mall and we feel ashamed. (University student, aged 24 years)

When considering the overall narratives and the improvements suggested by the youth, either providing a better business mix or providing better UPS was not sufficient. To become a better shopping mall there should be a balance between both. If not, shopping malls would not survive in the long run in terms of functionality.

For this study three types of participants were considered - namely: youth, shop owners and the shopping mall management. The main aspects considered were the attitude, positive and negative features of the existing UPS and expected improvements that they suggested to increase the sense on the mall. The management of the shopping malls in the private sector were always keen on the profitability, rather than promoting walking customers. With the profitability in mind and considering their customer profile all they wanted was to facilitate their purchasing customers instead of providing a leisure space for the youth who hang out without shopping purposes.

I am satisfied with the provided UPS. But I feel it's better to provide more sitting areas. However, a shopping mall is a profit-oriented entity and there is no much concern on provision of UPS especially for leisure. Such allocations might be a disturbance for the mall's function and younger generation may tend to hang out rather than shop. More UPS mean more visitors than customers. Therefore, we promote the (purchasing) customers rather than walking customers. It does not mean that we are not providing facilities for our customers and it is our responsibility. For leisure purpose we have allocated the food court area where will not be a disturbance for the customers. (Management of Private owned shopping mall)

The management of AIS (government owned) had a different perception on provision of UPS within the shopping mall. Public sector consideration on provision of UPS as a social service and profitability was the least priority. From the selected case studies, AIS is governed by the UDA and their perception of provision of UPS and its impact to mall functionality and youth were as follows:

For me, this is the ideal project with the surrounding land uses and its compatibility. Many people criticize this project as a failed project but we have achieved our expectation. As a mall we targeted high end community and tourists and placed shops and brands accordingly. But the provided UPS is open to everyone and can enjoy. Most of the time shop owners don't like to have sitting area or any public gathering area in front of their shops. So, we could satisfy both users and shop owners with the physical arrangement of the mall. With these AIS is a success project in every perception. (A member from Urban Development Authority project management team)

Even though shop owners had a different perception on users, 50% out of the sample were still willing to provide seating arrangements in front of their shops as they believed it to be a supportive factor for their businesses. Out of the sample, 76% responders displayed a positive attitude on UPS. Furthermore, 70% believed that UPS had an impact on their business with the perception of current visitors being converted into future customers. Figure 9 illustrated the findings.

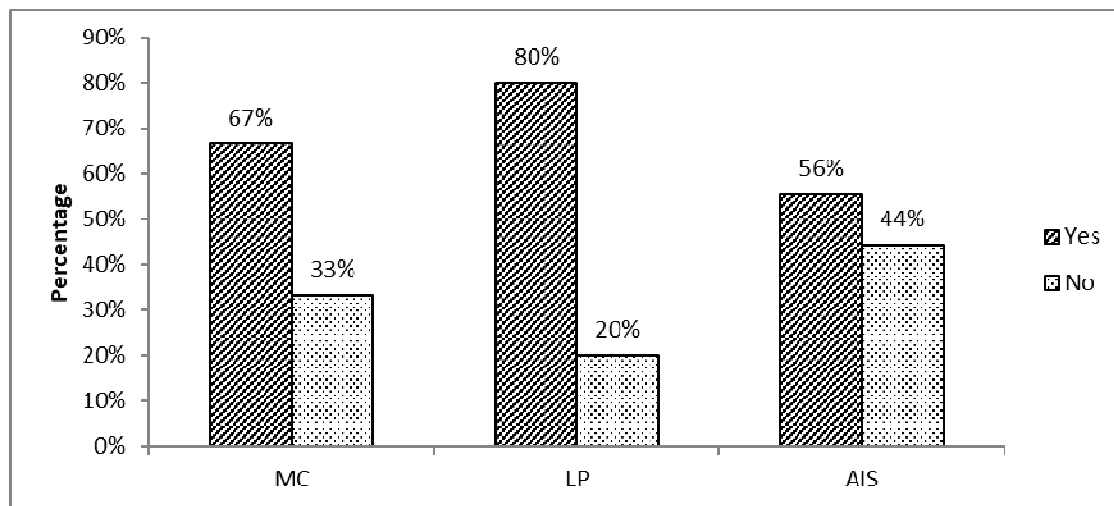


Figure 9 Effectiveness of provision of UPS for the business
(Source: Semi-structured interview's findings)

It was observed that 80% of LP responders believed that there was a positive impact caused by UPS for their business. Out of all case studies, LP had no defined UPS in its design. As per the perception of shop owners, the level of success of the malls resulted by UPS, 73% believed that in LP, 67% in MC and 55% for AIS. Furthermore, 57% responses mentioned that young customers were the most important category for their business. Based on the suggestions made by the youth, proper planning, maintenance and timely upgrades were essential for shopping malls to become a sensible urban setting. Most of the suggestions were on sanitary facilities, better food courts, affordable brands and more gathering benches with seating arrangements which were common areas of interest for the youth.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of the research, Majestic City (MC) shopping mall was comparatively the highest sensed mall among the youth. MC is located in a potential location which has railway and road connectivity. Second most preferable mall was the Arcade Independence Square (AIS). It has the highest common space comparatively for youth and the impact of Independence Square – a public park next door – influenced on the result. Comparatively, a least number of youth made sense on Liberty Plaza (LP) shopping mall. Considering the overall results, it can be concluded that a balance between business mix and urban public space had resulted in improving the sense on shopping malls. Based on the user responses, AIS had the most expensive and comparatively limited variety of products which caused less attraction for the youth with purchasing intentions. However, LP had the highest variety of products with limited common space to enjoy. Considering the public space and business mix, MC show a desirable attraction for the youth since its inception in 1991, as the youth sensed the mall as an attractive entity for both shopping and leisure experiences. The factors identified in the study show that shopping malls cannot be considered entirely as commercial entities since they serve as valuable urban public spaces for people to enjoy. From the urban planning perspective, it can be visualized that urban form and street networks play a major role in determining user perception on public spaces. This study attempted to understand the importance of “informal” urban spaces such as shopping malls in creating cohesive user experience on the overall urban area. Since traditional public spaces are defined from the accessibility and ownership perspective (Johnson & Glover, 2013), this study aimed at redefining the public space from a user's perspective. With increasing urbanization, the lands available for public parks and open spaces are shrinking, so alternative spaces that can replicate the needs of people is an important

finding. Youth can be considered as a priority user group who should be given an equal opportunity to participate in the decision making process in defining the urban public spaces.

In Sri Lanka, criticism is commonly observed on elements in urban settings, and its financial performance rather than physical attributes. One of the reasons behind this is the ignorance about elements that make a sense among people on that particular setting. In the recent past, AIS was criticized as a less performance entity due to its financial performance. But this study revealed that the importance of sense of place attributes in making a shopping mall's functional performance. However, those factors have not been given priority by project planners in all three case studies. Moreover, the youth who visited the malls could be potential customers in a few years since the purchasing decision of people can determine the sense of place which they perceived in their young age.

This study has been conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka to view the youth perception on shopping malls as potential urban public spaces. The study has been completed within a short span of 12 weeks. Therefore, was limited to five attributes identified from the literature review. The study could be expanded by increasing the number of indicators to assess the UPS in the urban context and can be developed into broad user categories to understand comprehensive view of user conceptualization of urban public spaces. Additionally, this research could be expanded to compare different types of open public spaces in urban context from the user perception.

Through the investigation, the main consideration was given to the physical, social, personal, accessibility factors and land use mix. The factors of safety and security were highlighted. Therefore, it is recommended to compare the UPS in a shopping mall with public urban parks. Though rules and regulations have been imposed to establish urban parks based on the population distribution, a shopping mall would be a competitive solution as it provides economic benefits too. Moreover, the security, safety and night time functions are available in malls compared with public parks which can be studied as further research areas.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the staff of Department of Town & Country Planning, University of Moratuwa and management staff of the studied shopping malls for their cooperation in providing information and assistance for this research.

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