APPROPRIATE URBAN PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to evaluate the quality of "appropriateness", as in the concept of "appropriate urban public open space", with a focus on the open spaces of Malaysian town centers. This study was triggered by the issues of urban placeless-ness, quality of urban public open spaces, and lack of town users' critical feedbacks in the public realm development of Malaysian towns. The concept was derived based on the literature review that evolved around the existing urban design and other related theories as an idea of "the urban public open space that has the qualities of physical viability and functional vitality" whereby 'urban public open space' implied 'square typologies within a town center that allow pedestrian activities to take place in them'. Physical viability and functional vitality were the basis to the two main objectives of this research. Whilst the importance of the built physical quality of the spatial place has been well-documented, such environment would render irrelevant to its intended existence without people and their activities. Thus, an assumption was made that 'appropriateness' of urban public open space depends on the simultaneous fulfillment of both the aforementioned aspects. A case study approach of Kota Bharu town center with its three selected public open spaces was adopted as it allowed for an in-depth inquiry into the subject matter. The investigation has led to the construction of the town's morphological development and recognition of the elements that contributed to the characteristics and qualities of its public open spaces. The main purpose was to better understand the evolution and inter-relationship between the concerned elements. A questionnaire survey was carried out to gauge the town users' satisfaction levels with the elements. Initially, the obtained data were analyzed quantitatively utilizing simple percentage and frequency and then triangulated with the qualitative data that were obtained through interviews and field observation as well as with the established theories. There were four significant findings. Firstly, in terms of physical-spatial definition, the combination of the location of buildings, public amenities

and vegetation around the edge of the open spaces were found to be the main defining factor to the perception of the spatial shapes that led to users' satisfaction with the open spaces, thus contributed to their viability. Secondly, in terms of the functions, the most vibrant place had varied functions such as public transportation, parking spaces, resting and eating places with commercials as the most dominant use and was located within close proximity and easily accessible for the users. In other words, the users were attracted to the open space because of its many functional elements, which provided them with choices of activities. The combination of the first and second findings contributed to the justification of the qualities of the appropriate urban public open spaces. The last finding is related to the research methodology. Although classification of the participating respondents into different groups was justifiably considered insignificant in this research, it was discovered that the employed sampling technique, which was a combination of two different but proven sampling techniques (time-interval and cluster sampling techniques), was able to reflect the general distribution and characteristics of Kota Bharu population. Consequently, the findings of this research have several implications on the planning policies and urban design strategies with regard to the public open space in terms of spatial physical planning and design, conservation, functional planning and in the implementation of urban projects that have public significance. These implications are only specifically discussed in relation to Kota Bharu town center. The main contribution of this research to the body of knowledge lies in its appraisal of the qualities of appropriateness in the context of urban design.

ABSTRAK

Matlamat penyelidikan ini adalah untuk menilai kualiti "kesesuaian", seperti di dalam konsep "ruang terbuka awam perbandaran yang sesuai", dengan tumpuan keatas ruang terbuka dalam pusat bandar di Malaysia. Kajian ini tercetus oleh isu-isu seperti urban *placeless-ness*, kualiti ruang terbuka awam dan kurangnya maklumbalas dari pengguna bandar terutamanya dalam pembangunan persekitaran awam dalam bandar di Malaysia. Konsep tersebut yang dirumuskan berasaskan kajian ilmiah yang berkisar sekitar teori-teori rekabentuk perbandaran sediada dan teori lain yang berkaitan, adalah idea "ruang terbuka awam perbandaran yang mempunyai kualiti viabiliti fizikal dan vitaliti fungsi" dimana "ruang terbuka awam perbandaran" bermaksud "typologi medan dalam pusat bandar yang membenarkan aktiviti pejalankaki berlaku di dalamnya". Viabiliti fizikal dan vitaliti fungsi adalah asas kepada dua objektif utama penyelidikan ini. Ketika kepentingan kualiti fizikal ruang tersebut jelas tersurat, persekitaran tersebut akan menjadi tidak relevan kepada maksud kewujudannya tanpa manusia dan aktiviti mereka. Oleh itu, satu andaian telah dibuat iaitu "kesesuaian" ruang terbuka awam perbandaran bergantung kepada tercapainya kedua-dua aspek tersebut. Pendekatan kajian kes pusat bandar Kota Bharu dengan pemilihan tiga ruang terbuka awamnya digunakan kerana ia membenarkan penyelidikan mendalam keatas perkara berkenaan. Kajiselidik ini telah membawa kepada pembinaan pembangunan morphologi bandar tersebut dan pengenal-pastian elemen-elemen yang menyumbang kepada watak dan kualiti ruang-ruang terbuka awamnya. Tujuan utamanya adalah untuk lebih memahami evolusi dan hubungkait diantara elemen-elemen berkaitan. Satu tinjauan *questionnaire* dilaksanakan bertujuan menilai tahap kepuasan hati para pengguna bandar terhadap elemen-elemen berkenaan. Mulanya, data yang diperolehi dianalisa secara quantitatif menggunakan kaedah peratusan dan frekuensi ringkas dan kemudian diuji-bandingkan dengan data kualitatif yang

diperolehi melalui interview dan pemerhatian ditapak juga dengan teori-teori mantap. Ada empat penemuan utama. Pertama, dalam terma definasi fizikal-ruangan, kombinasi lokasi bangunan, kemudahan awam dan tumbuhan disekeliling ruang terbuka berkenaan didapati menjadi faktor utama kepada persepsi bentuk ruangan tersebut yang menjurus kepada kepuasan hati pengguna dengannya, seterusnya menyumbang kepada viabilitinya. Keduanya, dalam terma fungsi, ruang yang paling meriah mempunyai fungsi yang pelbagai seperti pengangkutan awam, tempat letak kereta, tempat-tempat rehat dan makan dengan perniagaan merupakan kegiatan paling dominan dan terletak dalam lingkungan berdekatan dan senang dikunjungi oleh pengguna. Dalam ertikata lain, para pengguna tertarik kepada ruang terbuka berkenaan disebabkan kepelbagaian elemen fungsinya, memberikan mereka pilihan aktiviti. Kombinasi penemuan pertama dan kedua tersebut telah menyumbang kepada justifikasi kualiti ruang terbuka awam perbandaran yang sesuai. Penemuan terakhir berkait dengan methodologi kajian. Walaupun klasifikasi responden yang terlibat kedalam kumpulan berbeza difikirkan tidak penting dalam penyelidikan ini, didapati teknik *sampling* yang digunapakai, yang merupakan gabungan dua teknik *sampling* berlainan tetapi sahih (teknik *time-interval* dan *cluster sampling*), berupaya memberi gambaran umum tentang taburan dan watak penduduk Kota Bharu. Penemuan penyelidikan ini memberi beberapa implikasi kepada polisi perancangan dan strategi rekabentuk perbandaran berkaitan ruang terbuka awam perbandaran terutamanya dari segi perancangan dan rekabentuk ruangan fizikal, pemerliharaan, perancangan fungsi dan di dalam perlaksanaan projek perbandaran berkepentingan awam. Implikasi tersebut hanya dibincangkan secara spesifik berkaitan dengan pusat bandar Kota Bharu. Sumbangan utama penyelidikan ini kepada bidang ilmu pengetahuan terkandung di dalam huraiannya terhadap kualiti-kualiti kesesuaian dalam konteks rekabentuk perbandaran.

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LIST OF TERMINOLOGIES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Appropriateness	An appropriate quality is attained if both aspects of physical viability and functional vitality qualities are met
Physical Viability	Physical viability is defined as having a capacity to adapt and respond to changing circumstances as well as an ability to stimulate improved changes. It is measured primarily based on user satisfaction
Functional Vitality	It is a measure of functional elements that is defined as having an ability to attract or contribute to human activity of a place, and is also gauged primarily based on user satisfaction
Town Users	Town users are people who frequent a town and are familiar with the environment regardless whether they are residents or non residents
S	Satisfied
DS	Dissatisfied
DK	Do Not Know
N	Neutral
Lo	Location
Sc	Scale
Fo	Form
Co	Color
Ma	Material

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

1.0 Introduction

This research examines the idea of 'appropriate urban public open space' in Malaysian town centers. The primary concern is to study the qualities of the space that contribute to its 'appropriateness'. The term as a concept has already been used in urban design study as 'visual appropriateness' (Bentley *et al*, 1985), nonetheless, the definition was not conclusive. According to various English dictionaries, the word 'appropriateness' means 'suitability', and is generic in nature. 'Suitability' was used by Noor Sharipah Sultan Sidi (1991) in her investigation of housing for low-income groups in Kuala Lumpur City, Malaysia, in which the 'suitability' of the residential units was measured based on the residents' satisfaction levels. Her study adopted a site specific approach, hence, the findings were culturally biased. This research also adopts a similar approach but specifically focused on the physical viability and functional vitality; arguably were the two most prominent aspects in urban design study but rarely studied together in depth. One of the notable works that simultaneously investigated those two aspects was carried out by Bianchini and Landry (1994). Their study dealt with a wide scope such as economy, management and maintenance of a city. For this research, however, due to the complexity of such environment, the definition of the concept is scoped down to a simultaneous fulfillment of the viability and vitality qualities that are measured primarily based on the town user satisfaction (see Chapter 2).

This endeavor was initially inspired by the study of 'Identity of Place' (Shuhana Shamsuddin, 1997). It begins by clarifying urban design issues of place-ness in urban environment, public open space as 'a place', and the role of town users in evaluating the concept of a place. As the issues are both a global, as well as a local phenomenon, therefore, they need to be understood in an overall global scenario and then reconstituted in the context of this research. The issues form the basis toward the formulation of the assumption, aim, objectives, and research questions. The limitations of this research are then stated. Subsequently, a review into similar study areas is used as the framework in selecting the methodology and approaches for this research. Finally, this chapter presents the overall structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background to the Problem

Similar urban design issues that are viewed at from global as well as local perspectives are used as the framework for this research. Two issues that are related to urban spatial place study are looked into; they are place-ness in urban environment and the relationships between public open space, which is one of the main components that constitutes the built environment, and the town users.

1.1.1 Global Concerns

1.1.1.1 Place-ness in Urban Environment

In recent decades, the concern with urban environments all over the world has been prominent, notably with the quality of urban design in general, dissolution of local urban identity and sense of place or place-ness, even though techniques of building construction, transportation, and other technologies related to city systems have been

greatly improved. Much of the discourses, which is centered on the built environments, seeks to identify and understand factors that have been considered as the main causes to the issues of place identity and placelessness, and suggests ways to correct them (Hough, 1990). Globally, such a problem still persists as reflected by various studies, such as by Short (1996), Chapman (1996), Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997), Sandalack (1998), Crawford (2000), Carter (2002) and PPS (2006b).

Kevin Lynch (1960) was considered as one of the pioneers in the study of urban place-ness through his book 'The Image of the City'. Many similar studies followed suit thereafter. A study by Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997) investigated the attributes that contribute to imageability and the formation of distinctive identity in a Malaysian town center. Similarly, in another study, Sandalack (1998) traced the impetus to the development of Canadian Prairie towns and elucidated the causes of its disappearing distinctive identity and place-ness. Although the studies by Shuhana Shamsuddin and Sandalack were conducted in different regions and places that were different in almost every aspect, their theses were similar in nature as they dealt with urban place crisis faced by the respective town. In retrospective, both of them concluded that the process of modernization and technological advancement were the main reasons that contributed to the situation faced by Canadian Prairie towns (Sandalack, 1998) and Kuantan town center (Shuhana Shamsuddin, 1997). Besides rapid technological change that has taken place since the industrial revolution, according to Muir (in Chapman, 1996: 60), "the emergence of new approaches to planning and architecture has often resulted in urban landscapes and environments of variable and sometimes very poor quality".

Crawford (2000) inferred that the image of today's cities is eroding because efforts and financial resources are spent to provide circulation expediency for private automobiles without real concerns for humane environment for people. Before that, Bradshaw (in Chapman, 1996: 118) argued that the impact of a good public environment on image and attraction is enormous where pedestrianization in particular should be a central feature in spatial thinking. He, however, observed that a complete elimination of traffic is not the answer in all circumstances as spaces themselves too often lack

informality and are over-planned and detailed; economic decline from out-of-town development demands improved central access for at least some vehicles, which can then be restrictively managed; and vehicular movement is often seen as making streets safer.

Short (1996: 414-437), discussed city image from a different perspective where he concluded that competition among cities is at global, not just national or regional levels where appropriate image is of crucial importance in order to improve the relative standing of a city in comparison with others not only in terms of the physical environments but also in the quality of life, services and management, abilities to attract investments and tourists, career opportunities and political stability. However, due to centuries of cultural contact through trades, colonization, education and migration, an authentic local or national culture is almost non-existence (Ellin, 1996). Melvin M. Webber (in Wingo, 1963) also rejected the contention that there is an overriding universal spatial or physical aesthetic of urban form. Hence, in this globalized world, it is important to mediate the impact of globalization with elements peculiar to each place in order not only to determine what contributes to the identity of a place but more importantly to place-ness, and find ways in developing it. Trancik (1986: 114) acknowledged that most city developments, new towns, and suburbs are environments that have failed to create a concept of place that responds to local, social, cultural, or physical environment. Perhaps, the issue of a place should be evaluated from a different perspective since urban place-ness is multidisciplinary that cut across all social groups (Clay, 1987). The situation may require a shift of lateral thinking in order to interpret what is happening in the present multi-functional and pluralistic cities (Chapman, 1996: 82). Perhaps, a combination of universal qualities of good places and the qualities peculiar to a region or place could be valuable in providing guidance for development of a place that can be considered 'appropriate'.

The issue of urban place-ness and/or placeless-ness has been subjected to many studies for quite some time now, beginning by the awareness triggered by Camillo Sitte in 1880s through his analysis of the effects of industrial revolution on human settlements

especially in Western Europe and the New World. The issue regained momentum after the World War Two notably through the works of Kevin Lynch (1960), Christoper Alexander (1966), and Jane Jacobs (1961), in response to widespread standardation of modern cities in terms of planning, building character, and materials used regardless of place, climate, people, and their culture. The issue, although arises during different eras and in different regions, generally is due to the same reason that technological development in various fields has caused mobility of people and goods, productions and consumptions of almost every material aspect of human life to significantly increase, improve and probably become more efficient. Nowadays, in the ever advancing technological, electronic and cyber world, the lack of attachment to a place can be more evident as people are more mobile, have more choices and can do almost anything at convenience. Richard Sennett (in Lennard, 1997: 5) argued that "people travel today at speeds our forebears could not at all conceive. The technologies of motion, from automobiles to continuous, poured concrete highways, made it possible for human settlements to extend beyond tight-packed centers out into peripheral space". Their increased mobility may lead them to be less aware and less attached to their surroundings (Chapman, 1996: 232). In fact, they can also carry out activities such as shopping and see other places without going out from their home and work place; and they can communicate with families and friends face to face via the virtual world of cyber networks. Another risk is that, as professional practice can now spread over the whole of the globe, the distinctive local conditions and circumstances may be ignored in favor of simplistic, transferable international solutions (Chapman, 1996: 232). The danger there is that the essential characteristics of cities, the cradle of civilization may be lost (Bob Cools in Lennard, 1997: 5). Therefore, understanding the forms of places and their evolutionary process, sharing experiences, encouraging local public participation in the design processes and evaluations are essential in developing visions or designs for the future of a place.

Towns and cities, especially their public places, need human interactions and interventions for them to be meaningful. According to Carter (2002: 173), "Oedipus (and Freud) would have agreed with Hannah Arendt's wise remark that the public realm, as

the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak". The quality of place-ness of human built environment associates with meanings that are imparted by people of a place. Meanings are culturally interpreted and affect people's interpretations of imageability, which contributes to the interpretation of the place quality (Harrison and Howard, 1982). Different cultures develop sensitivity to certain elements and as a result the cues become more salient, meaningful and noticeable to the observer from that culture. The noticeable differences are reinforced by the salience and meaning of the elements such as thermal changes, olfactory and acoustic cues that play a major role in the judgment of the quality, status and social identity of places (Rapoport, 1990: 273). The quality of urban place such as public open space as inferred by Carter (2002), therefore, cannot be measured based on international industrial standard of product quality. It is embedded in people's life and has to be evaluated and interpreted from the perspective of the locals.

1.1.1.2 Public Open Space and Town Users

The term 'agora' is often regarded as a synonym for public open space in an urban setting. It defines a particular kind of space, or place, with a distinctive physical form and political history. In ancient Greece, the meaning of 'agora' is "not only the place of political assembly, but the assembly gathered there" (Carter, 2002: 9). Although many studies, such as those by Cullen (1971), Bentley *et al* (1985), Moughtin (1992) and Carter (2002), acknowledged that streets play an important role as the channels for people to move through the urban fabrics that directly contribute to the 'vitality' of urban environments, there is little doubt though that, throughout history, the growth and development of the city square has to some extent epitomized the true quality of urbanity found in many of the world's great cities such as Piazza San Marco in Venice, Place de la Concorde in Paris, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Red Square in Moscow, Times Square in New York and many other places (Tom Muir in Chapman, 1996: 78-81).

Several early studies on the urban public open space typology of squares, or *agora* (Greek), or *piazza* (Italian), or *platzangst* (German) and, or *place* (French), however, mainly focused on the physical aspects without real concerns toward the use of the spaces by urban dwellers (Cooper and Francis, 1990: 10). The studies such as by Rowe and Koetter (1978), Krier (1979), and Rossi (1982) attempted to acquire some understanding of people's lifestyle, including their attitude to the world only through the character of the physical circumstances in which they occur, and "leave out those things that are not amendable to qualitative knowing" (Sandalack, 1998: 22). Cooper and Francis (1990: 9) also commented that "standard texts such as Gibberd's 'Town Design' deal primarily with sculptural arrangements of buildings and space, with almost no reference to their actual day-to-day use, except on visual or aesthetic level", which might lead to the creation of a place without meanings and placeless-ness. In relation to that, Trancik (1986) concurred that one of the reasons to the persistent urban design issues is because there is not enough human inquiry in the implementation of urban development as designers and planners are inclined toward emphasizing the quality of the physical aspects. Lynch (1960) himself tended to accentuate more on the physical determinants of path, edge, district, node, and landmark in his study of imageability even though the study was based on a population survey. However, in his later books, 'Managing the Sense of a Region' (1975) and 'Good City Form' (1981), he clarified and acknowledged that human activities were indeed a significant contributing factor to his earlier concept of imageability. Although physical attributes contribute to the physical presence of a place, according to Banerjee and Southworth (1990), ultimately it is the people (users) who make the place meaningful. Therefore, in an evaluation of an urban environment specifically of its public open space quality, the components of the spatial environment and the users are inseparable; that the cumulative evidence of the people's daily acts, the material settings in which they take place and their perception of that place should be evaluated together.

1.1.2 Local Issues

1.1.2.1 Place-ness in Urban Environment

According to Fryer (1979) and inferred by Salleh Buang (2006: 10), since World War II, the Southeast Asian region, particularly in Malaysia and Indonesia, has been undergoing a rapid urbanization process, which has been accompanied by an increase in the urban population. Globally, by the end of the twentieth century, 60% of the world's population lived in urban areas (Ribajournal, Feb. 2001: 12). In Malaysia, with a population of about 22 millions including citizens and non-citizens, the population statistics of 1998 showed that 59.1% of the population lived in urban areas with an average annual growth rate of 3.8% (http://www.windowstomalaysia.com.my/thenation>population>demography). The increase in Malaysian urban population is largely due to the rural-urban migration, growth of new urban areas and the extension of administrative urban boundaries. The government, on the verge of endorsing a new National Urbanization Policy (NUP), predicted that Malaysian urban population will be 75% by 2020 (Sarban Singh, 2006: 14, 32-33). However, the rapid urbanization process, which has resulted in the growth of urban population and new towns, and expansion of existing ones, was not accompanied by cohesive urban physical and social developments (Sarban Singh, 2006:32) that have led to incoherent urban image and placeless-ness (Shuhana Shamsuddin, 1997: 2-3, Johan Azmir Anis, 2000: 11). Therefore, two of the objectives of NUP are to develop a planned, progressive and sustainable town; and to create a conducive environment to encourage social development (Sarban Singh, 2006: 32).

The principle of Malaysian planning practice as stated in the 1996 Malaysian Senior Planners meeting is that Malaysian urban design should give emphasis to human development and social interaction for all groups within society as well as creating identity for the towns (Zainuddin Mohammad, 1996). Toward realizing the principle and

in conjunction with the celebration of World Town Planning Day in Kuala Lumpur on 17-18 November 2005, the Department of Town and Country Planning and Malaysian Institute of Planners had organized the two-day event centered on the theme of 'Planning Towards A Liveable City' highlighting "a set of implementable urban indicators that were identified in 1999 and categorized as the Malaysian Urban Indicators Network or MURNInet" (as reported in New Sunday Times, 6 November 2005; p.22). "Indicators that are policies orientated, facilitate states and local authorities to prioritize sectors of development and map out objectives" (Ibid). The six thrusts of the National Urbanization Policy 2006-2020 (Sarban Singh, 2006: 33) also echoed the same sentiments. However, the common planning and urban design practices adopted in Malaysia are seldom based on the observation of the way people behave in public spaces. Poor design of public open space in Malaysian town centers is also due to the lack of public participation and feedbacks in the design process (Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman, 2000). As a result, Malaysian planners and urban designers failed to provide a broader range of activities and a user-friendly environment that is 'appropriate' to the climatic, physical, social, and economic circumstances of Malaysian towns (Dolbani Mijan, 2000).

The National Forum on 'Development of Town Image in Malaysia' in early November 2000 at Langkawi's Aseana Resort, which was promoted by the Federal Department of Town and Country Planning (JPBD) (Dolbani Mijan, 2000), was triggered by the fact that Malaysian towns did not possess clarity of image and distinctiveness. The proceedings seek to find urban image that is reflective of Malaysian people and the culture without sacrificing the integrity of the nation. During the proceedings, five working papers were presented by three groups of individuals; they are controllers (federal and local government authorities dealing with urban planning and development), producers (developers, architects, planners, and landscape architects), and academicians (university lecturers and researchers). A working paper presented by Ismawi Zen (2000) forwarded an idea toward searching for Malaysian town image, which was modeled based on traditional Islamic cities such as Mecca and Madinah, or the cities that used to be under Islamic rule like Cordoba and Granada in Spain, Istanbul,

Dar al-Salaam, Samarkhand and Delhi. He made a comparison between Western cities such as London, Liverpool and Manchester in Great Britain as the country was the most advanced industrialized nation during the booming era of Western imperialism and those Islamic cities. He claimed that the main difference between the two was that, on one hand, Western cities prioritized material and economic gains and ignored the welfare of the general public except for the elitist groups. On the other hand, the development of Islamic cities was pillared on knowledge that the understanding of the religion would lead toward a harmonious relationship between people and their built environment, regardless of their social status.

Ismawi Zen further clarified that the image of Malaysian towns should reflect the culture of the people, and in a multi-racial country like Malaysia the concept of 'separate togetherness' should prevail in town centers through social interaction, communication and common needs. He stated that to promote an environment of public interaction and activity within a town center, every building such as government, financial, commercial and cultural centers with supporting development such as hotel, club, shopping and eating areas, should be developed around a plaza, a square, an enclosure and other types of pedestrian spaces. Ismawi Zen's idea was echoed by Zaini Zainul (2000) in his paper when he argued that the city of Paris is sculpted with strong concept of the negative voids (streets and plaza) where simple and impromptu activities promote neighborhood interaction and tourism opportunities that contribute to its unique identity. He implied that it is the interplay between the negative voids and the positive blocks filled with public activities that lend the image to the city. In general, all presented working papers inferred to the importance of public open space as a means of creating an image of a place. At the same time, they also agreed that it is the people who make a place 'a place', and this can be easily recognized and seen at best by others through their public life in their urban public open spaces.

1.1.2.2 Public Open Space and Town Users

People's role in the making of Malaysian great cities (Johan Azmir Anis, 2000: 11) is the concern of this research, yet, another thorny issue that has been propagated by the local media is the lack of social harmony and integration among various races in Malaysia (Ashraf Abdullah, 2000: 1) also will be briefly clarified. Through the *Dasar Ekonomi Baru*, or New Economic Policy, now in the middle of its Ninth Edition, the government tries to bridge the economic and social gaps between the three major races, namely the Malay, the Chinese and the Indians with the aim to promote racial integration. In 2001, Deputy Prime Minister then, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, expressed that the nation took national unity into account when it implemented the development plans right from the time of independence until now (The Sun, 2001: 6). He, now the Prime Minister, has reiterated the same agenda when revealing the latest edition of the plan in early 2006. Urban design and planning wise, however, the effort has been ineffective since most new urban developments, especially of public open spaces that have been taking place in Malaysian major towns, merely reflect political and architectural concerns without thorough investigation of users' behavior and activities (Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman, 2000). Mohd Khalid Harun (2000), Vice President of Real Estate and Housing Developers' Association of Malaysia, stated that in a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society like Malaysia, the city must fulfill an important role of maintaining racial harmony and unity. Although he did not refer to specific typological urban generation, he inferred to the importance of urban environment that prioritizes public open space development, which is capable of stimulating and mustering social interaction.

Rapoport (1976) argued that urban theories and planning actions should be based on the purposes of cities in social terms because of cultural variations. He expected that different cultures would have different ways in identifying urban environments. Robert Sommer (1969), a professor of psychology, when asked for his advice in reference to his expertise of college dormitories study rightfully said that "although we found these

opinions held at twenty dormitories in California, your situation in Salt Lake City or Toronto may be different, so borrow carefully from our findings". Sommer, as was then echoed by Rapoport, implied that the findings of similar research areas might not be applicable to different settings.

Contrary to the expectation of socio-cultural differences and variations, however, the studies on 'Identity of a Place' and 'Responsive Public Open Space', which were conducted respectively by Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997) and Dolbani Mijan (2000) in the context of Malaysian urban environments, concluded that the diversity of Malaysian cultural backgrounds contributes little toward the perception of the public places. The same scenario was also unearthed in a study of a small town of Pasir Mas, Kelantan that the perception of the town users toward the town bared inconsequential differences regardless of their ethnicity (Loh *et al*, 2006). Perhaps, the unexpected findings were due to the socio-culture of Malaysian urban public life that is based on the spirit of tolerance and accommodation, which has been painstakingly cultivated over the years (Lee, 2001: 3) after the darkest moment in the history of Malaysia when racial riot had broken out on the 13th of May, 1969. An understanding of Malaysian socio-cultural history, which is briefly presented below, may further explain the findings of the aforementioned researches.

"Cultures have been meeting and mixing in Malaysia since the very beginning of its history... Malaysia's cultural mosaic is marked by many different cultures, but several in particular have had especially lasting influence on the country... the ancient Malay culture, and the cultures of Malaysia's two most prominent trading partners throughout history; the Chinese, and the Indians... Although each of these cultures has vigorously maintained its traditions and community structures, they have also blended together to create contemporary Malaysia's uniquely diverse heritage...You can go from a Malaysian *kampung* to a rubber plantation worked by Indians to Penang's Chinese *kongsi* and feel you've traveled through three nations. **But in cities like Kuala Lumpur, you'll find everyone in a grand mélange**...Although Malaysia's different cultural traditions are frequently maintained by seemingly self-contained ethnic communities, all

of Malaysia's communities open their doors to members of other cultures during a religious festival--to tourists as well as neighbors. Such inclusiveness is more than just a way to break down cultural barriers and foster understanding. **It is a positive celebration of a tradition of tolerance that has for millennia formed the basis of Malaysia's progress.** " (http://www.interknowledge.com/malaysia>kaleideculture)

One common aspect that has always been taken into consideration by urban design research conducted in Malaysia such as the works of Noor Sharipah Sultan Sidi (1991), Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997), Dolbani Mijan (2000) and Affendi Ahamad (2004) is the ethnic background of the respondents. The issue of ethnicity has also been conspicuously heightened by local politicians and media throughout the years and would get more intense especially during election times as reflected by a report in the New Sunday Times (7 Mac 2004, p.1 – 4) just before the concluded general election. It is the ultimate aspiration of all Malaysians to live in harmony but insensitive racial related statements by the irresponsible politicians and medias, for whatever vested interests they have, only promote racial polarization and fuel distrust among the races. This research acknowledges that the population composition of Malaysian major towns typically consists of three major races, which are the Malay, the Chinese and the Indian. However, based on the findings of the previous researches that indicated little or no difference in the perception of urban environment by the ethnic groups and the quotation above, the issue is assumed to be more politically motivated than socially embedded thus is rendered to be insignificant in this research. Yet, a preliminary study and analysis will still be carried to ascertain the scenario.

The real concern in the public environments of Malaysian towns is not about social interaction, racial integration or preferences. Rather, the problem is in the approach and implementation of urban design programs that normally only circulated among the professionals (Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman, 2000) with little or no participation of the laypersons or the actual users. An example of such a case was Mahbob Salim's (1992) study of 'Aspects of Urban Design with Special Reference to Image and Identity

in Built Form', which concerned with building styles based on professional opinions rather than elements and qualities of a place that town users associated with. He only took opinions of a selected group of professionals that did not reflect the general population of a place, thus, his study contributed little to the image development and 'appropriateness' of the place. Nonetheless, at the end of his study, Mahbob Salim did acknowledge that in a pluralistic country such as Malaysia, an investigation was needed to establish the relationships between urban image and the groups of different social, demographic and cultural characteristics of the society. The shortcomings of Mahbob Salim's study and the weakness of Malaysian urban design practice in general were further reiterated by Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman (2000) when he concluded that the practice in Malaysia rarely took public opinions and feedback into considerations in the implementation and re-evaluation of urban developments of public realms.

Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997) examined identity of a place through perception and recognition by the residents of familiar elements within their urban neighborhood. She investigated the concept of distinctive character in terms of built form, usage and public activities. She found out that one of the components, which strongly constituted perceptual identity of a place by the residents, is public open space. The study, however, only considered the town center residents, and did not investigate the qualitative aspects of the public open spaces in relation to the general town users as a whole. As a place of public significance, a town and its public space should not be associated only with the residents but also to those who commute to and use it in a regular basis.

Kota Kinabalu City Hall (DBKK), on January 29-30, 2001, due to the problems confronting city and its community, had organized an urban planning symposium in an effort to ensure the physical and social developments of the town were well planned. Among the issues that were addressed; a widening gap between the rich and the poor, deteriorating building blocks, improper land use, rising traffic congestion and lack of green spaces (The Sun, Jan 27, 2001: 10). The discussion mainly focused on the maintenance, management, and economic aspects of the urban environment. The

symposium, which was organized to find the answers to the growing problems of Kota Kinabalu City, actually reflects the sustaining general problems faced by the towns in Malaysia. It is unfortunate that in trying to resolve the problems, the relevant authorities dealing with Malaysian urban planning and development have failed to recognize the core component of urbanism which is the town users that give life to the urban environment.

Malaysian public open spaces, such as *Dataran Merdeka* (Independence Square) in Kuala Lumpur (al-Attas, 2000: 3), the Red Square in Melaka, *Padang MPK* (MPK Field) in Kuantan (Shuhana Shamsuddin, 1997) and *Padang Merdeka* (Independence Field) in Kota Bharu (Nik Mohamed Nik Mohd Salleh, 1984) for examples, used to play an important role in the physical and social developments of the towns in which they were conceived. Those public spaces are still important in their respective context but their role as a place for daily public activities and gathering has since changed and become more nostalgic and ceremonial as the towns grow and develop. New public places, such as Bintang Walk in Kuala Lumpur (Johan Azmir Anis, 2000), *Dataran Putrajaya* (Putrajaya Square) in Putrajaya, which is a new administrative capital of Malaysia's federal government (Shuhana Shamsuddin and Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman, 2002), *Padang Mahkota* (Mahkota Field) in Melaka and *Dataran MBJB* (MBJB Square) in Johor Bharu, lack the social qualities of those early urban geneses. Unlike the continuous developments of public places such as in Rotterdam (Goossens, 1995), and Birmingham, London and Manchester (DoE, 1996, 1998) that generated public interests and participations through various means, the development of Malaysian urban public open space barely did so (Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman, 2000). Therefore, it is important that the development of urban spatial environment in a democratic society like Malaysia gives priority to people's aspirations and satisfaction by involving them in the spatial investigation and evaluation.

1.1.3 Summary

The current global preoccupations of urban designers, are with the qualities of urbanism in general, respect for tradition, preferences for developments of human scale, identity and/or place-ness of urban areas, and equally important the form and vitality of urban space. The issues have been addressed by various studies and theories such as those by 'Shaping neighborhoods' (Barton *et al*, 2003), 'Compact Cities' (Jenks, 2002), 'Urban Transformation' (Bentley *et al*, 1999), 'Urban Regeneration' (Colquhoun, 1995), 'Repressed Spaces' (Carter, 2002), 'Ten Benefits of Creating Good Public Spaces' (PPS, 2006a), and many others. The last two issues are highlighted in this research because they are currently the central concerns of urban design practice in Malaysia as emphasized by JPBD in 2005, Malaysian Institute of Planners and the new National Urbanization Policy (NUP) of 2006. In search for identity of place, Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997) discovered that urban public open space is one of the main attributes that contribute to Malaysia's urban identity. The finding was again highlighted by Dolbani Mijan (1999) in his responsive public open space study, elucidated by Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman's (2000) urban design method, and as stated by DoE (2000: 72), historic buildings, parks and open spaces make a great contribution to the character, diversity and sense of identity and place-ness of urban areas. The theses, as well as other earlier studies such as Moughtin (1992) and Lennard (1997), also emphasized on the important role played by the urban users in creating quality public life in the urban public open space. The real issue here is their lack of focus on the qualitative investigation of such urban place. The situation is more apparent in the development of Malaysia's urban spatial environment where public opinions and feedbacks have rarely been put to good use as the town users have barely involved at any stage in the development process that had led to the undesirable urban environment. Therefore, this research, in an attempt to better understand the problem, instill awareness to the lay public and those who are responsible toward the development of urban public realm, will evaluate the quality of the spatial places in terms of physical and functional elements respectively that shape their forms and contribute to the activities from the perspective of the users of such places.

1.2 Research Agenda

1.2.1 Scenario

Generally, there are two major categories of public open space in an urban environment, which are the streets and the squares (Krier, 1979, Moughtin, 1996). The focus of this research is on the square typology because of its significances as clarified in the following Chapter 2. However, as was elucidated by Ahmad Bashri Sulaiman (2000), creating such public open space in a town center is not a norm in the practice of planning, urban design and architecture in Malaysia. A lot of ideas put forward are borrowed, unfortunately, without thorough investigation and understanding of the local needs, and the significance of such spatial places to the environment. The lack of understanding of the implications of urban public open space development is evident in the newly launched National Urbanization Policy (NUP) 2006-2020, in which one of its six tenets is "to create a conducive urban living environment with a distinct identity" (Sarban Singh, 2006: 33). In its clarification, the emphasis on public open space is only implicit in creating "public amenities of recreational areas" (Ibid). Such spatial entity is not only recreational but also economic, social, political and cultural. More importantly, it has to have a sense of place. The policy, therefore, is only successful in revealing the lack of understanding among the policy makers.

The issues of distinctiveness and place-ness of urban living environment are related to the urban physical entities together with the presence of public activities, thus, need to be seen from the perspective of the town users in general and not just of the professionals. As found out by Shuhana Shamsuddin (1997), Dolbani Mijan (2000) and Ismawi Zen (2000), the effort needs to focus on the urban public realms, especially on the public open spaces and their constituent components, as they are the places that could project imageability of a town in a broad sense, foster social interactions, attract public gatherings and activities. There is abundance of existing urban public open space theory but it was found to be insufficient to fulfill the intention of this research, which is

attempting to be more users oriented in its qualitative investigation. Thus, the following assumption, research aim, questions and objectives are established.

1.2.2 Assumption

An assumption of this research is that the idea of 'appropriate urban public open space' depends on the simultaneous fulfillment of the qualities of physical viability and functional vitality.

1.2.3 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to search for the qualities that contribute to the idea of 'appropriate urban public open place'.

1.2.4 Research Questions

The key research question is 'what are the qualities that contribute to the appropriateness of urban public open space in Malaysian town center?'

The subsidiary questions this research will deal with are;

i. What are the qualities of the physical elements of urban public open space that contribute to their viability?

ii. What are the qualities of the functional elements of urban public open space that contribute to their vitality?

iii. How do qualities of physical viability and functional vitality contribute to the appropriateness of public open space?

1.2.5 Research Objectives

The objectives of research are as follows:

i. To evaluate the quality of viability of the physical elements of urban public open space that is based primarily on town users' satisfaction levels

ii. To evaluate the quality of vitality of the functional elements of urban public open space that is based primarily on town users' satisfaction levels

iii. To establish the appropriateness of urban public open space based on the qualities of physical viability and functional vitality

1.3 Definition of Key Terms

There are four key terms that are related to each other in this research. They are 'appropriateness', 'physical viability', 'functional vitality' and 'town user'. A discussion and clarification of their derived definitions and relationships are carried out in Chapter Two. Nonetheless, they are briefly defined as below;

i. Physical Viability:

Physical viability is defined as having a capacity to adapt and respond to changing circumstances as well as an ability to stimulate improved changes. It is measured primarily based on user satisfaction.

ii. Functional Vitality:

It is a measure of functional elements that is defined as having an ability to attract or contribute to human activity of a place, and is also gauged primarily based on user satisfaction.

iii. Appropriateness:

An appropriate quality is attained if both aspects of physical viability and functional vitality qualities are met.

iv. Town Users:

Town users are people who frequent a town and are familiar with the environment regardless whether they are residents or non residents.

1.4 Research Methodology

This research investigates the qualities of physical and functional aspects of urban public open space in the context of Malaysia's town centers based on town users' satisfaction with the components as contributing toward the spatial appropriateness (see Chapter 2, section 2.2). Generally, there are two approaches to studying urban public open space. The first type of research is a qualitative method in which the collected data are analyzed qualitatively such as through descriptive analysis. This method is widely employed in urban design research such as those by Lynch (1960), Rapoport (1977) and Moughtin (1992), and recommended by Berg (2004). The second type of urban design research is a quantitative method, in which the data are statistically analyzed, that was adopted in urban spatial analysis such as those by Plummer and Shewan (1992), and Hillier and Hanson (1984). Although the two approaches have different techniques of data analysis, both share several similar techniques in collecting the data, such as through field survey, interview, field observation and archival search.

This research adopts a case study approach because this method allows in-depth inquiry into the subject under study (Lynch 1960, Yin 1984, Sandalack 1998, Dolbani Mijan 1999, Merriam 1998, Salah Ouf 2001). This research investigates a major Malaysian town center as a case study, hence, a complete understanding of the origin and development of that particular urban form is necessary. Trancik (1986:114) argued that the continuity of time with successive urban layers intact was lacking in modern urban development pattern because there was not enough inquiry and understanding in the historical development of the urban form. Thus, it is important for this study to evaluate the evolution of the case study town as a whole, recognize its origins, trace its

layers of social, physical and functional developments, and establish the relationships between them over time. Since Malaysia's urban developments, in general, have not been well documented, therefore, the first effort of this research is to morphologically analyze the historical and physical evolution of the town.

According to Sandalack (1998), morphological approach could be a very effective tool in understanding environmental evolution of a town. Her study seeks to understand urban historical development of a Canadian Prairie town in the physical terms by recognizing the town genesis, and follow its subsequent changes. However, as argued by Moudon (1997), urban morphologists tend to focus only on the tangible results of social and economic forces. This is seen as a shortcoming of the approach as admitted by Sandalack in the conclusion of her thesis. Therefore, in the analysis of this research that is based on town users evaluation of the urban spatial environment, morphological study alone is insufficient. Initially, the morphological study is useful as it provides the basis of understanding the urban historical development; subsequently, other techniques such as field observations of the spatial components and environment as well as of public activities, and users' perception of a place are necessary to achieve the objectives of this research.

According to Berg (2004) and Zeisel (1981: 111), observation could generate data about the physical setting as well as people's activities and the relationships needed to sustain them; about expected uses, new uses, and misuses of a place; and about opportunities and constraints that environments provide. Observation in the form of visual survey is an examination of the form, appearance and composition of a town or city, and is mostly recorded such as in forms of simple maps accompanied by sketches, photographs and brief notes (Spreiregen, 1965). The intention of (visual) survey is to gather data at a particular point in order to describe the nature of existing conditions, or identify standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or to determine the relationships that exist between specific events (Cohen and Manion, 1989). Although this research deals with a multi-dimensional nature of urban environment, it focuses on the interrelationships of only two aspects, which are the physical and functional

components of urban public open space. Lo, Yiu and Lo (2003) Friedmann (1978) and Babbie (2001) suggested that since the components are influenced and related to other aspects of urban environment, field observation is the best way to record them in their natural setting.

Moughtin (1992), Chapman (1996) and Lo, Yiu and Lo (2003) argued that environmental design in general involved an interactive and continuous process in which individuals designed and influenced their physical environment and, in turn, the environment influenced their behavior. The complex interplay between a person and the environment generates two discrete but interacting variables, which are the person variables and the environmental variables. The complexity and vastness of the person-environment interface, which involves many different disciplines such as sociology, psychology, law and landscape design, requires the study to acquire information from various different sources such as observation, interview and users' survey. At this early stage of its development, at least in Malaysian architectural context, theoretical or conceptual definition of the urban spatial environment is almost non-existent. As such, in order to initiate an understanding of the intricate relation between a person and his designed environment, according to Pomeranz (in Krasner, 1980), any attempt to define and conceptualize the subject matter should be explorative and descriptive in nature.

Friedmann (1978) and Creswell (2002) suggested that in an environmental design evaluation, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods should be used because it is more appropriate to deal with the complex nature of the environment and at the same time minimize the problem of differences relating to validity and reliability of data measurement and assessment. According to Bianchini and Landry (1994: 38), objective data can be quantified and measured, whilst subjective data can only be assessed and judged. They further argued that in looking at something as complex as a city it is unlikely that a simple set of quantitative data will provide an accurate picture. It is always necessary to read this data in the light of local conditions and to understand the relationships between types of data. Therefore, both methods of quantitative and

qualitative are considered relevant for this research. However, as the nature of this study is to better understand an urban phenomenon of public significance based on town users' perception, it means that this research will be primarily explorative and descriptive since it analyzes an existing urban environment and explains its process of development, and also prescriptive because it will provide justification and direction for the design and development of the environment. The quantitative method plays a subsidiary role especially to quantify supporting data of the qualitative work and to provide basis for sampling and comparative groups of an intensive case study of this research. A more detailed explanation of the research methodology is provided in Chapter 4.

1.5 The Case Study

A case study approach was utilized because it was considered to be the best method when dealing with human built environment. According to Merriam (1998), this approach would be able to illustrate in detail factors that contributed to the phenomena of urban place study. This has been proved by many studies such as those by Lynch (1960), Sandalack (1998), Dolbani Mijan (2000), Hassanuddin Lamit (2004) and Lo, Yiu and Lo (2003). These studies were carried in different countries all over the world, such as The United States, Canada, Malaysia and Hong Kong, but dealt with only one specific urban context. For this research, Kota Bharu town center, Kelantan, Malaysia was selected based on several justifications. Further clarification of the selection criteria of the town center is presented in Chapter 4, Section 4.8 and its morphological study is carried out in Chapter 5.

1.6 Limitations of the Research

This research acknowledges that the issues of urban public open space were multi-dimensional wherein cultural, economic, political, climatic, architectural and behavioral as well as many other aspects were inter-related to each other. However, this study was only limited to the study of the physical and functional elements of square typology (in a selected Malaysian urban environment) because, as were highlighted by PPS (2006c), Lang (2005) and exuded by Chapman (1996: 137), they were the two tangible variables most likely to affect the quality of the urban spatial places. It was necessary for this research to scope down the discussion to be better focused. However, this might contribute to the limitation of its findings.

This research also acknowledges that religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds and other socio-cultural associations of the town users might influence their perception and satisfaction levels with the urban spatial environment and its elements. However, those aspects were not fully explored on their own for the justified reason that there were insignificant differences among Malaysian urban population toward their built environment (see Section 1.1.2b). A preliminary investigation would still be carried out to ascertain the situation. In certain circumstances though, their influences were unavoidable and still accounted for in the reasoning of why the users felt satisfied or dissatisfied with the concerned elements. In other words, their influences were only considered to be peripheral. This delimitation was considered necessary due to the immense scope of work involved if all the aspects were to be explored in greater depth. This was seen as a limitation to the findings of this endeavor.

This study was also limited to the town center area because, as argued by Worskett (1969), Kostof (1992), Moughtin (1996) and many others, it embodied the essence of the character of most towns. A town center is where the public come spontaneously to find satisfaction and solace (Frederick Gutheim in Wingo, 1963); it is a place that has historical continuity (Trancik, 1986), the genesis of a town (Kostof, 1992), and the life of the people (Gehl, 1980). Although the focus of inquiry was in the area

that was defined as a town center by the local planning authority rather than the whole town itself or the central topographical areas of the town, the justification in the selection of the case study town, which was Kota Bharu town center, was still governed by the criteria of a town center as a place. Since a case study approach was adopted, the findings might not be applicable to other places and towns.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1 presents the overall structure of this research. It states the research problem, outlines the main issues such as the study of concept of place and its relation to place-ness in urban environment, and the relationships between urban public open space and town users. It also states the aim, objectives, and discusses the relevant research approaches and introduces the methodology for the research. Finally, this chapter highlights the limitations of the research.

The following two chapters present the review of the literature relating to the subject matter under investigation. There are two important aspects that are considered vital and need to be explored in the investigation of this research. The first aspect, which is covered in **Chapter 2**, relates to the existing theories and concepts either they are in urban design or in other areas of knowledge that assists in defining the term 'appropriateness' and the concept of this research, which is 'appropriate urban public open space'. Since the examination of the research is on the qualities of urban public open space, specifically focusing on the spatial typology of square, an understanding of the components that constitute the spatial places is necessary. Thus, the urban spatial place and its components, which are the second concern of this research, are clarified in **Chapter 3**. Guided by these two chapters, **Chapter 4** explains the methodology and procedure that are adopted in this research. It establishes the choice and rationale of the selected methodology of urban morphology, field observation and users' perceptual evaluation. A detail account of the data collection procedures and the measuring

instrument are also presented in order to substantiate the validity and reliability of the research findings.

A case study approach initiated through an urban morphological study is adopted in this research because it allows an in-depth understanding of the origin and development of a particular urban form. However, after lengthy archival search, it was found out that there has been no extensive study done, neither a complete documentation of the case study town available. Therefore, the first analytical investigation of this research is to reconstruct the historical and physical evolution of the town, which is presented in **Chapter 5**. The following two chapters present further analyses of the case study town. There are two main components of the spatial environment that are subjected to the investigation; they are the physical and functional components. **Chapter 6** examines the town users' satisfaction level with the physical elements of the urban public open space, whilst, in **Chapter 7**, the functional elements of the spatial place are analyzed.

Discussions and cross-analyses of the two set of data in relations to the spatial settings in order to establish the appropriate qualities of the concerned components and the spatial environments of the town are carried out in **Chapter 8**, which also consists of specific recommendations for the case study town as well as general recommendations for the towns of Malaysia. These recommendations illustrate how qualities of the spatial-physical viability and functional vitality can contribute to the appropriateness of urban public open space, thus alleviate the problems of urban 'placeless-ness' and the overall urban spatial quality of Malaysia. Finally, this chapter summarizes the main findings and highlights the implications and contributions of the research to the existing body of knowledge. The planning and urban design implications of the findings, suggestions for further research into this area and a general conclusion conclude the discussion of this challenging yet fruitful endeavor.

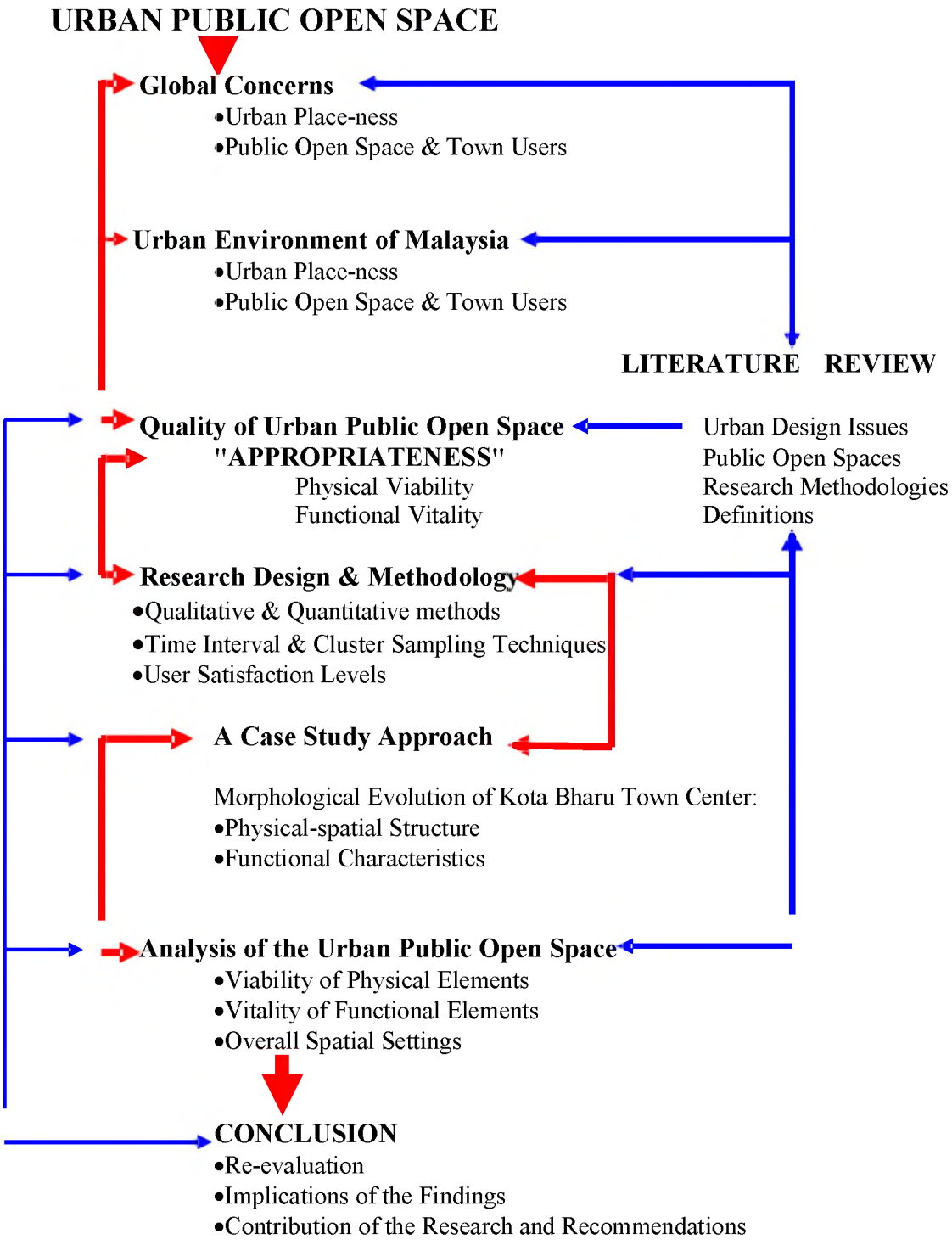

Figure 1.1: Structure of the Thesis

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