



THE SPATIAL DESIGN OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED SOUP KITCHENS IN KUALA LUMPUR

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Abstract

The goal of soup kitchens is to relieve the marginalized members of society of food insecurity by providing them with food and basic household necessities. There is limited information surrounding the spaces of soup kitchens and its ability to facilitate socialization; more so in Malaysia. This study aims to investigate the spaces that can promote socialization in soup kitchens and identify the effectiveness of the soup kitchen spaces present in select case studies in Kuala Lumpur. Through literature reviews, case studies, questionnaires and interviews, the Medan Tuanku Feeding Centre and Kechara Soup Kitchen were investigated. Out of the 15 soup kitchens reviewed, 11 of them were known to facilitate socialization, all of which have kitchens and dining areas. This contrasts with the two case studies which have only either one of those spaces. The findings revealed how the space responds to the unique functions of each study, be it oriented to the public or geared towards its external activities. An understanding of the roles and functions of the case studies leads to the suggestion of modifications which could potentially improve the functions of the buildings. As for one of the case studies, the suggestions were reviewed among the volunteers with mixed but mostly positive response. Despite having some overlap in their services, both case studies have spatial designs that are heavily dictated by their unique functions and tailored to effectively execute them.

Keywords: marginalized, necessities, soup kitchens, spatial designs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word 'humanitarian' implies the act or desire to invest effort in the wellbeing of members of society and humanity in general (Barbosa, 2015). In the age of urbanization, the humanitarian scope has extended to social and financial welfare in cities. Feeding and distributing food and other forms of support to the needy is a gap in welfare service filled by various non-government organizations (NGOs) that run soup kitchens and food sharing programs (Yeoh, 2017). In Malaysia, some examples include Kechara, PERTIWI and Need to Feed the Need (NFN) (Penang Institute, 2015). Architects wear the social responsibility to have confidence in their ability to create better living environments and improve the quality of living (Jubany, 2011). This study believes that this social responsibility should extend to humanitarian efforts that deal with the marginalized groups present in many communities. Soup kitchens and food banks are among the building typologies that are dedicated to alleviate hunger in places where poverty is a big issue. Whether many are aware or not, food insecurity is a global issue and part of Malaysia's population is also at risk of hunger. As of 2014, homelessness in Kuala Lumpur (KL) involved approximately 1,500 individuals (Kechara, n.d.), who certainly lack the resources to provide adequate sustenance without support from others. This gives importance to the soup kitchens operating in Malaysia.

For architects to design effective spaces, there must be consideration of human behavior and the psychological needs (Akbari, 2016). When dealing with spaces as deeply embedded in community such as food sharing spaces (Morrow, 2018), there exists a need for designers to know the needs of the users and make them key considerations in the spaces they design. This study reviews the spatial and architectural aspects of existing soup kitchens in Malaysia that have fixed building space to unveil the initial design intentions of the spaces. It is hoped that the changes in the space by continuous use can be understood. More importantly, this study should shed light on how the design of these spaces responds to the needs of the users and service providers in the space.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2014, Federal Territories Minister, Tengku Adnan, issued a ban on soup kitchen operations within a two kilometer radius of Lot 10, located in the city center of Kuala Lumpur (Yeoh, 2017). Tengku Adnan claimed that the problems related to the soup kitchens prior to the ban include worries of hygiene, diseases and public cleanliness (Penang Institute, 2015). He also raised concerns that the soup kitchen clients, namely the homeless and the poor, would not feel the need to find jobs and become lazy

(Mohd Adib et. al, 2018). This lack of understanding of the users of soup kitchen also led to some displeasure among people advocating support for the needy (Penang Institute, 2015). This ban was met with mixed reception, but initiated public participation on policies concerning the needy and urged the authorities to take careful action to remedy the supposed issues involved with food distribution to the poor (Penang Institute, 2015).

One of the resolutions that came out of the public stir and dispute this ban caused was to ban only mobile soup kitchens within the said radius (Penang Institute, 2015). This provides some indication that the problem lies in the state of the temporary soup kitchens set up on vacant parts of the urban scape. Of the few NGOs that can afford to have fixed soup kitchens, or have the luxury to use a dedicated building, little to no study has been done in terms of the architectural factors affecting the success of these spaces. To remove negative perceptions from this charitable act, the study believes that understanding the spatial aspects and environmental psychology to soup kitchens are important and will aid future soup kitchen set ups.

Soup kitchens in Malaysia

A recent study on the effectiveness of food sharing initiatives around the world shows that Malaysia, specifically Kuala Lumpur, ranks 29th among 100 other selected cities with the most ICT- mediated food sharing initiatives (Davies, et al., 2017).

A study by Mohd Adib et. al (2018) reviews some of the initiatives done in Malaysia to deal with homelessness. This includes a number of homeless shelters. However, the focus of the study is soup kitchens, which have also been discussed at length. In downtown Kuala Lumpur alone are about a dozen soup kitchens (Yeoh, 2017).

Operating in various locations in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights is Pertiwi Soup Kitchen (Mohd Adib, Hj. Hussin, & Ahmad, 2018). Their website writes that Pertiwi Soup Kitchen serves dishes containing vegetable, rice, and protein to between 550-750 people per night (PERTIWI, n.d.). Additionally, Pertiwi Soup Kitchen occasionally provides free medical and grooming services from their often-larger group of volunteers (Yeoh, 2017).

Kechara Soup Kitchen is also a soup kitchen operation that aims to alleviate the burden of food insecurity through the “Hunger Knows No Barriers” program. They distribute food to various areas in Kuala Lumpur and usually operate from Monday to Friday (Mohd Adib, Hj. Hussin, & Ahmad, 2018). Their soup kitchen space includes a mobile kitchen van from which food is distributed on weekdays (Kechara, n.d.). Being one of the top non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the country (Mohd Adib, Hj. Hussin, & Ahmad, 2018), Kechara Soup Kitchen also operates a permanent

soup kitchen in a dedicated shoplot which began operation in September 2010. Beyond distributing food to the poor, the soup kitchen also includes laundry services, resting facilities and employment consultancy (Kechara, n.d.).

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Studying existing soup kitchens in Kuala Lumpur and the effectiveness of their spaces is an important step towards improving initiatives that serve the needy in Malaysia's communities. More importantly, it is a step towards understanding these rarely investigated typologies. Through a good understanding of the selected case studies, designers can make rational and informed design decisions that will hopefully produce holistic designs that bring measurable impact to the needy. It will also help establish an understanding of the needs and desires of the needy in architectural and design terms.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study reviews the architectural elements of soup kitchens in Malaysia from a spatial perspective. The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To determine if the spatial design of selected soup kitchens in this study can facilitate socialization and create a community atmosphere.
2. To review the effectiveness of the spaces and develop recommendations for improvement in the spatial design of the soup kitchens.

5. METHODOLOGY

To achieve the previously mentioned objectives of the study, an appropriate research methodology is crucial. In choosing between a qualitative or quantitative study approach, this study has opted to employ qualitative methods such as case studies and interviews as it appears to be more suited to the goals of this study.

To justify this reasoning, it is beneficial to discuss the objectives of a research. The study aims to gain an insight on the architectural component of food sharing spaces; something that is not heavily explored in previous literature, especially within the local context. Qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding concepts, thoughts and experiences (Streefkerk, 2019). It is also a method for research that aim to produce ideas, provide insights on a problem, and reveal trends in thoughts and opinions (Snap Surveys, 2019). This method is used in favor of a quantitative study, which is meant to be applied when examining and verifying theories or hypotheses. In the case of this study, no theory is being tested.

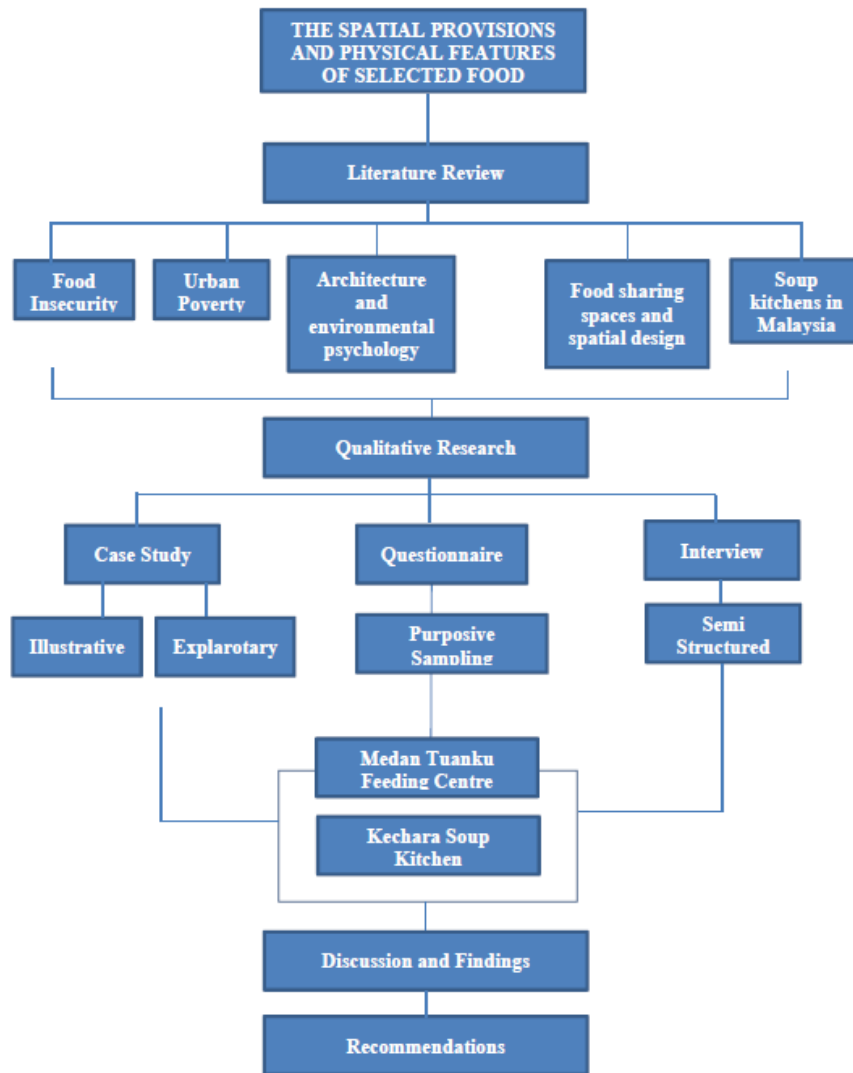


Figure 1: Flow of methodology applied in the study

6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: The distribution of all the spaces present in the soup kitchens

	S G K	B E	CS	G K	C C	GS K	JP	M J	BI		NR	A1	A 2	A3	A4	WC K	Tot al
Dining Area	/	/	/	/	/			/	/		/	/	/		/	/	12
Kitche n	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/		/	/	/			/	13

Restroom		/				/	/	/	/								6
Beverage Counter				/	/							/					3
Storage			/	/		/	/		/			/					7
Meeting room			/			/	/	/									4
Food Pantry	/		/	/					/								5
Serving counter						/	/						/	/	/		6
Shops			/				/		/			/		/			5
Garden	/											/	/	/			4
Waiting/ Queuing area						/	/	/				/	/		/		7
Foyer				/										/		/	3
Office																	1
Library/education space											/	/					2
Help desks										/							2
Lounge																	0

Playground														/			2
Laundry											/						1
Facilities Socialization	/	/	/	/	/			/		/	/	/			/	9	

The table above shows a distribution of all the spaces present in the soup kitchens in the reviewed literature. The space matrix illustrates what spaces each soup kitchen have in common and whether its social qualities are mentioned in the same study.

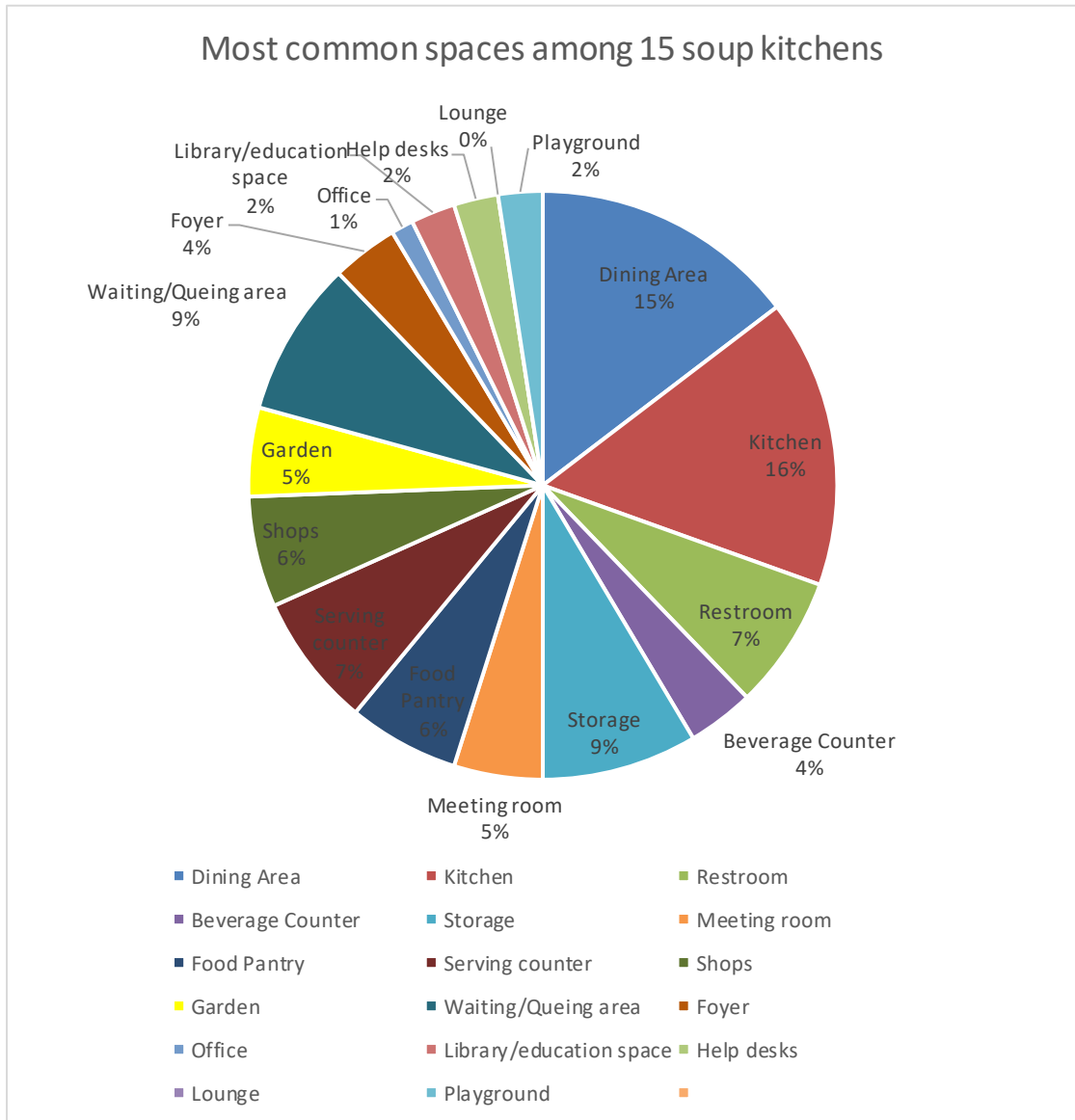


Figure 2: Common spaces among 15 soup kitchens

Based on the findings above, it can be seen that the most commonly found spaces between the case studies are the dining area (15%) and kitchen (16%) spaces respectively. This is then followed by a waiting/queing area and storage space, both being at 9%. On the opposite spectrum, playgrounds, libraries/educational space, help desks, lounges and offices are the least common spaces found in these soup kitchens.

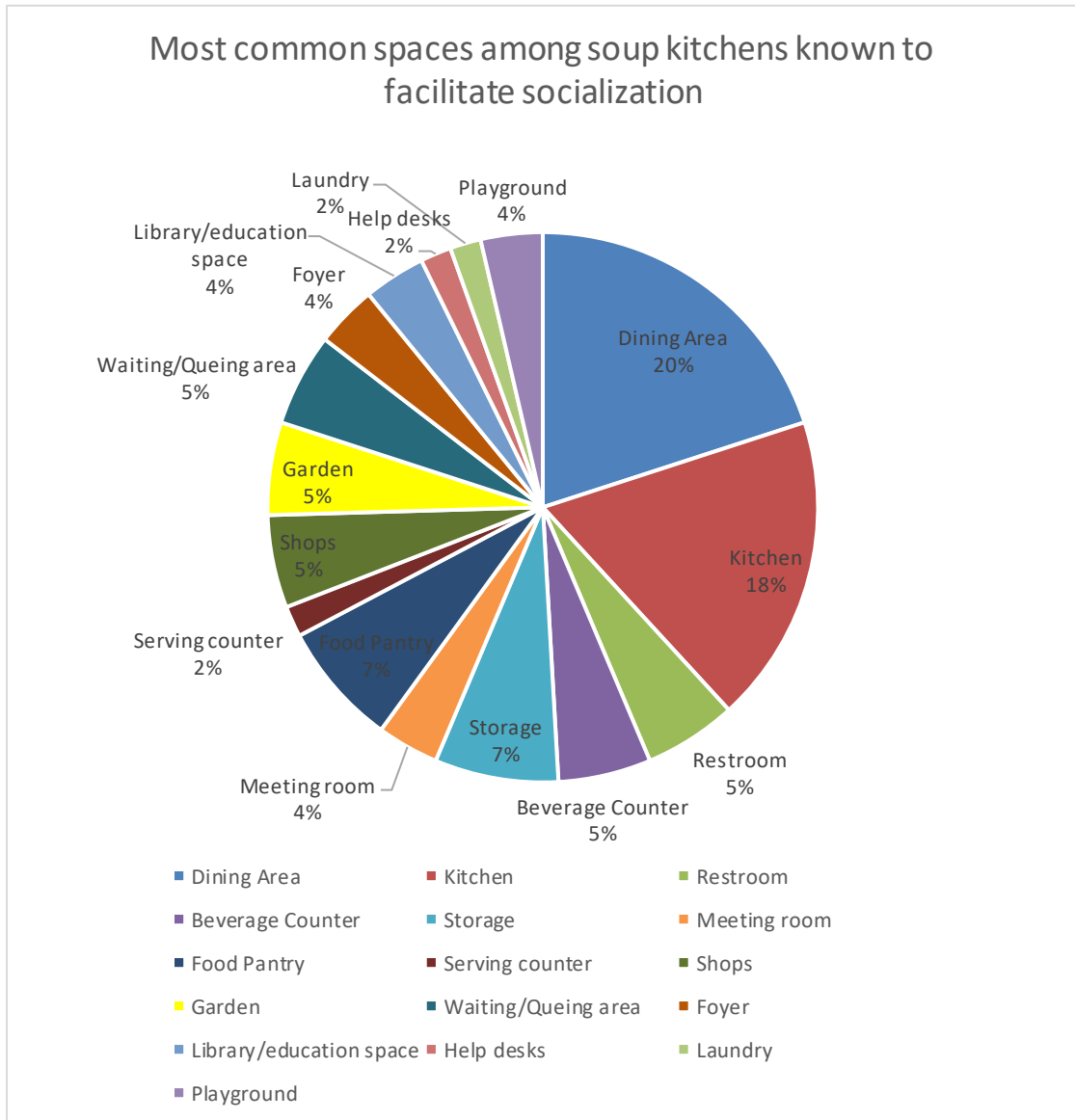


Figure 3: Common spaces among 15 soup kitchens for socializations

Out of the 15 soup kitchens studied, 11 of them were found to be associated with social activity, with mentions of the attendees visiting not only to receive meals but also for socialization. Between these eleven soup kitchens, All of them have dining areas and all except one have kitchens. These appear to be the most crucial spaces for facilitating socialization in soup kitchens. The food pantry is a more commonly occurring spaces between these eleven soup kitchens, sharing the same percentage as a storage space. This is followed by gardens, beverage counters, shops, waiting areas and rest rooms.

7. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study closely examines the architectural and spatial features of two soup kitchens in Kuala Lumpur. At the end of each investigation, recommendations are made in an aim to improve the spatial quality and functions of the case studies. These recommendations are largely based on the findings from the case studies, reinforced by the relevant existing literature and influenced by the researcher's notions. While these recommendations are not completely baseless, further studies should seek to verify the viability of these suggestions by testing them with the major stakeholders of both case studies.

Another logical next step for research on architecture for the urban poor in Malaysia should, in a similar manner, investigate homeless shelters in Malaysia. Perhaps by doing so, a record of the existing building typologies serving the urban poor can exist, with at least one example per typology as a means of reference or benchmarking.

Given the charitable and non profit nature of these typologies, it is beneficial to go deeper into the study of these spaces so that they can achieve maximum impact with the consumption of minimum resources.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Based on the content analysis, it is still too soon to determine a standard guideline that all soup kitchens should obey, at least in Malaysia. In this study, the soup kitchens are of vastly different sizes and cultures. However, a few key spaces have been determined which can help encourage a healthy social atmosphere. Besides the two primary spaces previously mentioned, support spaces like playgrounds, libraries, and beverage counters help the soup kitchens appear more humane and welcoming, which is crucial for the segment of the community they aim to serve, often suffering from social isolation.

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