Public Awareness towards Conservation of English Landscape at Taiping Lake Garden, Malaysia

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Abstract

Taiping Lake Garden (TLG) is one of the remaining British legacies located in Taiping, Perak. TLG is facing the transformation of English landscape environment, and diminishing the public appreciation on its historical value. This study aims to investigate the transformation of TLG’s historical value in the current environment, and to propose suggestions in promoting public awareness towards conserving the historical value in historic garden. This study has assessed the public awareness through a combination of survey and case study. The outcome of this study could offer the landscape architecture industry to moving towards conservation of historic garden in Malaysia.

Keywords: English landscape; Taiping Lake Garden; public awareness; historical park conservation

1. Introduction

In European countries, there are few studies that have been conducted to explore the significance of conservation of historic garden. However, relatively little attention have been given to similar researches in the Malaysian context. Taiping Lake Garden (TLG) is one of the remaining British legacies that...
located in Taiping, Perak. TLG was created as the recreational centre for British officers and the increasing number of expatriates in Taiping during the colonial era. The design concept and the surroundings of TLG reminded the British residents of the Lake District of England, which is used by British poets and writers who inspired from landscape and natural environment of Highland Of Scotland (Taiping Municipal Council, 2012). This indicates how the British’s appreciated natural landscape environment with the significance of English landscape garden. Current view on the landscape today is different from views in the past. People viewed the park and its landscape as a sublime experience, like walking through a landscape painting and nature picturesque. There was plenty of undeveloped land, but people came to the park to partake in its fine creation. Unlike colonial architectural building in Malaysia, consciousness with regards to landscape environment conservation especially park or garden is still a new phenomenon. Towards creating historic value and quality living environments, the sustainability of the historic public park as invaluable heritage need to be protected for present and future generations.

For the past two decades, the historical public parks have been under threats from several aspects. These include public understanding on the actual purpose based on its historical value and landscape environment. There are common contentions among scholars that in the 21st century, people have changed, their leisure needs have changed and parks are designed for the leisure needs (Conway and Lambert, 1993). Public parks are emerging as one of the most important spaces in town. They are multipurpose public spaces that offer social, economic, and environmental benefits. To what extent could those transformations, and in the same time parks which have the significance related in historical value are also have to disappear? This eventually will indicate that modern societies ignored the existence and significance of historical value in their own public park. Without a specific conservation approach, the historical value in landscape environment of TLG might be forgotten by future generations. With respect to this, there is need to help in establishing general guidelines for conservation in historic garden in order to sustain the public park as heritage conservation. Hence, to understand the transformation of TLG, this study aims to investigate the transformation and significance of English landscape garden during British era and its relevance in present Public Park, towards reminiscing its historic value and quality of today’s living environment. The scope of the study is limited on the transformation of historic Public Park in TLG from British period (1884 – 1937) to the present.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of historical garden

Historical garden is built with "architectural or horticultural" considerations and it is "of interest to the public" because of its historical or artistic importance (The Florence Charter, Article 1, ICOMOS, 1981). The term ‘historic garden’ and ‘public park’ are used to refer the transformation of English landscape in public uses. According to O’Donnell (2004), historic garden is much more than merely an old garden. It is unique places as a living composition of plants and physical features and public can see the past throughout their own identity, culture and landscape character on that era (Conan, 1999). Historic garden serves as a visible of craftsman, a style, an age and a collective cultural history and holistically the process and product of man and nature: a landscape creation of mankind’s culture and nature’s scale of change. As living constructs of mankind and nature, historic garden is an ever changing, dynamic places that can be destroyed or renewed (Micouline, 1993; Melnick, 1997). Thus, it is an evolutionary evidence of the ‘ecological’, ‘biotic’ and ‘aquatic system’ of a specific place that has been and continues to be influenced by human culture, natural events and climatic conditions.
2.2. The style of English landscape garden

English Landscape Garden is defined as an informal, asymmetrical, ‘natural’ type of landscape. According to Hobhouse (2002), the style of English landscape garden is apparently with grassy meadows, serpentine lakes, gently contoured hills and artfully arranged clumps of trees, seem the very model of Englishness. In general, the typical English landscape would consists of undulating grass that leads somewhere down to an irregularly shaped piece of water over which a bridge arches, of trees grouped casually, with cattle or deer about the slopes and of houses and other buildings glimpsed in the middle or far distance (Hunt, 1993). Figure 1 shows the typical style of English landscape garden.

![Fig.1. The typical style of English landscape; (a) background of the hills in Lake District of England and (b) fascination of reflecting water in Loch Katrine, Scotland](image)

According to Hobhouse (2002), there are three evolving phases of development in 18th century landscape garden. The innovator of the first from the 1720s to 1740s, were Charles Bridgeman and William Kent. Bridgman’s and Kent’s garden mixed elements of the formal and informal and gave views into the countryside.

Physical landscape features such as statues, temples, pavilions and other garden buildings were an essential feature, especially in Kent’s design. The second phase was dominated by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown and his followers, their main masterpieces produced between 1750 and the 1780s where grass, trees, sky and reflecting water were its main elements. For many connoisseurs, the simple beauty of Brown’s parks characterizes the English landscape style. Meanwhile, the ideas that Bridgeman and Kent introduced in the early stages was greatly influenced in the third phase, the Picturesque Movement. The “picturesque”, however, criticized Brown’s and Repton’ compliance and called for a genuine romantic wildness symbolize by asymmetry, distant moor or mountains, moving water and crumbling ruins. The park’s naturalistic water features are an integral part of the picturesque English landscape.

2.3. The need for historical public park

The urbanization of many cities advances the need for green space in the community. This is to serve people the multiple objectives of environmental protection, recreation, and to meet people's ability to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. Parks are more than sceneries, they are social space in the cultural landscape, planted, managed, and continually reacted the nature that have been engineered (Benton, 2008). According to Alfonso (2003), parks are more than just a place to stay and relax in. It has an array of cultural, recreational and entertainment amenities and most of all improve the health of the public. Public parks as representative of urban green areas have played an excellent role that balances the
needs for city conservation against degradation of urban environment while keeping the rapid pace of urban growth.

Parks that have the historical value played an important role to consciousness and reminiscing of the legacy should not been abandon. Understanding a garden’s history is a primary vital ingredient in determining the correct manner and approach in which a park or garden should be conserved (McCullen, 2008). History in this context is meant not only in the strict chronological order of its landscape, infrastructural and land use but also in its available art historical data which are its cultural, social national and international events as well (McCullen, 2008).

In Malaysia, TLG is the best example represented the historic garden from British’s legacy that should be conserved. The character of English landscape style in TLG is a main reason why it should be unspoiled. This explains the important of appreciating the significance of English landscape garden during British era towards reminiscing British’s legacy and quality of today’s living environment.

2.4. Historical landscape conservation

Changing lifestyles of the present society has changed their view towards historical value in the old landscape garden. People nowadays tend to use park as escapism from stress, for the purpose of relaxing and recreational activities. Therefore they tend to depreciate the heritage value (Nur Zalina et. al, 2013; Lee et. al, 2013). This has become a challenge towards the attempt of preserving the historical values in old park.

Apart from the changing lifestyles, insufficient legislation and enforcement from relevant authorities also be a challenge toward the efforts of historical landscape conservation (Badaruddin et. al, 2008). This is due to lack of concern of some authorities to recognize and protect the cultural landscapes (Shabnam, 2009). The reason is because the difficulties in defining and identifying the values inherent in landscapes, yet it is hard to adopt the best conservation practices.

A landscape that is in need of conservation work can be treated in a number of ways, depending on the condition of the site, and the intent of the conservation work. The approach includes preservation, conservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. The establishment of Conservation Management Plan (CMP) will assists relevant authorities to determine what features, historical value or artefacts are most important to the overall design of the site. The success of CMP will depend on the inclusion of all the relevant professional inputs which their inputs of a specialized nature may be required depending on the demands of the site.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Study area

The location of this study is at Taiping Lake Garden, Taiping, located in northern Perak, Malaysia. This area covers 96.44 hectares and within the vicinity of Bukit Larut. It is situated in Mukim Tupai, District of Larut Matang and Selama, and magnificently sculptured with natural landscape. The design concept and the surroundings of TLG reminded the British’s residents of the Lake District of England, which is used by British poets and writers who inspired from landscape and natural environment of Highland Of Scotland (Taiping Municipal Council, 2012).

The evolution of the Lake Gardens has been a long process over a century, from abandoned tin mines to a lush tropical garden. The panorama that sprawled over an area of about 64 hectares, covered with 2,300 trees and the unique sight of the drooping branches of the 100 years old trees. Figure 2 shows the location of TLG and its master plan.
3.2. Data collection

This research involved two stages of data collection. The first stage was through the gathered primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by doing the site survey and observation. This is purposely conducted to search the issues and problem related to the topic studied, and to investigate the transformation of TLG. Literature survey and review of existing information serves as secondary data. It refers to historical data structures of variables that have been previously collected and assembled for some research problem. Literature review consists of examination of selected empirical research relevant to the particular concern of the study. This is to establish the background information about TLG and its historical value.

The second stage of data collection was obtained using questionnaires. Related questions about the historic landscape environment were grouped together within the questionnaire and distributed to the respondents in park (visitors). Section A (Question 1-5) surveys the information of demographic profile of the respondent who visits TLG. This includes gender, age and education level. Section B (Question 6-11) surveys on the specific uses and general frequency of occurrence uses of parks. Section C (Question 12-17) is surveying the responsiveness of respondent about the historic landscape environment and general knowledge of historical background in TLG. This is to determine the public awareness on the existence of British’s legacy and historical landscape element in TLG.

3.2.1. Procedure of the questionnaire survey

For the purpose of this research, 101 respondents were selected of the public in the city of Taiping. To get a reliable result, the surveyed sampling is assumed to be 10% of the population (Mitra and Lankford, 1999). However, if the population sample is too large, a sample population with sampling error less than 5% is justified. Referred to Malaysian Department of Statistic 2010, Taiping’s population was 245,015. Therefore, the calculated sampling error for 101 respondents is 3.5%, and was an appropriate estimate for this survey.

The public was chosen because they are potential users of TLG. The survey was conducted over a three days period (September 29 and 30, and November 18, 2012). The respondents were surveyed at the park on mornings and late afternoons. The distribution of the sample is stratified according to three
sections; section A (user distribution in park), section B (the usability and regularity in visiting park), and section C (the public awareness on historical landscape element in TLG).

4. Findings

This study has identified the significance of English landscape style and how the culture, tradition and life style between British’s and today’s people are influencing the changing uses in TLG. The heritage of TLG should be promoted as a historic garden in Malaysia. The summary of findings is as follows:

4.1. Transformation of TLG

TLG is facing the transformation of English landscape environment and diminishing the public appreciation on its historical value. During British period, TLG was created as the recreational centre for British officers and to celebrate the growing wealth and leisure of British residents and the upper classes populace. The colonial officers built park to cater to the recreation and leisure needs of their families, citizens and local affluent people such as royal family members. In other words, the main functionalism did not seek to develop public parks, but rather as their private sanctuary.

The transformation of park’s uses during British’s colonial period and today’s public park slowly decrease the public perceptions in appreciating the historical value in TLG. This current phenomenon has led to a negative public understanding towards historical park that they have been used. As a result, the combination of traditional and modern landscape element, emphasis on leisure needs and public lifestyle had blurring the uniquely English landscape identity in TLG.

The findings indicate that physical settings that exist in today’s park have been mixed with modern landscape elements. The materials and style that has been used are not suitable with English landscape characteristics. This is due to the changing functionalism of TLG during colonial era and today’s people needs. This study agrees with Enache and Craciun (2013) which indicates that the landscape must become the historical and cultural continuity by fitting the characteristics of the place so that it will conjoint the spatial continuity between the ancient and the recent, cultural and contemporary. Figure 3 shows the existing English landscape elements in TLG, and Figure 4 shows the inappropriate instant makeover of modern landscape facilities that spoiled the English landscape garden’s style.

![Figure 3](image_url)

Fig.3. Figure (a) to (c) indicates the heritage of English landscape style that portray British colonial reminiscence
Fig. 4. Figure (a) to (c) shows the inappropriate modern landscape elements that spoiled the English landscape style in the study area.

4.2. English landscapes: Significance of TLG as part of public park

English landscape garden style is indicates to expose the British’s legacy in Malaysia. The significance of correlation between English landscape style and natural environment has been recognized in TLG. The diversity of natural environment intertwined with English landscape style in TLG has changed the usability of the park from historic garden to public park. The result confirms that people visited TLG for common public recreation and leisure even though the park has its own unique character and historical value. 55.4% of survey respondents indicate that they go to the park simply to get some fresh air and outdoor recreation (Figure 4).

The transformation of TLG as a public park that used to fulfil leisure needs and demands for modern style on physical landscape element slowly decrease the historical value. The change of modern lifestyle that might focus to increase concern on health, quality of fresh environment and scenic view has changed the public perspective. The findings indicate that people come to TLG for exercise and leisure activities, but the special character of historic park were unnoticed.

This can be seen in the graph (Figure 5) where historical appreciation is the least percentage for the reason people visiting the park. However, the natural heritage that entails the English landscape style has remarkably attracted people to visit the park. This finding agrees with the previous research by Nur Zalina et. al (2013) where it is found that people enjoy the distinctive character of TLG by its picturesque natural scenery of hills, sky and clouds, lawns, trees and lakes which resembles the Englishness of landscape garden.

Fig. 5. The reasons of visiting TLG by visitors
4.3. Public awareness

4.3.1. General knowledge of TLG as oldest park
The public awareness indicates that 55.4% do not knows that TLG is the oldest park in Malaysia while 44.6% visitors are well recognise. Even it is a general knowledge, it does not mean that peoples who already recognise TLG is the oldest park in Malaysia, are really understand how to appreciate and respect when their used the historic park. This finding suggests, peoples still used the park as they viewed that TLG is one of the common public park in Malaysia. Thus, it lessens the appreciation of the history and awareness to preserve the lake identity as it is.

4.3.1.2. TLG as one of British’s legacy
The data indicates 76 of the visitors aware that the TLG is a British legacy. The remaining 25 of the visitors do not aware (Table 1).
This findings show that most of the visitor of the lake garden have a general knowledge on the first designer of the lake garden. Thus, this will make easier to educate the visitor since they are aware of the history value the lake holds.

Table 1. The awareness of visitors on TLG as one of British’s legacy

| Visitor’s awareness | Number of visitors | Percentage % |
|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Yes                 | 76                 | 75.2          |
| No                  | 25                 | 24.8          |
| Total               | 101                | 100.0         |

4.3.1.3. Historical landscape elements in TLG
The data indicates 66 of the visitors unable to identify any of the historical landscape elements in TLG while 35 of them able to point at least one of the historical landscape element (Table 2). This finding indicates that most of the visitors are not aware on the element that enhances the identity and historic key point in the park.

Table 2. The awareness of visitors on historical landscape element in TLG

| Visitor’s awareness | Number of visitors | Percentage % |
|---------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Yes                 | 35                 | 21.8          |
| No                  | 66                 | 78.2          |
| Total               | 101                | 100.0         |

4.3.1.4. Opinion of visitors to let public know the park’s history
The data indicates 98 visitors agree that it is important to let the public know the park historic detail information. Only three visitors feel that there is no effort requires for spreading the historic detail information (Table 3). This finding suggests that most of the visitors agree more detail information of TLG requires to be spread. Very little visitor’s feels that is no need to do it that may be because they feel enough for them to use the park as place to do activities (i.e. picnic, jogging, cycling etc).
5. Conclusion and recommendations

The findings established that there is a significance of English landscape garden that reminiscing British’s colonial legacy in TLG. It has remarkably proved that the style had address present people’s attraction for contact with nature. More concerted action is needed to promote public awareness to acknowledge the historical value of English landscape style in TLG. Transformation of landscape elements should be done with thorough studies and suitable to be adapted in to existing identity. Clearly, it has to be rejuvenated to ensure the historical values in today’s public park are protected without adding inappropriate modern landscape elements. Local authority and professionals in cultural landscapes play an important role to develop public awareness towards conserving the historical value in historic park or garden. The awareness can be gained through organizing of talks, workshops, exhibitions and seminars by authorities and non-government organization in order to encourage them to feel proud on inheritance of their historic garden. The adaptation of English landscape in study area could notify the next generation on the sentimental and value of historic design approach over 100 years ago. To promote the awareness and educate the public, existing elements of historical English landscape in TLG should be preserved to increase the public appreciation on the British’s legacy.

Transformation that took place at TLG has been seen as implication effect to certain group that supposed to be responsible for defining efforts toward conservation. The study suggests that landscape design guidelines should be deliberated to protect the historic physical landscape character and replacing a missing historic feature that compatible with the landscape environment. In addition, landscape design approach could offer the landscape architecture industry to explore the historical value through English garden style and moving towards conservation principle for historic garden in Malaysia.

The use of Conservation Management Plan will enable the understanding of the landscape history, and inventorying historical value of whole historic park. This will depend on the involvement of all relevant professionals’ inputs. For future research, it is important to understand how the significance, character, style, culture, and social history play a vital role in conserving the historical garden. It is also important to outline the conservation management plan that considers sustainability and usability of the existence historical value within today's public park.

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