Improving the Quality of Urban Lives through Public Art in Taman Suropati, Jakarta

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Abstract. A successful public space requires good infrastructures and atmosphere so that it can successfully invite and engage its users in various activities. The placement of public art in a city park may stimulate and invite active contacts rather than just passive observation, thereby promoting social interaction. The purpose of this study is to discuss the use public art as well as its role in improving social interaction in public space. The aesthetic quality in a work of art can transmit impulses resulting particular suggestions in human’s imaginative life and even attract activities that in turn create a great public space that sustains stronger communities. As a case study is public art in Taman Suropati, Menteng, Jakarta, which is known as the first garden city in Indonesia. In 1984, six statues from six pioneer countries of ASEAN were placed in this garden. This garden functions not only as a green open space and a recreational area for nearby residents but also as a place for some art communities to meet and hold their activities. The phenomena of a park that enhances community’s activities in Taman Suropati becomes the focus for the study especially how the idea of public art is initiated, sustained, and affected urban lives. This study also suggests some possibilities of improving urban life’s quality by using public art located at public spaces as the medium.

Keywords: Taman Suropati, public art, garden city, public space, urban life

1. Introduction
Social interaction is one of the most fundamental human needs, and living in a healthy society means the need of communication and interaction are fulfilled. A similar realization is included in Sustainable Cities and Communities, in the United Nation’s 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) established in 2015 [1]. A city can be seen as a potential hub for preserving social and economic growth which is driven by the subsistence of ideas, culture, science, and supported by productivity and social development of the citizens. Thus, a good living environment must be an environment that is adequate and supportive to generate social interaction. A city’s potentiality in supporting social interaction is shown through the public spaces.

Public art is an artistic expression of artist and community that can be found in various forms, materials and processes, both installed permanently or temporarily in a public space [2]. The practice of public art includes a collaboration of stakeholders, including the authority, artists or designers, and community members in order to promote a sense of belonging. Public art may contribute to the enrichment of public realm, the success of place making and the development of cultural and social capital [3]. Public art usually relates to local culture and establishes history, memory, the sense of notable event, as well as reflecting the belief system and at the same time, maintaining the city’s identity.
Every installation of public art has its rationale towards improving the quality of the living environment and the urban community. Public art plays an important role for the improving the quality of urban life in the following manner [4]:

- Reflecting and expressing city’s identity
- Celebrating significant people and places
- Telling the stories and histories of a place
- Contributing to a sense of pride and belonging to the community
- Improving the attractiveness of an area.

Arguably, in developing countries like Indonesia, there is a relatively less awareness of the role of public art in improving the quality of urban life compared to Western countries. People still question the connection of public art to urban landscape and to extend of public art contribution to the improvement of the quality of urban life. This lack of awareness leads to some debates of the public art’s meaning, placement and appreciation. Moreover, the practice of public art should respond to a particular setting of a public place, such as its use and significance history [5].

The aim of this paper is to analyze public arts located in a city park in order to investigate the aesthetic and functional values of public art and its relation to the particular setting of the public space. This paper takes Taman Suropati as the case study, a garden city and a public space widely known as a relic of Jakarta’s development in the early twentieth century. Located in Menteng, the central part of Jakarta, Taman Suropati is also a home for art communities. There are some statues from Association of South East Asia Nations or ASEAN countries that makes this city park has its own political statement added to the long history of the development of Jakarta city starting from the Dutch colonial period. It is this writing’s quest to discover the association of historical background, spatial qualities, and the narrative in Taman Suropati as a public space with the presence of public arts and community activities that in the end improving the quality of urban life through social interaction.

2. Methods
The research used mainly literature research and on site observation. Qualitative methods such as interviews, document and archive reviews, and field survey of public art were the main methods used for this research in order to uncover motivations and expectations that drive the development of public art and public space projects. On site observation that included interviews and visual documentations become the primary way of getting firsthand information for the analysis. As a case study is Taman Suropati in Jakarta that has expressive artworks and emphasizes the importance of locality as criteria for successful public art implementation [2]. The criteria included highly visible spaces and free accessed by the public. The review of the public art projects and public space were carried out firstly, an extensive review of the literature from books, journals and local archives for the art projects was conducted to gain information for the purpose of enhancing the relationship among ASEAN members. Then, information from the literatures was combined with the results from on-site observation in order to analyze two important aspects of the public art: aesthetic and functional. Lastly, analysis of the public arts and urban space was carried out to determine the significance of public art in improving quality of life also including the consideration of the local contexts of the public space.

3. Discussion
To be able to analyze Taman Suropati and its function as a public space, we first have to acknowledge its historical background and the most apparent narrative of the place, including its public art. The narrative of the place should be combined with an analysis of physical elements in the park [5]. These two points are considered substantial in Taman Suropati's sustainability in allocating its site for public interaction and activities.

3.1 History of Taman Suropati
Taman Suropati is located in Menteng, a site which was a part of the first garden city project built during the Dutch colonial era and an expansion of the city of Batavia or nowadays Jakarta. The area of Menteng was originally particuliere landerijen or private land – a kind of property that was commonly
owned by noble society since the seventeenth century in the Netherlands Indies [6]. The Dutch architect Pieter Adrian Jacobus Moojen was assigned to design a satellite town for Batavia in 1910. Allegedly, influenced by the growing ideology of a garden city utopia in Europe emerged and popularized by Ebenezer Howard, Moojen designed Menteng in a form of a garden city, making it the first ever prototype in the Netherlands Indies. His design was implemented into a radial constellation that covered residential blocks, gardens and boulevards, including connections with other residential areas. The broad Nassau Boulevard (Imam Bonjol Street) that bisected the Menteng residential area next to the central square (Taman Suropati) was intended to connect Tanah Abang to the west and Meester Cornelis to the east. The Java Street (HOS Cokroaminoto Street) was a north-south connector from Kebon Sirih to the southern fringe of Batavia.

![Figure 1. Comparison of Menteng neighborhood from its original design and early development.](image)

Moojen’s design shows a number of angles at the end of the streets that were considered too sharp for car manoeuvres and confusing. Moojen's plan was later modified in 1918 by F.J. Kubatz who changed the street pattern to become more realistic for vehicles to make turns and added a small pond (Situ Lembang) to the east of the central park area. Throughout the development of the area, the big park that was existed in Moojen’s design was never really built. But on the approximate location laid a smaller park positioned in the middle of Menteng. This park was originally called Burgemeester Bisschopplein, named after the first burgemeester or the city mayor of Batavia, G.J. Bishop (1916-1920) [7].

In 1920, an article on Taman Suropati was written and it illustrated how the park was cultivated with trees and flowers [8]. Figure 1 shows an aerial picture of Menteng taken in 1939 that showed a landscape of a newly grown park surrounded with blocks starting to be filled with houses. There are two other parks in Menteng beside Taman Suropati namely Taman Situ Lembang and Taman Menteng. Taman Situ Lembang was actually a water storage reservoir for the neighbourhood while Taman Menteng was originally a sports stadium for local football club Persija. Thus, Taman Suropati is the only park that is originally intended to function as a public park.
From its origin, the plan of Menteng garden city was intended for the elites. The site fit the purpose because the closeness of Menteng to the center of capital and government, and the idea of utopia were a great appeal to its potential buyers. Up to the present, Menteng area is still known as an elite area and the prestige of Menteng is transferred to the urban elite of Jakarta. With the prestige of the area, and the utopian ideal of a garden city, the existence of a public park is necessary to implement the function and image of the city [6].

During the 1990s, the image of Taman Suropati was similar to other city parks in Jakarta for being rather neglected and sometimes associated with negative image of the city. The city parks also had to compete with modern recreational space such as mall. In 1997, a senior violinist Agustinus Hesti Dwiharso who had a vision to preserve folk music from different regions in Indonesia started to use the park for his musical activities. Moreover, Agustinus believes that city parks are important public spaces and people should make a good use of the park that motivate him to make the park as his home base for musical activities. Then, he initiated Taman Suropati Chamber in 2007 that consisted of street musicians and artists and used the park as a meeting place. Instructors for violin, cello, percussion or guitar were since then available on weekends and yoga community came during weekend. Later on, Taman Suropati Art Community was created that involved divisions of music, crafts, sketch, photography, and theatre, still with active collaboration with street artists.

The history of Taman Suropati tells the importance of Menteng and the park in the development of Jakarta. The park bears the idea of public space with symbolic arts and cultural activities that the park offers. The rich meaning of Taman Suropati is also related to physical elements inside the park that in turn influences the image of the place and users’ behavior. Public arts at the park add artistic elements and consecutively affect activities in the park.

3.2 Public art and activities at Taman Suropati
In 1984, the local government decided to use the park for more prominent events. Six sculptures designed by various artists coming from the six pioneer countries of ASEAN were placed in Taman Suropati and substituted previous animal figures at the park. The sculptures are known as ASEAN's Monument of Peace and bear the idea of support and participation for the regional league. The public art project in Taman Suropati also means that the government recognizes the park as an important space and is worth to deliver political statement of peace and friendship among ASEAN members. When one walks the path from the south to the north of the park allows a view of six prominent artworks embodying the symbolic friendship and diplomatic ties between Indonesia and ASEAN countries. These six sculptures include (see figure 2): “Rebirth” by Luis E. Yee Jr. from Philippines (A), “Harmony” by Awang Hj Latif from Brunei Darussalam (B), “Fraternity” by Nonthivathn Chandhanaphalin from Thailand (C), the “Peace-Harmony and One” by Lee Kian Seng from Malaysia (D), “the Spirit of ASEAN” by Wee Beng Chong from Singapore (E), and “Peace” by Sunaryo from Indonesia (F).
An axis divided the park into two symmetrical areas, leaving a clear influence of European garden. There are three plazas at the park – west, central, and east plazas – with four accesses to the park (south, west, north, and east). The west and east plazas have two identical water fountains while in the middle stands the central plaza as the biggest plaza. People usually use the central plaza for communal activities, such as tai chi and yoga exercises as well as community gatherings. Trees and plants at the park are arranged with intervals, giving visual access from outside to inside the park and vice versa. With this kind of arrangements, it is possible to gain visual access to the artworks from almost every direction. Although not symmetrical, the sculptures were placed in balance – three on the left and three on the right – and in accordance with the park’s access and axis. Those artworks are put on the grass with low platforms.

These sculptures become a set of static artistic element of the park. The strong sense of artistic value in the park does not only come from these sculpture, but also from musical activities. The sounds from violin and guitar instruments, for instance, create unique atmosphere and artistic identity of the park [8]. Moreover, the activities of Komunitas Kota Seni Taman Suropati also emphasize the function of the park to support community activities related to arts.

Komunitas Kota Seni Taman Suropati holds a violin course every Sunday in Taman Suropati. The class is divided into several times, starting from 10.00 AM to 17.00 PM. Usually, the violin class involves some teachers who tutor several groups, marking each ‘classroom’ with plastic seats around the plaza located on the west side of the park. This group of musicians becomes an informal institution and the class is open for all ages. It is also common to see elementary school children sit next to middle age men because they take the same class. There are also other art groups such as sketch, theatre, crafts, and other visual artists in the park. They usually hang out or have an informal meeting at the park as the musicians play their instruments. Beside regular activities, some art communities
also organize special events at the park. The special events that include discussions, performances, and exhibitions. Those events are usually open for public and those events attracts people who live far from the park.

![Figure 3. Private violin lesson](image)

![Figure 4. Discussion in an event, “Nyandang Sandang” on 5 May 2018](image)

Public arts at Taman Suropati can be understood as two different kind of artworks based on motives of their movements. First, public arts at Taman Suropati are a set of display and inanimate objects. Second, public arts at Taman Suropati are animate objects and become influential elements for public activities [8]. In inanimate objects, the movement becomes a consequence of external physical forces while in animate objects the movement is the result of intention and desire. These two distinctive practices of public arts give different impacts to the park’s users.

The sculptures, which have fixed places at the park may be treated as art displays. There is visual reception from people in the park when they see the public arts. As the result of passive interaction between the public arts and the park's users, users perceive the public arts as a part of the idea of the park. In this way, the existence of the public arts are relative to their own position in the park, other physical elements in the park, and the image of the park. Since the position of those public arts are not central but spread in the park, no single public art looks dominant. Since there is no particular access or path to reach the artworks, the artworks seem to be understood only through visual connection.

Community’s activities are influenced both directly or indirectly by the presence of the public art. Public arts indirectly give influence to the users, especially art community, for the presence of those public arts give significance artistic value to the park. Public arts, together with the plazas and other objects at the park, also mark the plaza and influence how people perceive their places. For instance, people at the central plaza will most likely see the artworks from Brunei Darussalam the tall artworks from Singapore so that when they do their activities those artworks become part of the nearest surroundings. In addition to this, not only physical objects located at the park but also the sounds of music give influence to the atmosphere of the park. The dynamic sounds of music successively add channels of experience, enabling users to directly react at its presence. By these two dissimilar degrees of influence, we can assume that community’s activity is closely related to the presence of public arts that contributes to the creation of unique qualities of the park and in turn affects how the users perceive and use the space.

As the violin course takes place in the west plaza of the park, the sound can be heard from all directions. The unique violin sounds create a background sound for other activities, together with natural sounds of water from the fountain, birds chirping, and people chattering; all those sounds subdue the sound of the passing vehicles around the park. The presence of the specific sounds of music has affected the atmosphere of the entire place. The sound of nature combined with the unique sound of the instrument result in a synergy of space and event that produce a certain kind of artistic quality of the park.
Public art has some historical, aesthetic and functional values [9]. Taman Suropati is loaded with the historic meaning of the development of Menteng area and ASEAN public arts encourage the connection between the societies with their history and create a collective memory. Public art conveys the basic impression of art that is to beautify spaces and improve the visual quality. Public arts at Taman Suropati do not perform as functional objects such as street furniture. However, the existence of public arts in Taman Suropati give additional functional value for the park as a landmark and borders of activities. The success of public space in Taman Suropati arises from collaboration with the users of the place who articulate what they value about it and public artworks stimulates active interaction rather than just passive observation from the users [10]. In short, public art has helped to improve the quality space in the urban environment through fostering social interaction. The appropriation of the park by the local government through public arts plays a significant role in creating a public perception of the park [11]. The rich historical context of the park overlaps with the narrative of the place as meaningful public space that influence how people response to the idea of Taman Suropati as a public space. The appropriation of the park as the place for art communities’ activities is related to the accessibility of the park for public. Taman Suropati has become a medium for people to encounter urban space while the implementation of public art has encouraged the participation of public in public space. Up until today, the community is still dominated by middle to lower class society who actually live outside the luxurious residential of Menteng. In contrast to big houses in Menteng, people who use the park are actively use the park for as a regular venue of their routine activities and allow various background of society to join. In Taman Suropati’s case, the rich historical background of the place is added with the utilization of space by street artists. As a result, the communities who occupy the park and have variety in their backgrounds, contribute in branding the landmark as an art place. The artworks placed in the park are actually not too influential in affecting the park’s users. Nevertheless, the artworks help to strengthen the whole narrative of the park as a set of art displays. Besides improving the attractiveness of the area, public art also reflects the city’s identity, and celebrate the history and the uniqueness of local activities. People gather and interact in Taman Suropati with art as the medium of interaction. Public activities, discussions and collaborations held at the park reflect a lively social environment.

In a wider understanding, public art in Taman Suropati has its purpose in the urban community and helps to improve the quality of urban life. Following Hamilton City Council [4], the park reflects and expresses city’s identity as both loaded the idea of garden city in the park’s history and telling stories...
of its own as the place for art community. Taman Suropati also celebrates significant people and places that are related to art and contributes in giving a sense of belonging to the community. The identity of the park as important place in the history of Jakarta and as a place for art communities to do their activities improves the attractiveness of the area and the quality of urban life.

4. Conclusion
The analysis of public art and activities in Taman Suropati has shown an apparent case of an active public space that is, directly or indirectly, powered by the influence of public art. In Taman Suropati, public art is a promising agent to revive and sustain the function of public space as the place for community collaboration.

In Taman Suropati, there is quite a successful implementation of public art that generates artistic activities in the city. One of the reasons is because various stakeholders have a significant collaboration as well as the effect of physical elements of the park that create good access, visual connection and unique atmosphere. The role of public art in benefits not only the city’s development but also its community’s activities. Thus, further efforts to ensure collaboration of stakeholders, accessibility of public space and sustainability of public art and artistic activities at the park should be maintained. In order to sustain the uniqueness of the park, respecting local history and promoting collaboration of communities through the arts should be continued. In the future, it will be helpful for city planning to include potential treatments and utilization of public art in the grand design to support the growth of its community. The awareness of public art as a significant agent that can influence the life in the city should be related to the understanding of the history of the city and the enhancement of physical elements that surround the public art.

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