City Space Architecture

Placemaking and People-Making.
The Interplay between Youth Activities and Built Environment Design in a Philippine Public Park

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand the interaction between young people and the built environment of Taal Park, a public park located in the poblacion (central business district) of a historical town in Batangas, Philippines. With a renewed appreciation of public spaces in the post-COVID-19 era, this work builds on the promising opportunity for people to collectively claim the right to a (city) space – and to continuously reshape it through time. Employing a qualitative case study research design, the study involved the conduct of a survey and unstructured non-participant observation. Data was then analysed through complementary descriptive and thematic analysis. The results of the study highlighted the positive impact of Taal Park on youth well-being through effective design that facilitates and encourages social interactions. The nexus between placemaking and people-making in this context illustrates how the built environment design and young people's use of public spaces are mutually reinforcing. However, limitations in terms of the planning systems that are currently in place further highlight the need for more meaningful youth engagement mechanisms. Future research should continue utilising a transdisciplinary approach to deepen the knowledge base on public space in Global South contexts focussing on exploring effective youth engagement strategies in urban planning. Overall, ensuring that youth have a substantive role in shaping these environments can lead to more inclusive, dynamic, and vibrant public spaces.

Keywords: youth, placemaking, public spaces, built environment design, sustainable development

1. Introduction

> *"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody."*
>
>   – Jane Jacobs in The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961)

The publicly accessible physical environments within our cities have always been venues for human experience, and linking youth development to the public realm is depicted as a "fundamental need" in today's world (Owens, 2020). Ultimately, public spaces can and should support the social and psychological development of young people in the communities they aim to cater – by serving as spaces for socialisation and cultivating meaningful relationships as they unconsciously develop a sense of social responsibility and belonging before gearing towards adulthood (Ruel et al., 2018; Owens, 2020).

Built environments, in general, influence human behaviour in various ways. They can facilitate relaxation and recreation, provide or constrain opportunities for physical activity, and even encourage or discourage healthy diets. For this reason, presenting more opportunities for healthy behaviours through restructured and well-planned built environments has been considered an effective approach to improving health outcomes among people (Wilkie et al,. 2018).

The success of public spaces in fulfilling their purpose does not solely lie in the hands of the architects and planners who have designed them. In the long run, it also relies on the people continuously adopting, using, and managing such spaces. As Worpole and Knox (2007) described it: "people make places, more than places make people." From a more dynamic perspective, people continuously shape, experience and contribute to these spaces through 'placemaking' (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020). As opposed to the idea that public spaces are primarily defined in spatial terms and their physical form, there is a vast literature saying that such spaces are, in fact, co-produced, and only come into being once activated by the dynamic presence and movement patterns of people (Worpole & Knox, 2007). Consequently, the idea of placemaking puts people at its core to continuously generate positive relationships in, to, and with the place (Mateo-Babiano & Lee, 2020). Placemaking and the sociability of public spaces have long been at the centre of urban studies; however, difficulties remain in tangibly identifying, defining, and evaluating the non-material interrelationships that shape the physical space (Mahmoud, 2022), as well as how these interrelationships influence people.

People of all ages have experienced extraordinary challenges during the coronavirus-19 disease (COVID-19) pandemic, altering their physical activity behaviours and patterns (Gu et al., 2022). This led to a renewed appreciation of public spaces in the post-COVID-19 pandemic, especially among youth after the strict mobility restrictions to reduce transmission of the disease. Overwhelming evidence points out that a significant proportion of children and youth around the world have faced mental health struggles in the course of the pandemic due to key factors such as social isolation from their peers and significant adults (Collin-Vezina et al., 2022). Meanwhile, much research has also proved that public open and green spaces provide a wide array of social, economic, and environmental benefits to individuals and communities as a whole (ASSURE, 2019). Parks, for instance, offer a multi-sensorial environment that has been known to stimulate and improve people's mental health (Sia et al, 2020). Such context, then, offers a promising opportunity for people to collectively reclaim our "right to the city" through efficient use of public spaces. This concept, originally proposed around sixty years ago by French

sociologist Henri Lefebvre, encompasses everyone's right to access the resources of the city, to participate in what a city has to offer, and most importantly, the freedom to change and reinvent it through such access and participation (Collins & Stadler, 2020). Indeed, public spaces in our cities are a common good that are meant to be open, inclusive, and democratic (Bravo, 2017).

Building on this understanding, we looked into the interplay between the activities of young people and the built environment design of Taal Park, a public park located in the poblacion (central business district) of a historical town in Batangas, Philippines. This study also intends to contribute to the growing knowledge on youth and public spaces, especially in the context of Global South where there remains a significant gap both in research and applications of public space knowledge. More specifically, it aimed to: (1) describe the movement, behaviour, and activities of young people visiting the park; (2) determine how the park's environmental attributes influence the behaviour and activities of young people, and how these behaviour and activities, in turn, influence the park's environment, and; (3) articulate the insights and perspectives of young people as critical stakeholders of the public space. Toward this end, the relationship between youth and their built environment, as well as a brief overview of public spaces in the Global South, which informs the present study will first be discussed.

2. Youth and the built environment

Since the onset of the 21st century, public health scholars have taken an interest in the link between young people and their physical or built environments, mainly focusing on how the physical environment influences physical activity. It is well known that the physical environment can influence child development (Evans, 2006), effectively promoted by providing access to recreational facilities and transport infrastructure (Davison & Lawson, 2006). This can be attributed to how certain environmental features can either promote or hinder safe recreation and active transit, thus influencing physical activity or a sedentary behaviour (Poulsen et al., 2018). With that understanding, the attributes of built environments which influence habitual physical activity among children and adolescents have the potential to inform urban design (McGrath et al., 2015). A profound understanding of the relationship between youth and their built environment can only be facilitated through a transdisciplinary approach that extends beyond public health, and into the social sciences and humanities. Evidence suggests that low-income children are disproportionately exposed to multiple suboptimal physical and social environmental conditions which affect their physical and mental health, and may cause adverse developmental impacts (Evans, 2006; Andersen et al., 2022. Integrating perspectives from public health, sociology, urban planning, and other related disciplines is necessary to generate meaningful insights that can inform policy and practice.

Rapid urbanisation has turned many streets and neighbourhoods into hostile and inaccessible spaces for socialisation and play among children and the youth. This has led to youth's perceived vulnerability in such threatening environments, and eventually, their exclusion from the public realm (Torres, 2020). Thus, the importance of acknowledging their legitimate presence within public spaces is being emphasised, as greater numbers of children and youth reside in dense urban areas (Loebach, 2020). Citing an excerpt from Torres (2020): "*Redeveloping the streets to make them more child and youth-friendly is a fundamental condition of social and spatial justice, the optimisation of our collective resources,*

and the sustainability of our human settlements." Indeed, prioritising the design and planning of urban spaces to cater to the needs of children and youth not only fosters social inclusion but also enhances community well-being.

It is necessary to understand how young people utilise and claim public spaces to enhance their provision, as researchers, designers, and public space managers can only design more inclusive spaces when they are well aware of the specific environmental features and conditions that aligns with the aspirations of young people (Loebach, 2020). Kolay (2020) suggests that the reality of public space can only be understood by considering its design guidelines, rules, and regulations, as well as the perspectives of its users. A top-down approach reflects the city's vision for the space, while a bottom-up, user-centric study reveals the actual impacts of these guidelines and how people feel about the space. The integration of both approaches is crucial for creating public spaces that truly serve the needs of a community.

3. Public spaces in the Global South

Given the highly interrelated challenges that urbanisation and climate change brings forth, addressing issues related to lack of accessible and inclusive public spaces are most pressing for developing countries. The emergence of interest in thinking and practising urbanism from cities of the Global South – rather than just about them – has been emphasised recently (Inam, 2022). However, current research and actual applications remain limited (Pauleit et al., 2021); many scholars have been calling for reconsidering existing planning approaches to make it more relevant in the Global South context (Landman & Mady, 2022). According to Sahakian et al (2020), it is critical to underscore how such spaces provide the satisfaction needs of diverse people in these regions for architects, town planners, and local governments to be able to work on its sound provision. Ultimately, acknowledging the current pressures on public spaces within rapidly evolving cities, it becomes imperative to conduct more research to strengthening the argument to maintain the availability and accessibility of these assets (Tuhkani et al., 2021).

In terms of built environmental design in the Global South, Bradshaw et al. (2020) suggests that the balance between natural and built environments influences perceptions of security in local green spaces. It is highlighted that while nature is valued, people often prefer it to be less wild and more well-managed, as such spaces are perceived safer and more attractive. Urban Green Spaces (UGSs) in Kumasi, Ghana have also been found to be storing significant amounts of carbon above and below ground (Nero et al., 2017), indicating potential contribution to climate change mitigation, although often unaccounted for in urban planning and climate change policy. Recent research has provided evidence that noncommunicable disease burdens can be reduced through the use of UGSs in Global South megacities, such as Dhaka, Bangladesh (Labib et al., 2020). However, a study by Olfato-Parojinog et al. (2024) reveals that in the megacity of Manila, Philippines, increasing urbanisation has led to a drastic decrease in UGS per capita over nearly two decades, with all 17 cities in the region falling below the World Health Organization's recommended levels. This decline underscores the urgent need to prioritise the establishment, management, and protection of UGS to enhance urban sustainability and health.

Beyond health and climate change, the concept of informality is also a recurring theme in the existing research about public spaces of the Global South because of its central

role. Beza & Hernandez-Garcia (2018) focus on how the public spaces within informal settlements of Bogota, Colombia have been created outside the formal planning processes, which offered an evolutionary step in understanding community-realised places. Similarly, Agheyisi (2023) shifts attention to the temporary use of urban vacant spaces, showcasing how informal sector activities utilise these areas and challenging traditional urban planning approaches. Kamalipour and Peimani (2019) on the other hand highlight how street trading has been essential to urban economies, and propose a typology to better integrate informal trading into urban planning. Finally, Kamalipour and Peimani (2022) demonstrated the potential of optimal urban design in less formal, congested cities to support sustainable mobility and vibrant public spaces. While recent research highlights the benefits of UGSs and informal public spaces in the Global South, there remains a gap in integrating these findings into formal planning frameworks in order to fully realise their potential for sustainable urban development.

In the Philippines adequate support for the provision of public open parks and green spaces has not been given the attention it deserves despite the recent attention to sustainable urban development (ASSURE, 2019). From a political perspective, Shatkin (2005) examined how globalisation has shifted urban spaces in the nation's capital, Manila, from state-driven utopian projects to privatised, profit-oriented developments. He argues that such an approach has failed to address the needs of the entire population, and has implications for democracy and urban development in the Philippines. Meanwhile, in a more localised setting of managing public open spaces (POS), a study by Chavez (2021) revealed that while local government units (LGUs) and various stakeholders in the country play active roles in maintaining POSs, these spaces suffer from issues such as rapid development, limited budgets, and diminishing public interest. Armas and Galano (2024) highlight the underutilisation of public spaces despite their significant contribution to local economies and tourism. Holistic urban management solutions such as design improvements and support for informal enterprises, were recommended to address these gaps. These findings shed light on the need to adopt more proactive measures to ensure the sustainability and effective management of local public spaces nationwide.

Public life in public spaces is a key element of a vibrant city culture. Spaces such as parks tend to be overdetermined in spatial terms but should allow for flexibility and change (Inam, 2022). Al Skaff (2022) argues that cities should be thought of in terms of processes, rather than just things, shaped by time and place. Throughout history, public space has been a place for unresolved struggles and conflicts that have been transmuted. Despite public space being perceived as 'democratic', it has been contested that public space has long been a site of exploitation, oppression, and prohibition for vulnerable groups, including the young, women, LGBTQIA+ community, elderly, homeless, and people with disabilities (PWDs) (Inam, 2022). Moreover, the inequitable distribution of inviting public spaces within cities has demonstrated various impacts on spatial justice. Therefore, there is a necessity to fully recognise the important role that public spaces play, and more importantly, the need to integrate considerations of people's well-being in urban planning, especially in the Global South (Tuhkani et al., 2021).

4. Case study: Taal park (Batangas, Philippines)

Taal is a small municipality with a land area of around 30 km², located in the province of Batangas within the Southern Tagalog region in Luzon, Philippines. As of 2020, it has

a population of around 61, 000. It is currently classified as a third-class municipality by the Philippine government based on its average annual regular income of between PHP 130 - 160 million (approximately EUR 2.07 - 2.55 million). Dubbed as a "heritage town", the municipality is known for its astounding collection of ancestral houses and heritage structures that have been well-preserved for centuries, with some of them now turned into museums, galleries, cafes or gift shops for tourists. It is also home to Asia's largest Catholic church, the Minor Basilica of St. Martin of Tours (known as Taal Basilica), which is a dominant structure at the town's centre as it sits atop a hill. Immediately down the hill is Taal Park (Figure 2), a spacious public park that serves as scenery for Batangas travelers, providing a picturesque view with the basilica at its backdrop. On its own, the park can be depicted as an open green space offering a peaceful and warm vista of the townscape for locals and tourists alike.

Figure 1. Location Map of Taal Park (Isla, 2024)

Taal Park is situated within the town's public square, which has been considered by the Philippine government as a national historic site due to its cultural significance dating back to the Spanish colonial period in the Philippines (National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2018), especially during Taal's glorious years as the provincial capital. Various educational institutions, small business establishments, and heritage structures, such as the municipal hall (Casa Real), can also be found nearby. The park is divided into two portions, separated by a walkway at the centre (Figure 3). The park's left portion is faced by the municipal tourism office and one of the town's cultural centres

Figure 2. Photo of Taal Park

(Escuela Pia). Meanwhile, within the grounds of the park's right portion, adjacent to the social plaza, is where the picture-perfect letters of "Taal" stand. Trees, lamp posts, and concrete benches under vined shades are distributed all throughout the area, encircling the various monuments of prominent historical figures. Recently, a mini-playground for children and some physical fitness amenities have been constructed within a particular section of the park.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research design

The study employed a qualitative case study research design as it strives to provide an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2010), which, in this case, is Taal Park. It involved the conduct of survey and observation. As an in-depth study of Taal Park, meanings and understanding of youth activities that occur in the built environment were sought. This approach allowed for a holistic exploration of how the environmental design, features, and attributes influence youth behaviors and experiences, uncovering insights into the role of Taal Park as a social and recreational space for young people in the area. Ethical procedures were employed through securing informed consent from research participants before answering the survey. All individuals who agreed to participate in the survey were made aware of the purpose of the study.

5.2. Data collection

The survey utilised a combination of purposive and convenience sampling where inclusion criteria were set, requiring respondents to be residents of the municipality of Taal, aged 15 to 24 who had visited Taal Park at least once since the year before the conduct of the survey. Having experienced visiting the park within such timeline was a crucial criterion for inherently capturing and highlighting park usership in the post-pandemic setting.
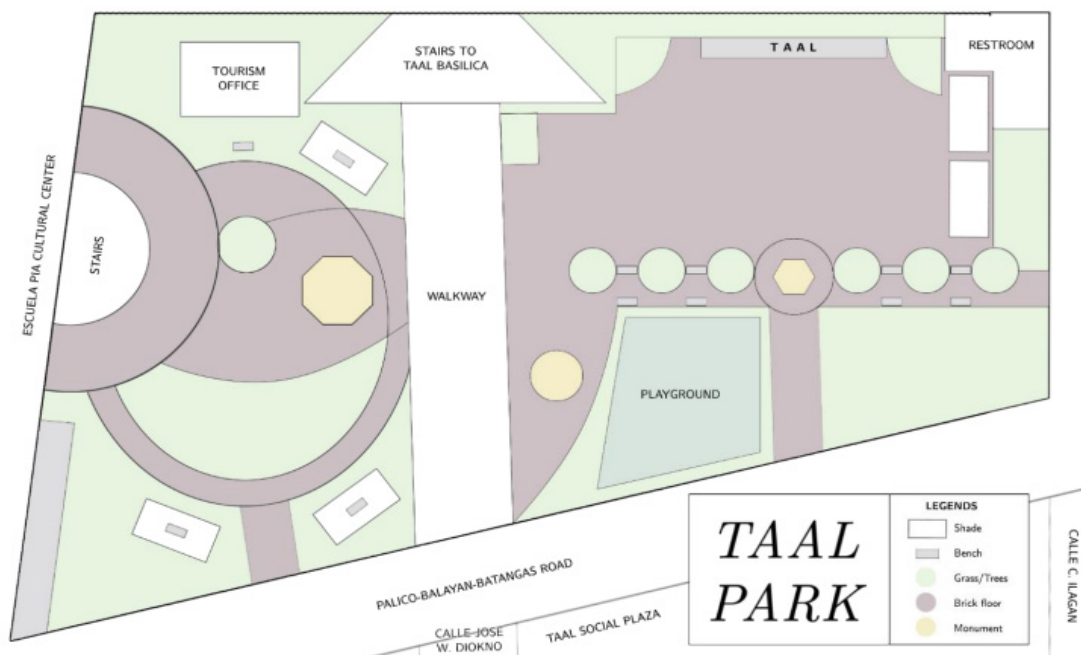
Figure 1. Layout/Design of Taal Park

Figure 3. Layout/Design of Taal Park (Isla, 2021)

The questionnaire was disseminated across various social media platforms to efficiently reach potential respondents, thus adding an element of convenience. Initially yielding 42 responses, further screening resulted in a final sample of 40 respondents. Structured to align with research objectives, the questionnaire incorporated close- and open-ended questions, Likert scale items, and free listing. The survey was divided into five sections, namely: (1) socio-demographic characteristics; (2) youth activities in the park; (3) influence of the built environment design on youth activities; (4) influence of youth activities on the built environment, and finally; (5) recommendations and concluding questions. Meanwhile, an unstructured non-participant observation was also conducted for 20-30 minutes at different times of the day (early morning, late morning, early afternoon, late afternoon, and early evening) within one week. This was done to account for the regular movement, behaviour, and activities of young people visiting the park to complement and paint a clearer picture of the collected survey data. Such methods have been identified by Loebach (2020) as an effective way to build a profound understanding of how children and youth interact with their local environments, such as public parks and other public settings, where they congregate. These methods are frequently used in research exploring the actions of individuals in public spaces (Clark et al,. 2009), and to triangulate emerging findings from other data collection methods, such as surveys (Chikowore, 2023).

5.3. Data analysis

The data collected consisting of qualitative responses from surveys and observations within Taal Park were analysed through descriptive and thematic analysis. Descriptive analysis was employed to summarise the characteristics (i.e., frequencies, means, and standard deviations) of the numerical data from the surveys using Microsoft Excel (2021

version). Thematic analysis, on the other hand, involved identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the qualitative data generated from the observed phenomena and the open-ended questions in the survey. Themes, according to Saldaña (2020), are extended phrases or sentences that summarise the manifest (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of data. This combined approach was deemed appropriate for the context of the study as it leveraged the strengths of both methods to reveal the complex relationships between youth activities and the park's built environment.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1. Movement, behavior and activities of young people in the park

According to the observations, there is a distinct rhythm and pattern to the use of the park. During the early hours of the day, even before sunrise, a handful of locals go into the area to walk, jog, bike, and do other physical fitness activities. Other users start the day in the park: people attending morning mass, early tourists, cyclists from neighboring towns, and street sweepers. During daylight, busloads of tourists come and go, locals pass by, and young people hang out. When darkness falls, the volume of people in the park slowly diminishes until the park is empty until the next day. On special occasions, especially during the Christmas season (September to December), the park is full of a mix of locals, guests from neighbouring municipalities, and visitors who come to enjoy a light show/ festival in the park every night.

The survey respondents consisted of 40 individuals, with a slight majority being female (n = 27) as compared to male respondents (n = 13). The mean age of the participants was 19.7 years old, with the largest age group being 21-22 years old (n = 20). In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents are currently college students (n = 26), while some are high school students (n = 12). Few respondents identified as part of vulnerable groups (n = 9). The cohort of respondents represents a diverse group of young people whose knowledge and experiences have been beneficial to the conduct of the study.

The survey revealed that young people visit the park for various reasons. Most commonly cited were the appreciation of the beautiful scenery, and its proximity to other heritage and food spots. Desire for relaxation and social interaction, as well as the lights show that takes place in the park annually were also identified to enhance the appeal of the park for them. Other motivating factors include accessibility, environmental benefits, place attachment, sense of adventure, and a desire to boost creativity. Such findings indicate the importance of considering diverse preferences when planning and designing public spaces. Many of them would go to the park as often as at least once a week (n = 15) to at least once a month (n = 17), usually during afternoon hours (n = 15) or in the evening (n = 13). On a regular basis, they are either accompanied by friends and peers (n = 20) or by family and loved ones (n = 17), wherein the length of their stay would range from less than an hour (n = 17) to an hour or two (n = 12). Primarily, Taal Park serves as a place to unwind and relax (n = 37) for young people, while for some, it is where they celebrate holidays and other seasonal events (n = 15), such as town feasts or festivals. Others also view the park as a space for fun and socialisation among their peers (n = 11), as well as cultural and educational activities (n = 8).

The primary benefits of visiting Taal park for young people include opportunities for social interaction and relaxation, providing a free and welcoming space that alleviates daily

Figure 4. (left) Young cyclists enjoying a photo opportunity at Taal Park (left)
Figure 5. (right) Typical situation at the park during late mornings (right) (Photos by Joshua Mayo and
Ferdinand Isla III, 2024)

life and academic pressures. This is consistent with Loebach's (2020) findings on social inclusion and community well-being. The park also promotes physical activity and outdoor recreation, which echoes Davison and Lawson (2006) and Poulsen et al. (2018) on the importance of recreational facilities for youth development. As a common landmark, it supports local culture and tourism and serves as a safe, accessible space for school-related activities. Tertiary benefits include fostering community and belonging, connecting with nature, aesthetic appreciation, and improving mental well-being, aligning with Evans (2006) and Andersen et al. (2022) on the importance of supportive environments for children's physical and mental health.

6.2. Influence of the built environment design on youth activities

Notably, the survey shows how young people's appreciation of the park's natural and green features is slightly greater than its man-made and physical features. There is a high level of agreement among the respondents in this aspect, implying that these features are particularly well-defined and universally appreciated by the park users. This finding agrees with Bradshaw et al.'s (2020) argument that balancing natural and built environments has been crucial for green public spaces in the Global South. Integrating concrete elements and colours made the space more appealing and its perception as safe encouraged more use and maximised the social and recreational benefits.

The survey also revealed that the park's size, location, and accessibility have contributed to its attractiveness for young people, in addition to the welcoming environment for social and recreational activities. Similarly, availability of space provides ample and versatile outdoor areas that can cater to a range of interests and preferences. While the ratings for accessibility and availability of space are generally positive, there may still be opportunities for improvement to enhance inclusivity, usability, and safety for all park users, as exhibited by a slightly lower rating. This underscores the importance of inclusive design in placemaking, which is critical to ensuring that all users can fully engage with the space. Overall, young people still view the park's overall design positively, with the blending of man-made structures and the natural landscape in such an appealing and functional manner. It is important to note, however, that despite the park being publicly accessible to the local community, there remains the issue of having limited options for them in terms of public spaces. In the Philippines, it is common for municipalities to have a public park
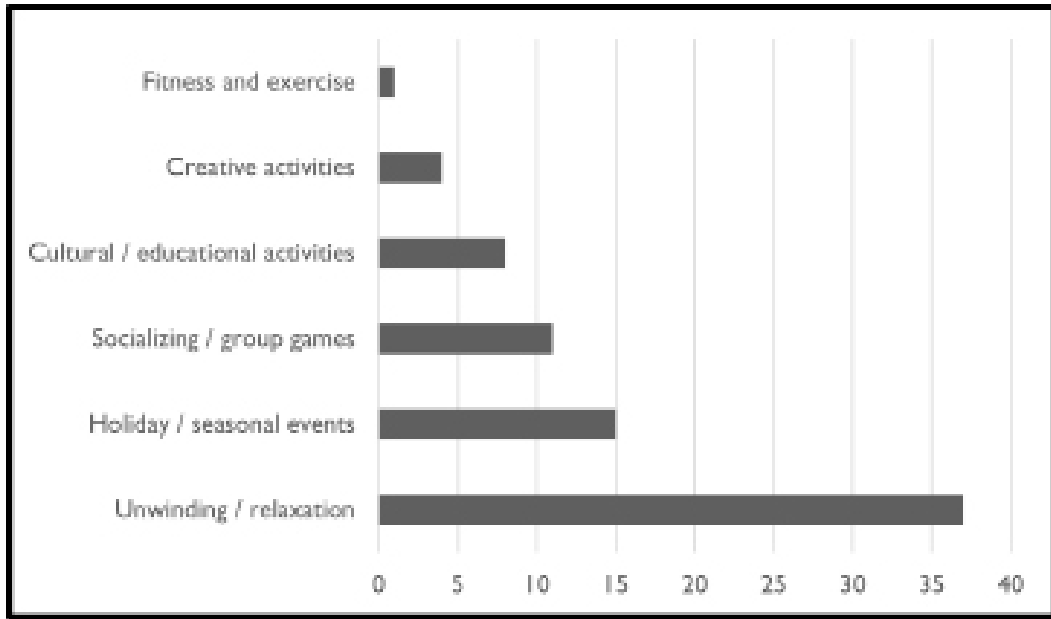
Figure 6. Youth activities in the park

or plaza within their respective commercial districts, such as in the case of Taal. But other than this, there are very limited public spaces. Young people's appreciation of the park symbolises their interest in utilising such spaces, highlighting the need for more such areas to support their well-being and development.

On another note, the park, as perceived by young people, provides a welcoming atmosphere for diverse groups of people within the community. The presence of wide pathways, accessible parking spaces, park management personnel, and designated road officers contribute to a sense of safety among visitors. Additionally, there have been activities dedicated to the youth, as well as LGBTQIA+ friendly events that were organised by local organisations. However, there are also notable areas for improvement that were identified.

Specific aspects of the park's design	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
Design of the park's man-made/physical features in terms of aesthetics and functionality	**3.90**	**0.78**	**Good**
Design of the park's natural/green features in terms of aesthetics and ecological significance	**4.53**	**0.60**	**Very good**
Appropriateness of the park's location in terms of size and accessibility for young people	**4.35**	**0.66**	**Very good**
Appropriateness of the park in terms of availability of space for facilitating youth activities	**4.20**	**0.79**	**Very good**

Specific aspects of the park's design	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
Overall park design, especially in terms of accommodating a diverse range of youth activities	**3.88**	**0.79**	**Good**
The park's inclusivity and safety for visitors who are part of vulnerable groups	**3.95**	**0.88**	**Good**

(1 - very poor; 2 - poor; 3 - neutral; 4 - good; 5 - very good)

Table 1. Young people's evaluation on the park's built environment design

Concerns are raised regarding accessibility issues for persons with disabilities (PWDs), such as the lack of ramps and unsafe playground equipment, as well as safety hazards posed by the park's proximity to a highway. Nonetheless, there lies a shared desire among young people to help address these issues and foster a more inclusive and safe environment within Taal Park through community engagement and collaborative efforts.

The perceived capabilities of Taal Park's existing built environment design in facilitating various activities were also examined. Primarily, the park is regarded as a tranquil space for unwinding and relaxation (n = 30), and suitable for cultural and educational activities (n = 27). Young people also see the park as a venue for socialising and group games (n = 27), its potential for creative activities (n = 25), and a place to celebrate holiday and seasonal events (n = 19). Furthermore, they perceive opportunities for fitness and exercise (n = 13), as well as sports and recreation (n = 8). Some key features contributing the most to the park's attractiveness for youth activities, include the open space (n = 37), resting areas (n = 26), recreational amenities (n = 19), vegetation (n = 16), and monuments (n = 9). These findings suggest that built environment design plays a significant role in shaping the range of activities available to young people, which, in turn, influences their recreational choices, social interactions, and overall experiences within public spaces.

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Level
Overall impact of youth and their activities on the park's built environment	**4.13**	**0.69**	**Very good**
Current level of youth involvement in maintaining the quality of the park's environment	**3.78**	**0.83**	**High**

(1 - very poor/low; 2 - poor/low; 3 - neutral; 4 - good/high; 5 - very good/high)

Table 2. Evaluation of youth's impact on the park's built environment

6.3. Influence of youth activities on the built environment

Most of the young people visiting Taal Park assert that their presence at the park improves maintenance and care (n = 24) for its physical infrastructure and amenities, and fosters
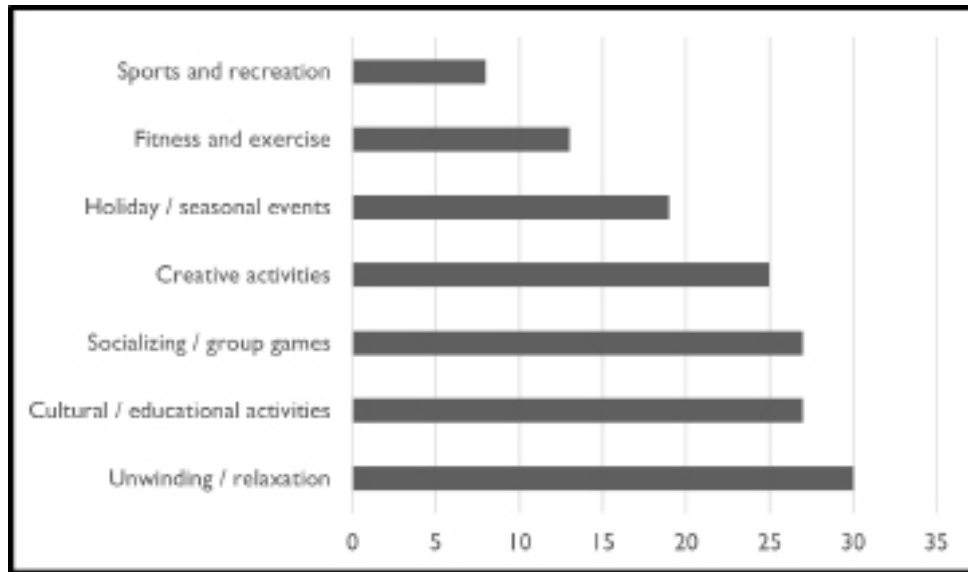
Figure 7. Activities that the park's design allows young people

positive growth and care (n = 22) for the park's natural vegetation and landscape as they normally conduct their activities. Consequently, acknowledgment of the increased need for maintenance efforts (n = 9) for the infrastructure and landscape further connotes the importance of responsible outdoor recreation. These results highlight the significant and generally positive role that young people play in maintaining the quality of the park's environment. It also reflects the concept of people-making, where the active participation of individuals in their environment fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. In fact, with a high level of agreement, there is a balanced perspective on the impact of youth activities on the park's built environment, acknowledging both the positive contributions and the challenges associated with increased use (e.g., wear and tear, improper disposal of garbage, etc.). While the active utilisation of the park by young people provides liveliness and contributes to a positive image of the community, it also underscores the importance of responsible use to ensure the longevity and safety of the park's infrastructure in addition to its functionality and aesthetic appeal for visitors. This balance illustrates how people-making and placemaking are intertwined – effective design should facilitate positive use while also anticipating and addressing potential challenges.

In recent years, people have seen some changes and developments in the park. Among the most noticeable are the addition of new features and amenities, such as playground facilities, benches, and shaded areas, comfort rooms, which have all greatly contributed in making the park more engaging and comfortable for users. Since 2016, the park has become a popular attraction at the heart of the province of Batangas for the local government's annual installation of a festive lights show (locally known as "Pailaw sa Taal") within the park grounds and the adjacent road, which has been ingrained for locals as part of their culture and traditions every Christmas season. This initiative has fostered a deeper connection between the space and its users, which exemplifies the synergy between design and community engagement. Other improvements include the expansion of brickstone flooring, and some landscaping enhancements, which have altogether created more structure and pleasing patterns within the open space. All in all, these efforts to revitalise the space have not only attracted more visitors to frequent the park, but have also created a sense of excitement among the local youth.

Figure 8. Taal Park's specific features that makes the park more attractive for young people
(Photos by Joshua Mayo, 2024)

6.4. Perceived role of youth in shaping the public space

Overall, the findings presented above suggest a sense of ownership and responsibility among youth towards the upkeep of the park's built environment, indicating that they perceive themselves as critical stakeholders in ensuring its quality. Indeed, the energy of young people can be harnessed, given that they are the most frequent visitors and users of the space. Their enthusiasm, creativity, and fresh perspectives can generate ideas for sustainable practices that can enhance the experience of people visiting the park, regardless of age. Youth involvement can build connections between them and the local community, which can help ensure that the park, as a public space, remains a valuable and functional asset in the locality. Therefore, their involvement not only benefits the park's physical upkeep, but also cultivates a sense of civic duty and pride.

The local youth suggest individual involvement through participation in the maintenance of

the park, and engagement in youth activities that can benefit the park and influence others positively. Specifically, they advocate for personal responsibility in keeping the environment clean, actively participating in social gatherings to foster a sense of ownership, and engaging in productive activities like regular clean-ups and youth-led programs. Meanwhile, on a community-level, there is a call for broader, collective actions to enhance the park's environment and ensure its sustainability. This includes advocating for the park's needs within local government, collaborating on youth-led projects, and hosting workshops and advocacy campaigns. Assigning local barangays to maintain cleanliness, using murals to enhance visual appeal, and distributing flyers about the role of youth in shaping public spaces were also identified as key strategies to promote ongoing youth engagement and stewardship. Moreover, their specific recommendations on how Taal Park's overall built environment design can be further improved to make it better and more inclusive are summarised in the table below.

6.5. Design recommendations from the youth	
Accessibility and inclusivity	· Install ramps to make the park accessible for persons with disabilities (PWDs). · Design areas that cater to different age groups and interests (e.g., picnic spots).
Amenities and comfort	·Add more benches, chairs, and resting places for visitors. · Consider mini-amenities for leisure and physical activities (e.g., small fountains, bicycle racks).
Safety and maintenance	· Prioritise maintenance of park amenities and infrastructure for longevity and safety. · Implement safety measures, including visible signs with safety rules and emergency procedures.
Sustainability and design	· Incorporate sustainable architecture and eco-friendly features. · Integrate elements of Taal's culture and history into park design (e.g., markers about Taal's heritage).
Community engagement and governance	· Ensure strong leadership and governance to oversee park improvements. · Involve the community in park planning and management.

Table 3. Design recommendations for improving the park's built environment

Within the rationalised planning system in the Philippines (Serote, 2005), which mandates the creation of local development and land use plans for each city and municipality, the local youth is a crucial demographic that must be taken into consideration in the planning processes and related activities. Represented by a local committee on youth affairs led by an elected youth officer in the community council (Sangguniang Kabataan), this sector is often clustered with culture, arts, education, and/or sports development. However, this existing set-up, while valuable, is not without limitations. In practice, youth and public space concerns are often deprioritised, leading to insufficient support and budget allocations – especially for resource-scarce localities. This marginalisation restricts the ability of youth to meaningfully influence public space planning. As a consequence, youth perspectives may be limited to advisory roles without substantial decision-making power, reducing their impact, and undermining dedicated efforts to create inclusive and dynamic environments.

7. Conclusion

The study explored how young people interact with the built environment of Taal Park, and shed light on their perspectives as key stakeholders of the public space. It revealed youth's overall positive experiences in the use of Taal Park not only for personal or individual purposes, but also for social interactions that lead to improved well-being. By providing a space for relaxation and socialisation, the park has been able to provide young people various mental and physical health benefits. How the park was designed also influenced the nature of such activities and interactions. The nexus between placemaking and people-making in this context illustrates how the design and young people's use of public spaces are mutually reinforcing (Figure 7). Effective placemaking creates environments that support diverse activities and inclusive participation, while active engagement by users, particularly youth, contributes to the vitality and care of these spaces. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in ensuring that the park remains a vibrant and inclusive space that meets the diverse needs of its users. For instance, much has to be done to promote inclusivity in the park. Designing public spaces must also be examined along with the totality of the city, with considerations of potential hazards and disasters in the face of climate change, which is critical in the local context of the Philippines.
The results of the study uncovered how young people perceive their role in maintaining the park, which adds a new dimension to understanding youth involvement in such context. It also emphasised the importance of understanding and addressing the evolving needs and preferences of youth in the design and management of public spaces, like Taal Park. However, the limitations in current planning systems further highlight the need for more meaningful engagement mechanisms. Future research should continue utilising a transdisciplinary approach to deepen the knowledge base on public space in Global South contexts, with a focus on exploring effective youth engagement strategies in urban planning. Additionally, research should expand to analyse the benefits of public spaces beyond individual experiences and address spatial injustices. By addressing these gaps and integrating youth perspectives effectively, cities can create public spaces that not only enhance the quality of life for residents but also contribute to the overall vitality and sustainability of urban communities. Ensuring that youth have a substantive role in shaping these environments can lead to more inclusive, dynamic, and vibrant public spaces.

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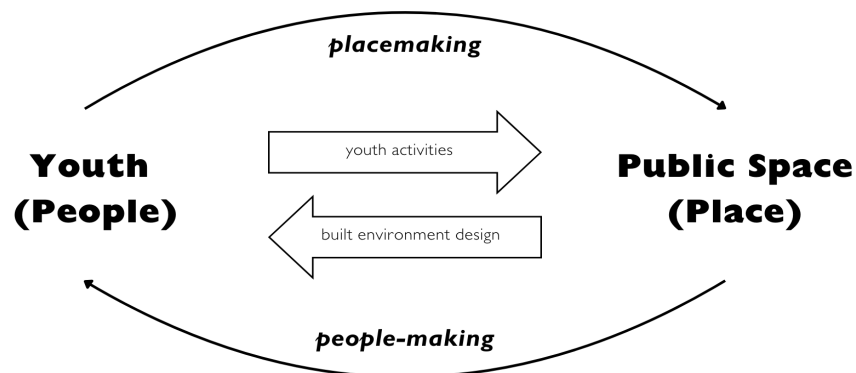Alliance for Safe, Sustainable and Resilient Environments (ASSURE) (2019) Public Parks, Open and

Figure 9. The nexus between placemaking and people-making in the context of youth and public spaces

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