

Case Study in Girl-led Placemaking. Mya Malar Community Park (Yangon, Myanmar)

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Abstract

The Mya Malar community park in Yangon, Myanmar, is an innovative, girl-led placemaking project that stands as a noteworthy case study demonstrating the impact of youth engagement and participatory design on their health and well-being. Completed in 2018 as part of the SPRING Accelerator Program, the project was spearheaded by 15 local girls aged 13 to 18 in collaboration with the community under the guidance of Doh Eain, a local multidisciplinary participatory design practice. Like many societies, girls in Myanmar face significant challenges in accessing and utilising public spaces, often grappling with concerns for their safety and a sense of exclusion from the communal environments. Rather than resorting to the default solution of restricting them to their homes, the Mya Malar project deliberately positioned the girls at the helm of the initiative enabling them to be a key part of the entire process from brainstorming to implementation. The project's significance is further underscored by its contribution to altering the prevailing dynamics of community representation in Yangon. Traditionally dominated by affluent Bamar Buddhist males, the Mya Malar park represented a crucial departure, offering a unique platform for young girls to shape their surroundings by actively navigating the complexities of city systems and participating in urban governance in a city characterised by limited opportunities for youth involvement. The positive outcomes of the project encompassed improvements in the health and well-being of the local youth. By creating a gender-equitable environment, the space promoted an active lifestyle and nurtured social cohesion within the community for a wider demographic, while fostering the soft skills and interpersonal competencies of the participating girls. Its successful amalgamation of social inclusivity, youth civic engagement, and participatory design serves as a testament to the transformative potential of collaborating with youths to shape sustainable and empowering urban environments.

Keywords: girl-led placemaking, youth community management, inclusive gender-equitable public space, youth health and well-being

To cite this article:

Tun Lwin, S.Y. (2024) "Case Study in Girl-led Placemaking: Mya Malar Community Park (Yangon, Myanmar)", *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(2), pp. 209–222. doi: 10.32891/jps.v9i2.1798.

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



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1. Introduction

The Mya Malar Park (MMP), a pioneering girl-led placemaking endeavor in Yangon, Myanmar, offers a compelling case study on the profound impact of youth engagement and participatory design on urban health and well-being. Spearheaded by 15 local girls aged 13 to 18 through the SPRING Accelerator Program in 2018, in collaboration with the community and guided by Doh Eain, the project challenges prevalent societal norms. Empowering girls to actively shape their environment, not only fosters inclusivity but also cultivates vital skills and enhances community cohesion, epitomising the potential for youth-driven urban transformations.

2. Methodology

A literature review was first conducted to gain better understanding of the issues of youth, urban health and well-being, and gender in the local context. A baseline conceptual framework for well-being was also explored to inform the evaluation in this study. The study primarily relied on information and materials collected by Doh Eain (DE), including project notes and reports, images, and survey data from various stages of the project. This was complemented by direct personal interviews with a key project team member, Ms. Cho Cho Shwe, the current Head of Community Engagement at DE and the lead designer of MMP. The author's first-hand experiences and observations of the site and the project as a DE member during this period further enriched the discussions and conclusions drawn in this study.

3. Literature review

3.1 *Urban Health and Well-being*

The concept of urban health and well-being is often discussed in tandem. Health can be defined as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2024). This paper adopts the framework outlined in the Asia Foundation City Life Survey (CLS) 2018 for Myanmar, aligning with the OECD Better Life Initiative framework (2019) due to its high relevance for the subject matter. Thus, well-being is defined as ‘Personal Well-being’, which pertains to individuals’ perceptions of their experiences in life, focusing on subjective evaluations such as satisfaction or anxiety levels. Three other determinants are (1) Economic well-being; (2) Interpersonal well-being; and (3) Physical well-being (Asia Foundation, 2019). These dimensions delve into tangible factors such as income or exercise frequency, shedding light on the reasons behind certain feelings experienced by individuals. Crucially, these aspects are influenced by the conditions of urban governance.

3.2 *Girls in the Urban Environment*

The intersection of girls and their built environment is not a well-researched area in Myanmar, but by analysing research on gender and youth of urban residents in Myanmar, insights can be gained to understand the unique experience of girls at these intersections. Youth Opportunities. The majority of migrating youth settle in urban areas across Myanmar, with Yangon being the key destination, attracting nearly half of all inter-State/Region movers (DoP, 2017), underscoring the need for tailored urban spaces for youth in

Yangon. However, youths in Myanmar perceive limited opportunities for involvement in decision-making within the strong hierarchical culture, with their influence being more impactful in community initiatives but restricted in high-level political spheres (Grizelj, 2018). The top three responses by youths on what they want adults to understand highlighted the importance of recognising youth aspirations, abilities, and the need for flexibility in traditional practices (Grizelj, 2018). To gain recognition, youth – including girls – must showcase credibility and community-focused actions (Grizelj, 2018), emphasising the importance of such opportunities for youth to demonstrate these qualities.

Limited access to public spaces. In urban settings, girls aged 10-19 reported constrained freedom due to real and perceived safety concerns around male presence, leading them to be strongly restricted to their homes, with “verbal harassment and groping” being common risks in public spaces (Bartholomew & Calder, 2018). Additionally, Yangon has one of the lowest ratios of public space per capita in the world of only about 0.4 m² of park space per person (Another Development, 2019).

Restrictive social norms. Social norms impose strict roles, expecting girls to be modest and domestic, limiting their time for study or leisure (Bartholomew and Calder, 2018). These norms, reinforced by mothers, perpetuate gender disparities. Expression of issues is hindered by stigma, with topics like menstruation and violence facing silence and shame (Bartholomew & Calder, 2018). Such constraints perpetuate disenfranchisement among women and girls, compounding their challenges in navigating societal expectations and safety concerns.

Low physical health levels. Among students aged 13 to 15 in Myanmar, 31.5 per cent reported that they “were not physically active for at least 60 min per day for any day of the week” (WHO, 2018). High levels of sedentary activity of three or more hours a day have also increased from 10.5 per cent in 2007 to 16.4 per cent in 2016 (WHO, 2018). The trend has only worsened as figures from 2022 report that 84 per cent of males and 90 percent of females between 11 and 17 years old are physically inactive (WHO, 2022).

3.3 *Girls in Yankin Township*

The Mya Malar Park is located in Yankin, a dense urban township in Yangon, close to the city centre. It has one football field under the *Tatmadaw*¹ Secretary Office and 3 public parks (GAD, 2019). The demographic and school attendance rates of the township provide a glimpse into the state of gender in the area.

Demographics. According to the 2014 census, female youths aged 10 to 19 years old make up 9 per cent of the township’s total population which has a slightly higher total number of females. The township is mostly comprised of working-class families (DoP, 2017). School attendance. School attendance in Yankin township drops after age 12 but remains above the national average, with significant declines observed in post-high school years when 85 per cent of girls and 81 per cent of boys do not attend school (DoP, 2017). Gender disparities persist, with girls consistently exhibiting lower attendance rates than boys.

¹. Military

4. Project materials and interview

4.1 Project initialisation

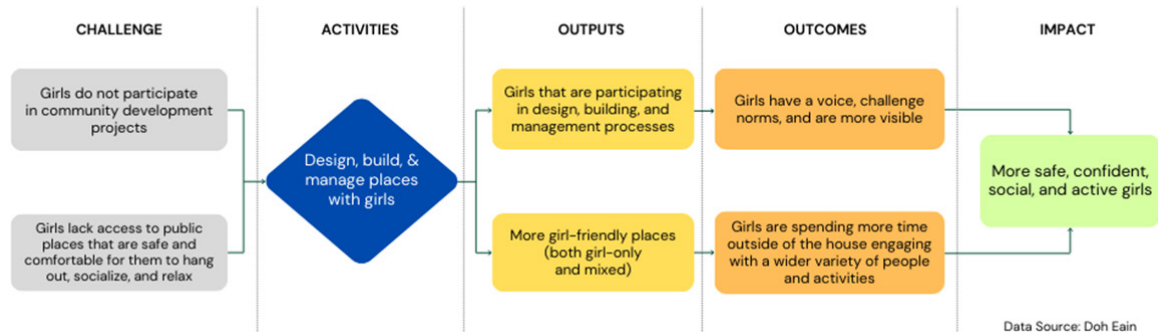


Figure 1. Doh Eain's Theory of Change Conceptual Framework for Impacting Girls (Data: Doh Eain)

The project began in early 2019 by Doh Eain² (DE) as part of the SPRING Accelerator³ program to deliver positive impacts for girls in the public urban realm in Myanmar. As such, a conceptual framework identifying key outputs, outcomes, and impacts was developed to guide their overall approach (Figure 1). To identify a site, the project team reached out to various elected Members of the House of People's Representatives⁴ (MP), prioritising female MPs. Nine potential sites were identified and a set of criteria was developed for site selection. After evaluation by the team, the Mya Malar site in Yankin township which had a female MP was ultimately selected (Table 1).

Selection Criteria	Initial evaluation of Mya Malar
MP / Local Committee Support	High - site suggested by MP & MP is actively supportive of the project.
Safety and Environment of Surroundings	The environment is quiet and calm. There are shops, schools, residential buildings, and a police station near the site.
Availability	Currently undeveloped but open to the public, owned by the DUHD ⁵ .
Accessibility	High – in the central area.
Usage of Site, particularly by girls	No usage as it is an undeveloped, vacant lot. Some use it as a shortcut (Fig. 2).
Size of site	Fair - appropriate for project scope
Threat of privatization	Possible depending on DUHD, but MP will engage with them. No informal settlements.
Team's opinion	Good.

Table 1. Selection Criteria and Final Site's Evaluation (Data: Doh Eain)

² Doh Eain is an interdisciplinary participatory design firm focused on heritage, public spaces and community engagement using design, restoration, research, and education and outreach based in Yangon, Myanmar.

³ SPRING Accelerator is a public-private partnership business accelerator between USAID, the UK DFID, and the Nike Foundation that aims to make a positive impact on the lives of girls in South Asia and East Africa.

⁴ Also known as the House of People's Representatives.

⁵ Department of Urban and Housing Development

The support from the then-MP was critical to the selection and success of the park, as public spaces typically require collaboration with various government bodies. This can often be difficult in the absence of proper political support. In this case, the MP was crucial to convincing DUHD to allow the site to be used for the project (Figure 5).



Figure 2. (left) Project Site Area (Credit: Doh Eain)
Figure 3. (right) Initial Site Image showing shortcut (Credit: Doh Eain)



Figure 4. Project Site Initial Image showing interior (Credit: Doh Eain)

4.2 Project process

Following the selection, the project team engaged with township and ward-level leaders, namely the General Administration Department (GAD) and Ward Officers (WO), in February 2024 for necessary permissions and support regarding community engagement and recruitment of local girls aged 10 – 19. Specifically, the WO of Ward 4 and a passionate community member who was a local English teacher arranged the recruitment. On 2nd March 2019, fifteen girls between 12 and 17 at the time of recruitment formed the core placemaking team with eleven remaining by the end⁶. The girls were all attending school of various levels, and all except one were of the majority Burmese race and Buddhist religion. An official committee was also formed, including one Ward Officer, one ‘Hundred Household Head’ officer, and 3 passionate women from the community, to

⁶. A few girls dropped out due to personal reasons, mainly regarding availability of time.

supervise and maintain the site post-completion.

The '5 D' placemaking process (Figure 6) developed by DE was used to systematically explore and co-design the site with the girls' and occasionally the committee. This involved 9 key events (Figure 7) over two months including workshops, on-site activities, and a Pop-Up Exhibition primarily organised and facilitated by the participating girls. The exhibition enabled them to showcase their accumulated skills and knowledge while sharing their ideas with the community and the public. For instance, the tree-house design (Figure 5) came up as a point of contention as some were concerned about the maintenance. However, the girls were able to clearly communicate how it aligns with the existing large trees and provides a unique landmark for the space, which ultimately convinced the community. Activities engaging with the larger community and public such as 'community build days' to make elements of the park together were also organised to foster greater community interaction.

The site was officially opened on 22nd June 2019.

⁷. The process initially started with 15 girls, and had 11 girls by the launch day 3.



Figure 5. Launch Day of Mya Malar Park (Credit: Doh Eain)



Figure 6. 5Ds of the Girl-led Placemaking Process (Credit: Doh Eain)



Figure 7. Timeline of the Girl-led Placemaking Process (adapted from Doh Eain)

5. Monitoring & Evaluation surveys

5.1 Initial Public Space Mobility Mapping: the Most Visited Public Spaces in Free Time

A public space mobility mapping exercise was conducted with 15 girls at the start of the project to understand their existing interactions with the urban environment. Results reveal primarily home-based activities such as reading and listening to music as the top activities. When they do go out, shopping malls came out as the most frequented place for shopping and dining, and outdoor activities were reported to be limited due to weather, exposure to cars, and lack of facilities.

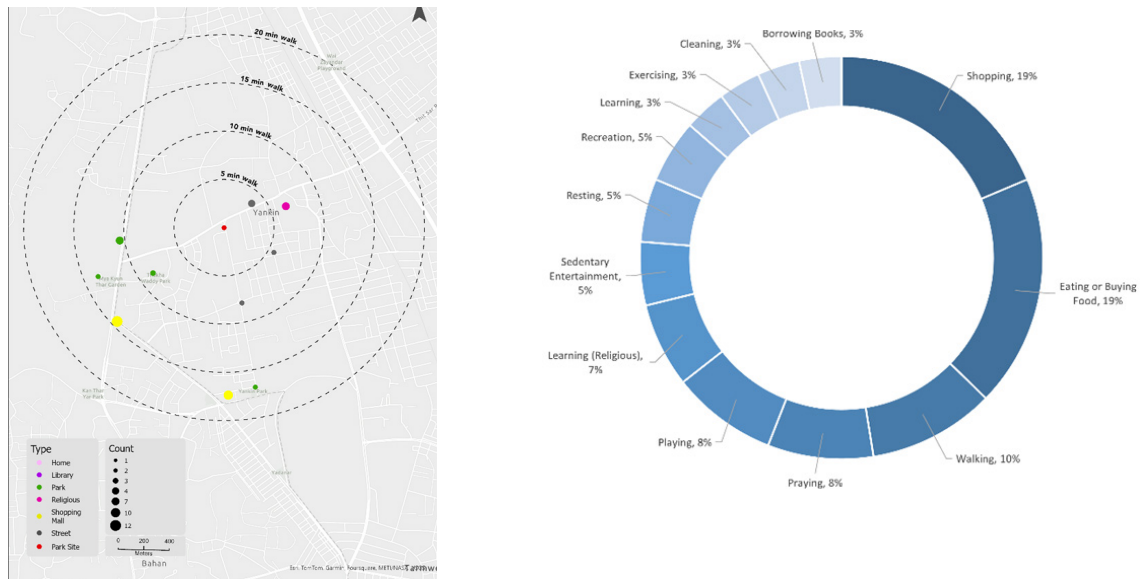


Figure 8. Typical Relaxation Places and Activities of Participating Girls (Data: Doh Eain)

5.2 Participating Girls' Post-Workshops Survey

The survey, conducted on 30th March 2019, with 11 of the girls after the Pop-Up Exhibition, focused on interpersonal relationships and soft skills such as critical thinking. Self-reported perceptions indicated most girls ranked themselves moderate to high in personal capacity and valued diversity and positive intergenerational relationships the highest.

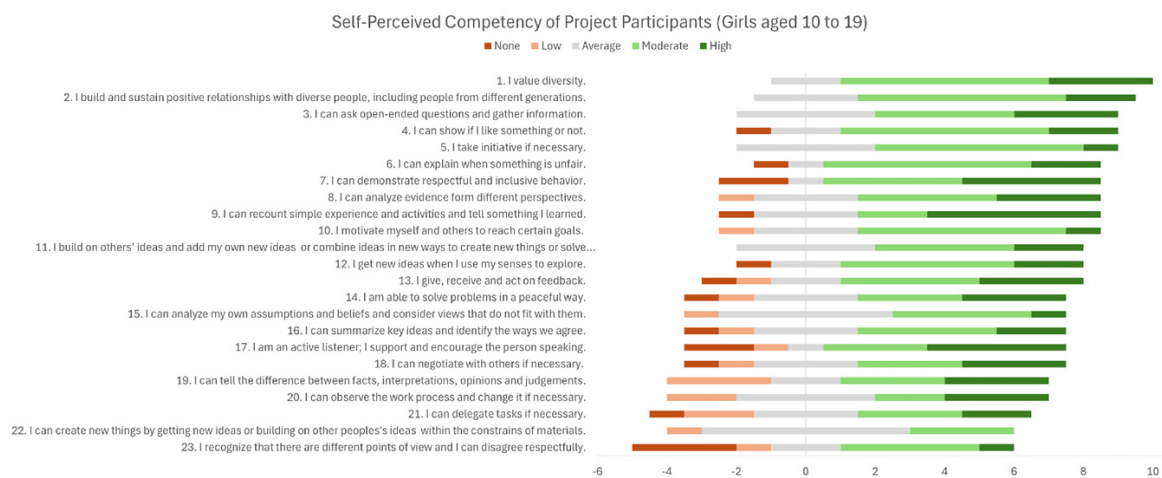


Figure 9. Self-Perceived Perceptions of Participating Girls (Data: Doh Eain)

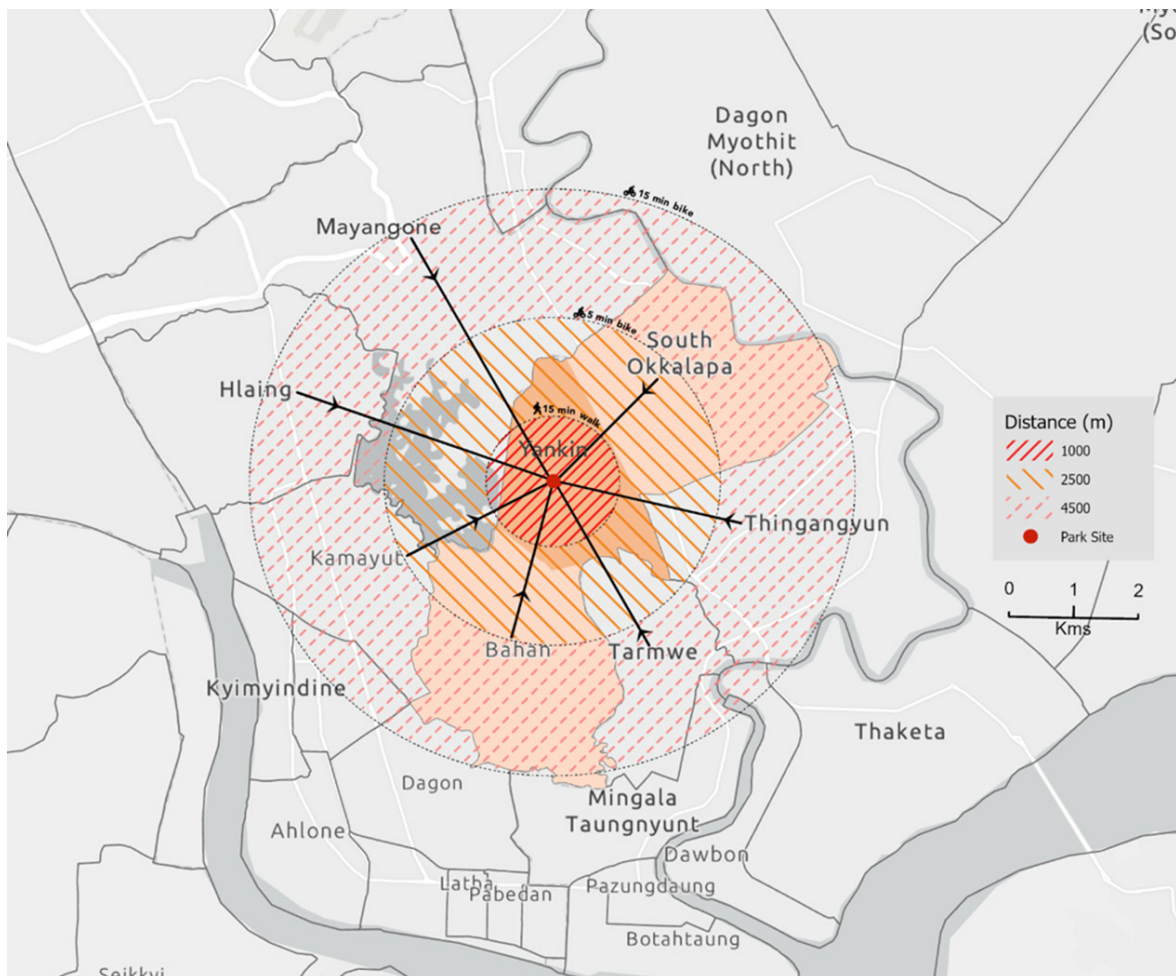


Figure 10. Service Catchment Area of Project Site (Data: Doh Eain)

5.3 Post-Project Occupancy Survey

An occupancy survey was conducted with 29 respondents on 18th October 2019, about four months after completion of the project. Results show that the site served a radius of approximately 4.5 km, roughly an hour's walk, encompassing seven nearby townships. Specifically, 40 percent of respondents came from South Okkalapa and Bahan townships, confirming its reach. Most of Yankin township, where 60 percent of the respondents reside, can reach the site within a 15-minute walk.

The survey also showed that a 55 per cent female and 45 per cent male visitor split, with the 10 per cent difference being among youths aged 13 to 21. There was also a relatively balanced representation across demographics, except for seniors above 60. Notably, all male adults and seniors reported that the park was not attractive to people their age despite their own presence, perceiving it as primarily for children. However, one female adult noted that despite this, those in their age group would still come to accompany their children.

5.4 Quality of Services Provided

Visitors rated mobility as being the highest quality service provided by the park, followed by its welcoming environment, and opportunities to be active with shelter from the

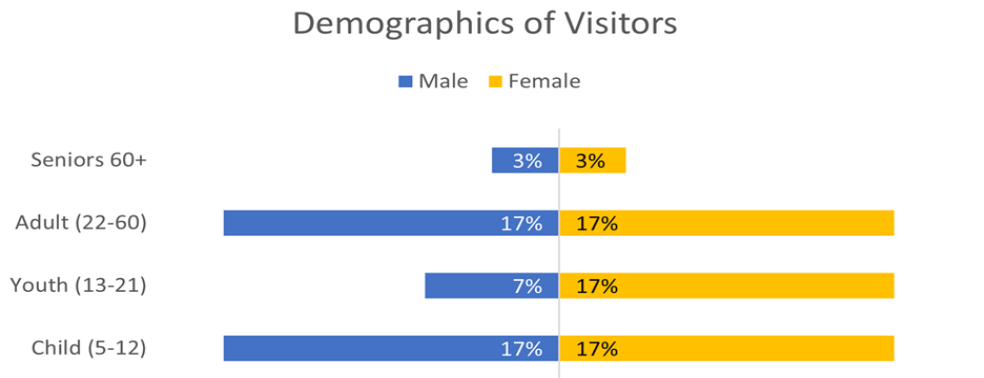


Figure 11. Demographic Pyramid of Visitors

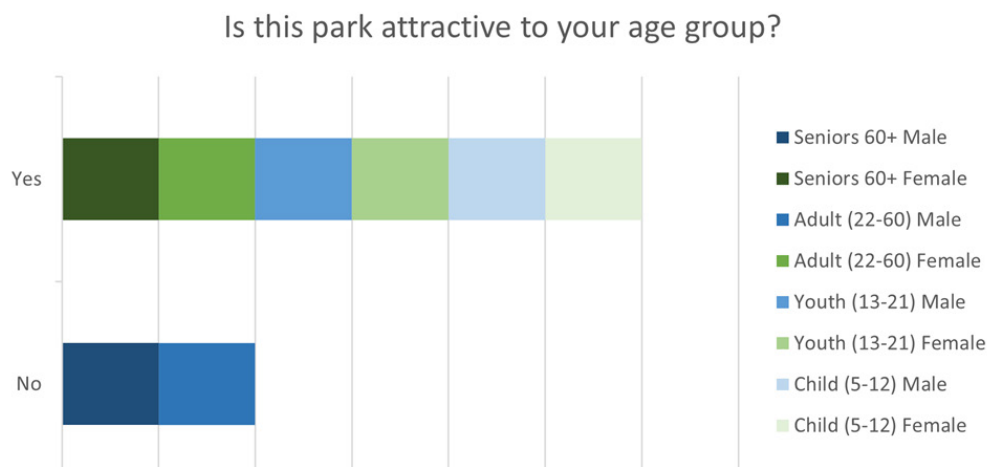


Figure 12. Reported Attractiveness by Age Group and Gender (Data: Doh Eain)

weather. Notably, they rated opportunities for social interaction as the lowest. However, the project team noted that the space was often used for community events, such as holding the first joint Ward 1 and 4 Nibban Market – translated as ‘nirvana’ market where free food and gifts are distributed – in November 2019. Notably, a diverse group of visitors spanning a wide range of ages and ethnic groups was observed (Figs.13 and 14). The project team also noted that in April and May of 2020, around the time of the first wave of COVID-19 in Myanmar, the space became a haven for food delivery drivers who were one of the main workers during the pandemic. The drivers could be observed using the space for rest, to have lunch, or to complete their accounting at the end of the workday (Figure 15). Following the global pandemic, Myanmar faced yet another challenge in February 2021 due to a military coup. As of 2024, in its third year of conflict, most of its political and public institutions continue to be in disarray, with social, economic, and political insecurity surmounting day by day. Despite this, Mya Malar Park continues to operate as noted by the project team, most recently holding a children and youth event to maintain the park with a local school facilitated by Doh Eain in January 2024 (Figure 16 and 17).



Figure 13. (left) People Lining Up for the Nibban Market in Nov 2019 (Credit: Cho Cho Shwe, DE)
Figure 14. (right) Diverse Demographics of Visitors at Nibban Market in Nov 2019 (Credit: Cho Cho Shwe, DE)



Figure 15. Food Delivery Workers utilising the Park during COVID-19 (Source: Cho Cho Shwe, DE)



Figure 16. (left) Local Students Maintaining Plants in MMP (Source: Doh Eain)

Figure 17. (right) Outdoor Painting Activity in MMP (Source: Doh Eain)

6. Discussion

The Mya Malar Park (MMP) project, guided by the CLS framework, significantly enhanced personal, interpersonal, and physical well-being, as evidenced by surveys conducted by DE. Empowering girls to challenge norms, MMP increased their visibility and engagement in diverse activities, marking a departure from predominantly home-based leisure. These benefits extended to the larger community as evidenced by the post-occupancy survey, showing that while the park effectively attracts its primary audience of young females, it also maintains a gender-inclusive environment. It is crucial to maintain this by continuing to support the local community especially through the polycrisis of Myanmar.

However, recruitment processes are primarily reliant on existing networks, limited diversity in race, religion, and possibly socio-economic background. Economic well-being, a key aspect of CLS, remained unexplored both due to privacy concerns regarding data collection, and the lower relevance given the participating members' lack of economic independence.

Setbacks from COVID-19 in 2020 and the military coup in 2021 had significant impacts on the evaluation capacity of the project team, as well as the functioning of the site under 'normal' circumstances. On the other hand, it provided a glimpse into the resilience of community-led efforts in such times of extreme challenges as MMP stands as a beacon within the community, continuously maintained by the local committee and used by communities to this day amid ongoing challenges in Myanmar's governance.

Myanmar's exploration of subjective well-being in youth experiences, especially concerning their built environment, remains limited. However, with the increasing importance of youth participation, pilot projects like MMP are steering the country towards a more comprehensive understanding and consideration of youth perspectives and needs.

7. Conclusion

So, what does a girl-led placemaking look like? When done right, it can look like any well-designed place, but the difference truly shines in how it functions. The purpose of any minority-led efforts in the pursuit of inclusion in public spaces is not to carve out an exclusive area meant solely for the marginalised group in question; rather, it is to ensure that the needs and wants of the underrepresented group are equitably represented to

ensure that they have a space alongside everyone else in the public realm. In the case of Mya Malar Park, this is evident.

In Yankin, a setting where placemaking is crucial, Mya Malar Park exemplifies how it empowers youth and girls, bridging gender disparities and fostering community cohesion. The process also contributes greatly to the success of the space, giving girls greater confidence and motivation to occupy these spaces. Simultaneously, the overall resilience of the space is strengthened by the participatory process, as seen from its continued functionality despite the difficult circumstances. It underscores the importance of participatory processes in creating inclusive environments that empower marginalised communities to actively engage in shaping their surroundings, not only for themselves but for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to the Doh Eain team for their contributions to this research that made this paper possible. Particular thanks are to Cho Cho Shwe and Pyae Phyo Zaw from Doh Eain for their time. I would also like to thank Ankur Negi for his technical guidance and support.

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