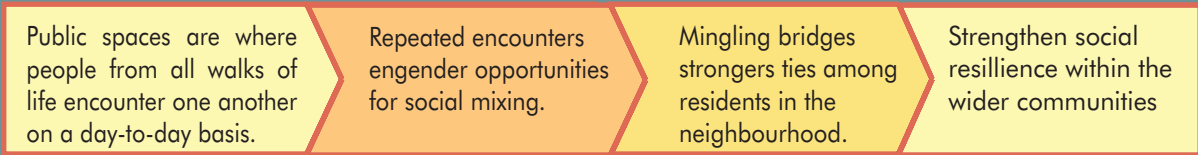


# PUBLIC SPACES AND SOCIAL MIXING\*

## Empress Market and Food Centre & Buangkok Sports Park

This project aims to discover how public spaces can facilitate social mixing among individuals of different socioeconomic status (SES), and thus strengthen social resilience, by examining such spaces that are nestled between public and private housing estates.



### Research Question

What factors of a public space contribute to social mixing?



Social mixing refers to interactions between people of different social groups<sup>1</sup> classified as :

**Passive Contact:** simply being in the presence of others

**Chance Contact:** non-personal interaction

**Familiar Stranger:** face-based affiliations

## METHODOLOGY

Participant Observations

### Mapping elements of the built-environment:

Identify purpose-built amenities and fixtures, and other 'foreign' objects introduced by frequent users.

### Tracing users' movements:

Plot paths users take and the areas where they dwell. User demographics like age range and gender were also noted.

### Partaking of activities at the site:

Making more notes on the user demographics and interactions between individuals/ groups of people.



Digital Ethnography

Trawling through social media posts (Instagram) with specific geotags. Data was encoded manually, including user profile, post content and captions and hashtags used.



Interviews

Conducting interviews with select users to uncover more insights, asking them if they interact with other user, whether they were comfortable with how the space is and how they would like to improve it.



### EMPRESS MARKET

### STUDY SITES

### BUANGKOK SPORTS PARK

COMMERCIAL NODE

TYPOLOGIES

SPORTING COMMUNITY FITNESS

COMMERCIAL

ACTIVITIES

HOBBY/SPORTS-DRIVEN

HAWKER CENTRE, MARKET, PLAYGROUND, MRT STATION, OVERHEAD BRIDGE, MSCP

SURROUNDINGS

BUS STOP, PCN, SUPERMARKET, PAVILION

\* This research topic was sponsored by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) for the Masters of Science in Urban Science, Policy and Planning programme at SUTD. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not reflect the views of URA.



# SITES AND

# EMPRESS MARKET

## 01. SEATING & SHADING

Seating can encourage gatherings and thus inc

There is a variety of seating in Empress, grouped as outdoor and indoor, each used by different user groups. By midday, the outdoor seating (planters and playground ledge) had become void of users, whereas the indoor seating (benches along the edge of market & hawker centre, lift lobby benches) were occupied regardless of the time of day, highlighting the importance of shading for seating.



## 02. CONNECTIVITY

Refers to how well a public space can be accessed from the im

Good connectivity can attract more users to the space, affecting

Empress market is sunken in relation to the adjacent Farrer Road. One would need to climb up or down a flight of stairs to get to and from the external pedestrian walkway, thus reducing the connectivity of the space. Lack of at-grade traffic crossing across Farrer Road, and thus having to cross an overhead bridge to/from Empress is a deterrence for residents living opposite. Frequent gridlocks happening outside the multistorey carpark may deter visitors too.



## 03. VISIBILITY OF AMENITIES

Lack thereof may render amenities un

The row of outdoor hawker seating tucked away behind the hawker centre, hidden from view of the HDB block. As a result, it sometimes attract unsavory behaviour during the wee hours of the day, which residents consider a nuisance.

In the day, hawkers use the area as a dumping ground for their empty cartons, making the place appear messy, thereby preventing social interactions from occurring here.



## 04. PASSIONATE USERS

Certain users of the space are invested in the com

Compared to the residents, some of the business owners seem interested to make the space more convivial through co-creation of the space. Their ideas are related to what Sennett called "coordinative designs".<sup>3</sup> The owner of a famous bakery suggested organizing a flea market in the heart of the space to enliven it. The popular roast meat stall owner shared his aspiration to improve social cohesion among his fellow hawkers. These indicate that coordinative efforts with business owners might be met with higher levels of success and could be essential in getting different people to mingle and foster interactions.



## 05. TYPOLOGY OF SPACE

Observed to lead to different types and levels

Empress market is a commercial node with a host of commercial activities. The types of interactions in Empress thus range from no contact to familiar strangers, generally leading to shallow ties among users.

Most interactions tend to be transactional. This could be because many of these business owners are older and face language barrier, especially when interacting with the foreigner residents, who form a significant population of the users here.

Pets and children were observed to be major stimulus for interactions here largely due to its user demographics, and the presence of a vet and a playground.



<sup>1</sup> Risom, J., Merker, B., Muessig, A., Scharnhorst, E. (2016). The Public Life Diversity Toolkit 2.0. Gehl Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Carmona, M., Tiesdell, S., Heath, T., & Oc, T. (2010). Public Places Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design (2nd edn). London: Architectural Press.

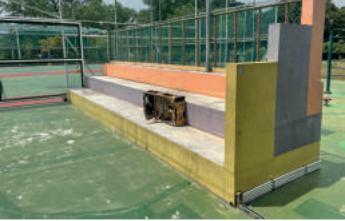
<sup>3</sup> Sennett, R. (2018) Building and dwelling: ethics for the city. First American edition, USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

# FINDINGS

## BUANGKOK SPORTS PARK



increase opportunities for social interactions.<sup>2</sup> Shading enhances user comfort, further facilitating interactions.



The seating here can be classified as formal or informal. The entire park has only 4 benches that were shaded and were therefore always occupied. While the grandstands also provide an alternative form of formal seating, they tend to be empty in midday. The lack of proper and sheltered seating forces the various social groups to gather in the pavilion, especially during hot weather, where they sit anywhere on the floor to rest or eat, creating opportunities for mingling.

mediate surrounding pedestrian or vehicular links.

g opportunities for social mixing.



The park is open, and fences to the courts are not locked, making the space feel more approachable and inviting. Despite its porosity, the park has only one proper access along Buangkok Crescent. Users coming from Lorong Buangkok must take a circuitous route, especially to get to the back of the park. The lack of dedicated vehicular parking is another common gripe. Nearest parking is far, about 7-10 min walk away.

derutilized or even turn them into disamenities, discouraging social interaction in the area.



The inward-facing public toilet in the corner of the park is blocked from view by a grandstand, facilitating illicit activities in the toilets, which have been locked following complaints. The water cooler and vending machine were also removed due to underutilization.

community and are passionate about improving the space.



Several interviewees complained that the park is poorly-designed. A skater suggested that the shelter could be much larger. Some were also unhappy at the lack of formal maintenance and surveillance of the place. On the other hand, users keep the space clean themselves. Some skaters also leave their own ramps in the park for communal use.

These actions, together with the feedback to improve the space, highlight users' interest in the space, and how much they care for it.

of social interactions.



Buangkok is a community fitness area; the activities are hobby-driven. Interactions range from chance contact to friends, generally promoting deeper ties among users. Hobby groups exist among skaters and footballers. They regard one another as friends and know each other by name. Some even hang out outside of the park. Most interactions observed between different social groups were facilitated by sports and hobbies, and were more likely to occur if there were children present. Note that pets, especially dogs, would be an inappropriate impetus for social mixing as many users here are Malay-Muslim, and dogs are considered haram to them.

# INTERVENTIONS

## EMPRESS MARKET

### Inject interactivity in the variety of seating

#### What

Seating like playground ledges could be re-designed or re-painted with artwork that reflect the history of the area. Adaptive reuse of planter seating by incorporating encircling tables and benches around the tree to prolong dwelling.

#### How

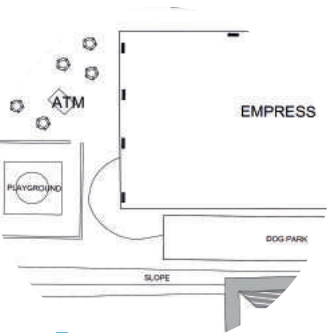
Interactive elements provide varying degrees of engagement with the space, while increasing chances for spontaneous contact and social interaction.<sup>4</sup> Historical and cultural heritage also contribute to the character of a place.<sup>5</sup>



### Relocate outdoor tables & repurpose space

Outdoor tables located in the 'back-alley' would be better utilized if relocated to the main open space to serve as a more prominent focal point of interaction. Repurpose and revitalized the empty space by turning it into a dog "parking spot".

Rule of "triangulation"<sup>6</sup>: the arrangement and linkage of programs and amenities in space could substantially contribute to the intensity of its use and of social interaction.



## Pioneer Heartland Improvement District (HID) programme

Bring together various stakeholders and agencies, provide funding to implement business owners' initiatives. Supported by heartland subcommittees in which business owners can arrange regular meetings to address key issues and help one another.

Higher levels of community engagement by residents and visitors can lead to more utilized and happening spaces. Activities tapping into common interests, like food, and that are in places with high foot traffic could attract different groups of people, especially those who do not live in the vicinity, thereby facilitating social mixing.

## BUANGKOK SPORTS PARK

### Open space, extend shelter & introduce hybrid furnishing

Open the space (especially in underutilized areas), expand shelter of pavilion and introduce hybrid furnishing to allow multiple types of usage and facilitate interactions between different group of users.

Designing incomplete systems does not conform to a specific set of programs, but rather leaves room for suggestion of cognitive activities<sup>7</sup>, providing a platform for creativity of users as there are already instances of existing coordinative movements from users who share and create their own equipment.



### Create another access point into the park

Create another access point via the back of the park, and re-route sidewalk along Lor Buangkok to re-direct pedestrians to walk along the park to get to the bus stop, potentially increasing opportunities for serendipitous encounters and uses of the park by passers-by.

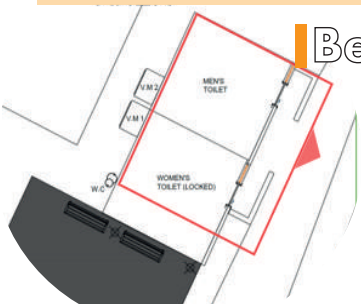
Connecting the park to the immediate surroundings could facilitate movements, contributing to the intensification of social contact and interaction, while creating diversity of use and users of the space<sup>8</sup>.



### Better visibility, maintenance and surveillance

Regular cleaning and fresh coat of paint. Re-position restrooms so the opening faces outwards. Regular cleaning of toilets must be scheduled too. Some form of surveillance to be installed in the park, one facing the exterior of the toilet, another in the pavilion.

The evidence of maintenance would increase the attractiveness of the place<sup>9</sup> and also have the effect of drawing more people, especially non-regular users to engender opportunities for mixing.



<sup>4</sup> Carmona, M., Tiesdell, S., Heath, T., & Oc, T. (2010). Public Places Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design (2nd edn). London: Architectural Press.

<sup>5</sup> Shafoote, H. (2012). Convivial urban spaces: Creating effective public places. Earthscan.

<sup>6</sup> Whyte, W. H. (1980). The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces. Washington, DC: Conservation Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> Cobb, J.M., "Toward a Behavioral Basis for Urban Planning and Design: Inquiry Into Decision Processes and the Psychosocial Costs of Planned Environmental Change" (1976). Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations. 2674, from <https://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/2674>

<sup>8</sup> Carmona, M., Tiesdell, S., Heath, T., & Oc, T. (2010). Public Places Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design (2nd edn). London: Architectural Press; Jacobs J. (1976). The Death and Life of Great American Cities New York: Random House

<sup>9</sup> Newton, R., & Ormerod, M. (2007). IDGO Inclusive Design for Getting Outdoors. Retrieved from [http://www.idgo.ac.uk/design\\_guidance/factsheets/seating.htm](http://www.idgo.ac.uk/design_guidance/factsheets/seating.htm).