

SPACE: DEAD OR CATALYST FOR CHANGE?

Philip Tan (Epic Communities)

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD OF REVITALISING UNDER-UTILISED SPACES

In Malaysia, it is common to find dead public spaces located in leftover parcels of public housing developments due to poor planning, cost constraints and mismanagement. Can these underused spaces be a catalyst for change within the community?

Epic Communities Malaysia is sharing the placemaking process that they've developed to guide other placemakers and their stakeholders in transforming spaces into places. Epic acknowledges that each space and community is unique, therefore, the process was designed to be flexible, moulding itself to the needs of the community and its external factors.

A PUBLIC LIBRARY

The story of PJS6 Library (PJS6) in Petaling Jaya began with an architect who grew up in the neighbourhood who saw an opportunity to bring a community space back to life. Together with other passionate residents, they lobbied Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ) for the redevelopment of an



PJS6 site, before.

abandoned community building. This building was in a corner lot that adjoins an intersection with heavy traffic. The site was uninviting and had become a hotspot for crime.

Epic was invited by MBPJ to engage the participation of the local community in designing the lot's outdoor spaces. The participatory design process that they developed represents a loop that cycles in five stages: Initiate, Engage, Develop, Activate and Empower.

The loop reflects the reality that places are alive, organic and ever-changing. Ideally, a project should complete each phase and continue to flow through the cycles.

THE PROCESS

1. Initiate

The first step was *streetcombing*. Inspired by *beachcombing*, the team walked the streets to look for ideas, inspiration and valuable insights. *Streetcombing* allows them to meet with the community at their pace and in an informal manner — along the street, playgrounds, at the local shops or the weekly night market. They asked residents simple questions about their lifestyle, interests and familiarity with their neighbourhood. This helped the team to build valuable relationships with the locals and to contact interested participants who would like to explore the placemaking activities further.



Community engagement with voting for outdoor public spaces.

2. Engage

Collaboration is a key factor in gathering community interest. To build momentum, Epic conducted a series of engagements. The first layer involved a vote for ideas and spaces. They worked with MBPJ, relevant authorities, resident's associations and locals to build awareness around the project. Call-outs to participate in a series of co-design workshops and ideation sessions were made via social media channels and through word-of-mouth to ensure cost-efficiency.

As with most cultures, food connects people. Epic's engagements are called *Kopi Sessions* (Coffee Sessions) and they involve chats over coffee and local desserts. The first public engagement was conducted during the local council's launch ceremony. Although there were many respondents, unfortunately the results were skewed due to the majority of participants being adults.

To bring in younger participants, the Epic team had to re-strategise to provide a holistic overview of the community's aspirations. Using a design thinking approach, they organised a session that was inclusive of all ages by using modelling clay, LEGO blocks, art and storytelling as tools.

3. Develop

To develop the ideas gathered in the previous stage, participatory co-design workshops were conducted with groups to draw out a collective outcome for the space. In the process of co-creation, we see empowerment fostered through the community taking ownership of their spaces.

4. Activate

"We see activation as life flowing through space. In PJS6, the participants collectively voted for a sports court, recycling centre, community garden and a small café kiosk to supplement the use of the library. These spaces were then actualised and built by the city council," explains Philip Tan, Project Manager at Epic Communities Malaysia.

Today, the community frequents the library. It's a space to meet friends or read a book in a pleasant setting.

"Our recent visit discovered that locals embraced the space as their own and have felt safer with the activated surroundings as this has deterred drunkards, crime and waste. The success of the community's involvement in PJS6 also saw some teenagers forming a committee to run small activities in the space such as movie nights," tells Philip.

Although the overall space has improved in serving the community, some of the co-created spaces such as the community garden, recycling centre and café kiosk still have the potential to be used to its full capacity. Speaking with users, they expressed hope for the kiosk to be operational as there are no other food stalls in the vicinity. The staff informed Epic that many entrepreneurs were hesitant to lease the space given the risk of running a full-time business in a place with perceived low footfalls.



Co-Developing with the community.



PJS6 Library today.



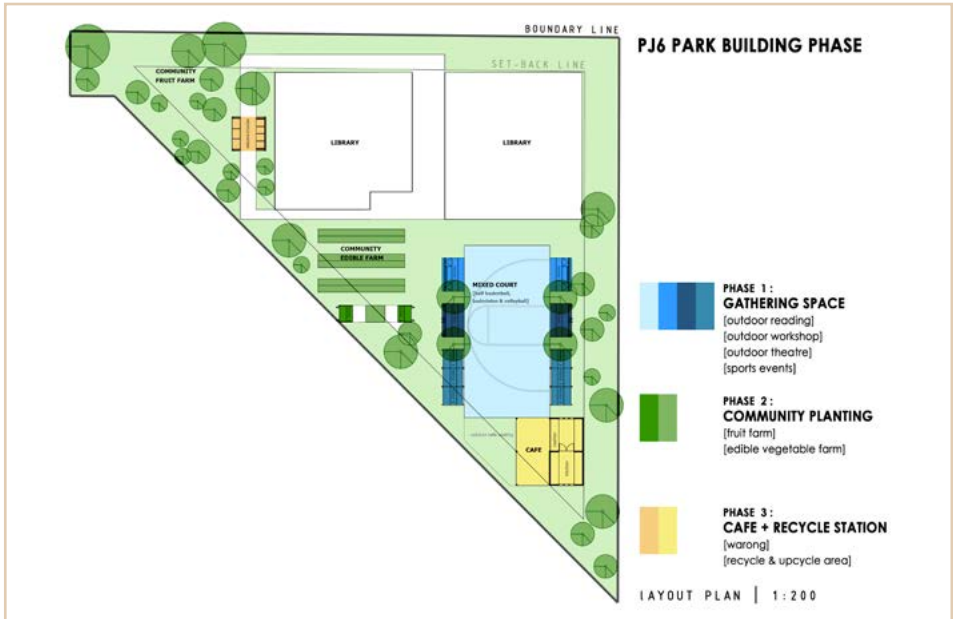
The Community Edible Garden today.



Inside the PJS6 Library today.



Launch Day and the outdoor spaces, with the cafe kiosk in the background.



Results from the co-creation workshops driving design and spatial planning.

Hence, Epic is exploring an ownership / tenancy model, which would see the kiosk space leased to micro-entrepreneurs on a pop-up basis; businesses rotating each week to keep the space active. Combined with a lower rental commitment, this could minimise the barriers of entry for micro-entrepreneurs. By bringing life back to the kiosk, the hope is that this will activate the outdoor spaces further.

5. Empower

Empowerment begins with small steps to create change agents. Through Epic’s activities, the team came across local champions — individuals who are passionate to see their community prosper and thrive. “By allowing them to share openly with us we have also worked to improve our

engagements to meet our objectives. Inspired by the cyclic process and seeing the community transformed, some champions even started their own placemaking projects in their communities!” states Philip proudly.

CONCLUSION

As the community goes through the cycle, the aim is to see a transformation in the community through a place. In this, a place merely acts as a catalyst for users to become empowered individuals.

DO'S

- **Gather a dedicated collective of stakeholders** to commit to completing the cycle as this would strengthen the outcomes when faced with external pressures. This also minimises the risk of the space becoming under-utilised again.
- **Explore opportunities with your local council members.** They are there to represent their community and could help connect you with the right parties.
- **Listen to the community in their natural environment** for insights and ideas by streetcombing.
- **Encourage participation of all age groups.** Children can be included through playful activities like kicking a ball to vote for a 'design outcome' goal of their choice.

DON'TS

- **Be afraid to explore unconventional routes to gain trust,** interest and feedback such as casual conversations.
- **Underestimate the influence of empowering others to act on local interventions.** It is contagious and can lead to individual change.
- **Overlook grassroots activation in top-down led projects,** as they represent the daily users of the space.

About Epic Communities

Epic Communities seeks to make it accessible for communities to participate in forming thriving and sustainable environments. The company had its origins in building shelter for the Orang Asli (indigenous people of Malaysia) using a participatory design process. Recognising the importance of this process in urban cities, the company was formed to tackle urban and built environment challenges.