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ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS: SPATIAL BEHAVIOUR OF THE HOMELESS IN KUALA LUMPUR

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Abstract

Shelter is one of the human basic needs. One of a person's necessities is a place to live. Homelessness in Kuala Lumpur is a growing concern, and this study explored how homeless people navigate through Kuala Lumpur's urban spaces for survival. It aimed to understand their sleeping habits and how the decisions reflect the basic human needs. The study employs a qualitative approach through observation and appraisal in five identified homeless concentrated nodes in Kuala Lumpur: Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Masjid Jamek, and Pudu. An appraisal was used to record homeless behaviours, using thematic analysis to detect trends. The data collected indicate that self-built shelters, valuable organisations, well-lit areas, and coverings are intentional survival strategies. Through the interpretation of the theories of Architecture without Architects, Hierarchy of Needs, and Environmental Psychology, the data show that homeless individuals may adapt to public spaces to secure safety, privacy, belonging, and dignity. These behaviours, even under deprived conditions, demonstrated that humans will naturally adapt themselves to meet their basic needs. The study found that homeless people's spatial behaviour was an intentional strategy and that, unlike current law enforcement strategies, understanding it may yield more inclusive design and policy solutions to eradicate homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.

Keywords: Homelessness, Architecture without Architects, Spatial Behaviour, Kuala Lumpur, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is one of the major urban issues globally and is particularly visible in Kuala Lumpur. Homeless populations in Kuala Lumpur are mainly concentrated in central urban areas like Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Pudu and Masjid Jamek. These locations attract the homeless due to their access to welfare services, social connections, and potential economic opportunities (Jasni et al., 2022). However, the current literature on homelessness in Kuala Lumpur primarily focuses on policy, welfare, and rehabilitation initiatives, often overlooking discussions on the spatial behaviours of the homeless, which are crucial in understanding their lived experiences and survival strategies (Hisham & Amin, 2023). Understanding homelessness issues through an architectural perspective encourages deeper discussion of informal self-built shelters, as suggested by the concept of Architecture without Architects (Hisham & Amin, 2023; Rudofsky, 1987). The micro-architecture these homeless people build explains how they adjust to their situations. The features of these temporary shelters reflect their resilience in the face of financial and social barriers (Amir et al., 2024). Their spatial behaviours highlighted unmet needs as they navigate urban areas to ensure safety, visibility, and access to food for survival (Jasni et al., 2022).

Homelessness in Kuala Lumpur is affected by factors such as poverty, issues of mental health, and social stigma (Rom et al., 2022). Underprivileged homeless people often face disease threats due to living in poor living conditions (Ahmad et al., 2021). Moreover, homelessness in Kuala Lumpur has become more diversified, with an increasing proportion of families, women, and youth (Razak et al., 2024). The diversity highlights the need for effective strategies to address the fundamental root cause of homelessness in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the spatial behaviour of Kuala Lumpur's homeless people and interpret them through human needs theory to inform an inclusive design framework.

This study is guided by the research question: How do homeless people in Kuala Lumpur adapt to urban areas by building informal shelters, and what does this reveal about their basic human needs? The method of this study is behavioural observation to understand their survival strategies in urban spaces. The objectives are to investigate the spatial behaviours of the homeless in Kuala Lumpur with a focus on how informal shelter practices reflect the basic human needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Architecture Without Architects

Bernard Rudofsky's concept of Architecture without Architects highlights the importance of informal and vernacular architectural practices in addressing homelessness. (Rudofsky, 1964). The concept explains the demonstration of

homeless survival-driven design as they navigate through the urban spaces (Whiteford, 2008). The homeless often set up or build their informal shelters to address immediate needs, using whatever materials they can find, demonstrating their thinking and resilience in design (Whiteford, 2008). Rudofsky's theory proposes that architecture comprises not only the works of architects but also the informal, practical responses of individuals to their environment. This is relevant to the homeless, who often create spaces that serve as shelter and places for community engagement (Moss & Irving, 2024). Homeless people in urban areas often creatively modify and repurpose urban spaces to enhance their sense of security and belonging in challenging situations. These behaviours align with their immediate survival needs and typically reflect local customs and cultural norms (Whiteford, 2008).

The characteristics of self-built informal shelters inform discussions of homelessness and adequate housing in urban areas. This shows that homelessness is related to architectural practice, where informal, survival-driven design is a response to the socioeconomic challenges it poses (Wittman, 2017). These informal shelters or settlements highlight the unmet needs of marginalised communities, often prompting innovative architectural solutions that can inform urban and housing policies (Meshkani, 2024). Furthermore, informal settlements often utilise locally accessible materials, and these practices may have significant implications for sustainability (Kozłowska, 2021). Research also highlighted that to address homelessness effectively, design practices must collaborate with homeless people and reflect their lived experiences (Wittman, 2017). Understanding homelessness through the concept of Architecture without Architects encourages us to explore effective solutions by shifting our approaches to urban design and architecture. In addressing homelessness, it is essential to recognise and integrate informal shelters into broader urban discussions, as homelessness is not just a social issue but also a challenge requiring more participatory and innovative architectural responses.

Homelessness and Urban Spaces

Homelessness is not a monolithic condition but a complex urban social phenomenon. This includes different segments of the population with diverse circumstances that produced different spatial needs and behaviour (Somerville, 2013). The European Federation of organisations working with people who are homeless (FEANTSA) has developed The European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) framework for classifying homelessness. There are four categories of homelessness, which are roofless, houseless, insecure and inadequate (Edgar, 2012). In the Malaysian context, all these categories are relevant, and this study will focus on the first category, the roofless.

Globally, responses to homelessness have been divided, especially over how urban spaces are utilised. Infrastructure, such as flyovers, sidewalks, and benches, has become a haven for the homeless to live their daily lives. These public spaces are used for survival, as homeless individuals utilise any available structures for shelter, rest, and socialisation (Bergamaschi et al., 2014). However, this adaptation by the homeless often involves hostile architecture, which is used to discourage homeless people from using these spaces (Rosenberger, 2019). Hostile architecture, such as anti-homeless spikes, benches and barriers, discourages them from lying down and blocks access to possible sleeping areas (Petty, 2016). These elements are not just physical interventions but also a broader social mindset that marginalises the homeless population. Somehow, hostile architecture effectively prevented homeless people from accessing, making their efforts to survive even more difficult (Albertsen and Knight, 2025). This design strategy has sparked further discussion about how to address marginalised urban populations and how authorities prioritise maintaining aesthetics and functional urban environments over addressing the root causes of homelessness (Rosenberger, 2019).

Kuala Lumpur Context

In Kuala Lumpur, homelessness is linked to factors such as the legal framework, social and urban issues. The government has demonstrated approaches to eradicate homelessness through the implementation of the Destitute Persons Act 1977 and the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLKLCHCH) municipal law. This law grants authorities the power to act against individuals categorised as destitute (Jasni et al., 2023). Somehow, under the same law, government interventions are usually aimed at containing and removing rather than providing relevant support that addresses the root cause of homelessness (Hisham & Amin, 2023; Hisham et al., 2025).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) frequently support government initiatives by providing food supplies, welfare assistance and advocacy for the rights of homeless people (Rom et al., 2022). NGOs tend to work towards creating a more compassionate environment for the homeless, while the government might focus more on the aesthetic value and functionality of these public spaces. However, from the overview of the legal framework and NGOs' initiatives, a gap is evident: a misalignment between current policies and the actual needs of the homeless population. Due to rapid urbanisation and the inadequate provision of affordable housing during the 1980s to 1990s, squatter settlements were visible around Kuala Lumpur (Aziz, 2012). These settlements were defined as self-built, informal structures that reflected a survival-driven approach to shelter. The dwellers built the structures from available materials, which not only provided immediate housing but also demonstrated the marginalised community's resiliency and resourcefulness under pressure from

socioeconomic and urban policies (Neuwirth, 2016). Today's homeless people have adapted to the challenges of urban life by occupying urban spaces, such as sidewalks, benches, and underpasses or bridges, as shelters, a method like that used in setting up settlements as survival strategies (Hisham & Amin, 2023). Malaysia's rapid urbanisation and homelessness highlight the critical need for an inclusive policy that considers everyone's socioeconomic circumstances (Rusenko, 2014).

Theoretical Understanding of the Spatial Behaviour of the Homeless in Kuala Lumpur

The study is anchored in Rudofsky's (1964) theory of Architecture without Architects and supported by two explanatory theories: Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Appleton's (1975) Prospect and Refuge. The Architecture without Architects suggested that non-pedigreed and vernacular buildings were built in response to needs, climate, and material availability (Rudofsky, 1964). This concept acts as the central lens in the study of homeless behaviour when they choose or build their own shelter. The self-built improvised shelters, adapted to hostile street furniture or barriers used for territorial marking, are solutions developed by the homeless (Lehmann, 2020). Even though they are considered urban disorder, they are a sign of contemporary urban vernacular. And this architecture, without the architects, is generated by the same logic of necessity suggested by Rudofsky.

The Hierarchy of Needs is useful in understanding homelessness issues, particularly in Kuala Lumpur. The hierarchy consists of five levels of human needs: physiological, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. By meeting basic physiological needs, such as food, water, and shelter, human lives can progress to higher levels of the hierarchy (Omodan & Abejide, 2022). Somehow, for most homeless people, the basic physiological needs are often unmet. This is due to limited access to food, clean water, and proper shelter, which increases health risks and perpetuates the cycle of poverty (DeMuynck, 2017). The theory helps explain how the homeless choose their resting areas. During the physiological phase, the homeless are drawn to areas with access to basic human needs, including food, potable water, sanitation, and protection, particularly from Malaysia's tropical rain and heat.

For the homeless, reaching the level of self-esteem and actualisation is very challenging. One of the reasons is the social stigma that frequently results in loss of respect and dignity. This has made it challenging for them to develop positive self-perceptions (DeMuynck, 2017). The application of the Hierarchy of Needs theory to homelessness issues highlights the need for an inclusive solution that considers both immediate and higher-level needs. Understanding the importance of self-built informal shelters for these homeless individuals may

significantly inform current policy by creating spaces suitable for everyone, regardless of status.

The lived experience of homeless people is highly influenced by behavioural and environmental factors, particularly in the context of self-built shelters and the broader concept of Architecture without Architects. While the theory of Prospect and Refuge explores how behaviour interacts with the built environment, it encompasses aspects of territoriality, privacy regulations, and the design of self-built shelters (Moser & Uzzell, 2003). For safety and security, this theory supplies the spatial choice. It suggested that humans will occupy a space affording a vantage point from which they may observe or foresee environmental dangers. Refuge proposed the ability to create or choose safe spaces for rest or recharge without interruption (Appleton, 1975). Individuals who self-build their own shelters may control the level of exposure and public interactions by designing their shelters to reflect their sense of privacy and separation from the external environment (Evans, 2003). These design aspects may improve mental health conditions by creating a private and safe space that helps individuals cope with social and emotional challenges that may be caused by homelessness (Evans, 2003).

Prospect and Refuge can be applied to homelessness; however, an important gap remains in understanding the behavioural factors involved. It is how the built environment shapes homeless actions and lived experiences in urban settings that have not yet been thoroughly studied, largely due to the absence of spatial and design-oriented research (Verderber, 2014). For effective, inclusive urban design, it is essential to understand how self-built shelter design affects spatial behaviour, privacy, and the overall well-being of homeless people. This has highlighted the urgent need for thorough research in these areas. Addressing the issue of homelessness requires an understanding of the spatial behaviour and how the homeless interact with their environment to survive. These studies may help fill gaps in research on homeless behaviour and aid the development of design principles that foster a sense of security, belonging, and dignity.

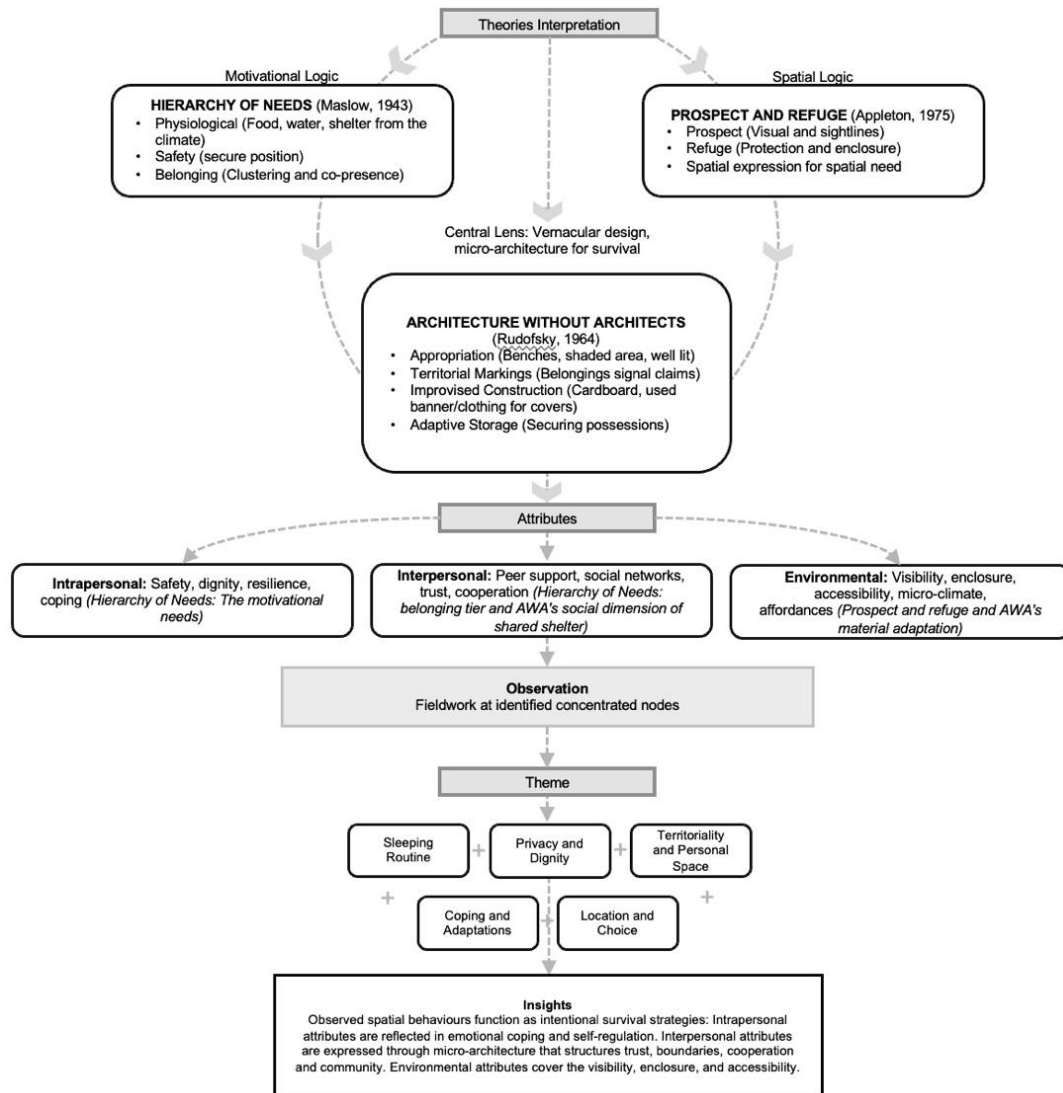


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of the study. Source: Author, 2026

The diagram above presents the conceptual framework of this study, which outlines the study of Kuala Lumpur's homeless spatial behaviour, beginning with observations at identified concentrated node areas. Architecture without Architects translated into four observable indicators coded for fieldwork observation: i) *Appropriation*: The repurposing of urban elements beyond the intended designed function, ii) *Improvised construction*: Material which are easy to assemble such as cardboards and used banners, being utilised as partitions,

covers for enclosures and bedding; iii) *Territorial marking*: The arrangement of personal belongings or bedding to mark as occupied claims; and iv) *Adaptive storage*: Any solutions in securing personal possessions such as bundling of personal belongings or concealment of the intended spaces. The three theories used to interpret attributes were the Architecture without Architects, which redefined the self-built shelter as micro-architectures of survival. The Hierarchy of Needs explains how their behaviours respond to safety, belonging, and dignity, while territoriality and adaptations to the urban environment are covered by Prospect and Refuge. There are three attributes derived from the theoretical framework: Intrapersonal, which consists of safety, dignity and resiliency; Interpersonal, which consists of peer support and social networks; and Environmental, which includes visibility, enclosure, accessibility, micro-climate, and affordances. The identified attributes are theoretically grounded and reflect both individual needs and social connections. From the attributes and through fieldwork observations, their behaviours were coded into themes: sleeping routines, privacy and dignity, territoriality and personal spaces, coping and adaptations, and location of choices. The identified themes revealed consistent data explaining how the homeless occupied and adapted urban spaces. The framework develops a theoretical understanding of spatial behaviours as intended spatial strategies that the homeless use to survive. These highlighted the contribution to design and policy implications.

METHODOLOGY

This study examined the spatial behaviour of the homeless population in Kuala Lumpur using a qualitative observational method. Field observations were conducted for four days, from the 17th to the 20th of September 2025, for each identified homeless concentration node, including Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Pudu, and Masjid Jamek on separate occasions. The observation was conducted between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m. when the settlement is at its fullest. Observations were guided by a structured checklist that focused on their sleeping and belonging arrangements, covering privacy techniques and location selection, including sidewalks, bus stops, benches, and underpasses. Five behavioural themes were identified through thematic coding of the data: sleeping routine, territoriality and personal space, privacy and dignity, location of choice, and coping and adaptation. These themes clarify how the homeless arrange their shelter and adapt to their environment. The observations employed strictly non-participant observation. It is conducted from a distance without any direct interaction. The researcher did not initiate any interactions with the homeless individuals. No interviews, conversations, or solicited responses in which any incidental verbal activity occurred were not recorded as part of the dataset and were not analysed. All descriptions were limited to general behavioural patterns

and not to individuals. It was non-intrusive, and all confidentiality and privacy were respected.

The analysis applies the observation-led form application of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2021). Although interviews are specified as part of a common data source, IPA scholarship has extended to non-verbal and visual materials, recognising that lived experience is sometimes not expressible in words (Relja & Ward, 2026). In applying this research design, the research employs an appraisal checklist that provides a structured record of the datasets on which the researchers' interpretative analysis was performed. The appraisal checklist focuses on the concentration node areas within the urban fabric and the behavioural pattern perform by the homeless.

FINDINGS

Each of the behavioural themes presented in Table 1 is analysed using three complementary databases: i) Frequency patterns were generated from the structured appraisal checklist, and the numbers of sessions and observed sites were recorded; ii) A behavioural map, which recorded the behaviour within the observed physical sites, and iii) All photographic documentation of spatial adaptations is limited to anonymised material arrangements.

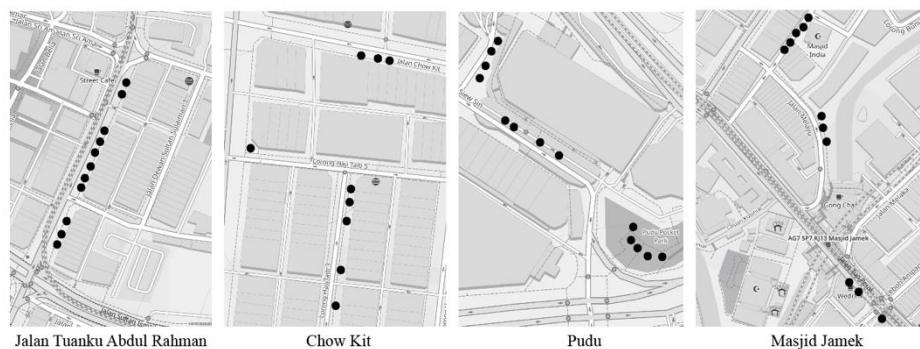


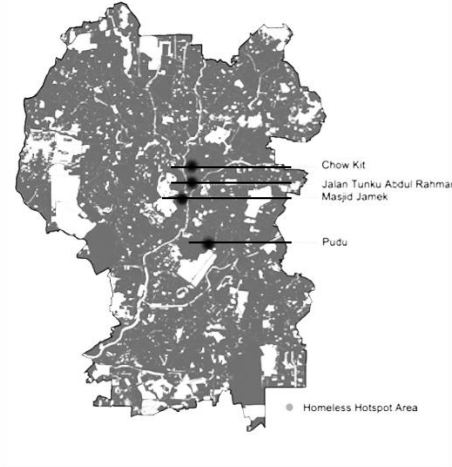
Fig. 2. Maps of each concentration nodes in Kuala Lumpur City showing the homeless's sleeping niches. *Source: OpenStreetMap and Author, 2026.*

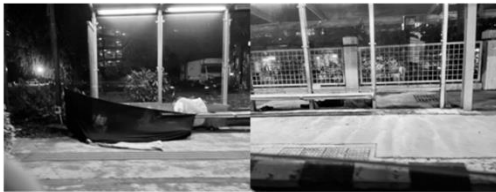
Figure 2 maps the location of the sleeping niches across the identified concentration nodes in Kuala Lumpur. The sleeping area is clearly shown on the map; the homeless chose their sleeping spaces not randomly but arranged in sequence along building edges and covered walkways. Some prefer benches, such as around Masjid India. However, in the Pudu area, the homeless can be found around the Kota Raya bus stand and nearby pocket park.

Table 1 summarises the findings to organise the patterns found. The primary concentration nodes where the homeless usually reside, the factors that influence their location selection, and the behavioural themes that emerged from

the data analysis are highlighted in the table. These themes indicate that the selected locations are intentional and not random, influenced by the availability of food and water, social support, safety, and shelter resources. The themes also reveal how the homeless navigate urban spaces and adapt their environment to maintain territory and privacy, thereby ensuring dignity and survival.

Table 1. Summary of findings on Concentration Node Areas and Behavioural Themes.

Category	Data Collected	Finding
Hotspots Areas		Concentration node area: Chow Kit, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Pudu and Masjid Jamek. These areas are where homeless people frequents. The areas are not chosen randomly but intentional which influenced by the factors of: 1.Safety: Well-lit, visibility, near to peers 2.Shelter: Underpasses, bus stops, covered corridors 3.Resources: Food distribution, social supports 4.Community: Peer networks and mutual supports

Category	Data Collected	Finding
Behavioural Themes	<i>Choice of Locations:</i> Preferences for well-lit, semi-sheltered and less busy areas 	Homeless people tends to choose well-lit and partially covered area, such as covered sidewalks and corridors and bus stop benches. The decision shows that they prefer to be visible to the public as protective strategy to prevent vulnerability so that others are close by in case of emergency.
	<i>Privacy and Dignity:</i> Use of coverings, symbolic partitions or partly exposed 	Covering themselves to establish privacy in public areas. Some remained expose, shows the desire for safety over privacy.
	<i>Territoriality:</i> Belongings as boundaries, use of bags, boxes or trolleys 	Organisation of personal belongings to demarcate sleeping area, which provide stability by converting public into private areas.

Category	Data Collected	Finding
	<i>Coping and Adaptations:</i> Benches, cardboards, blankets, makeshift cover for concealment 	The areas and items were repurposed and improvise where cardboard was used as floor covering to soften pavements, and benches which intended to discourage sleeping were used by sleeping while bending awkwardly across them. These methods show their inventiveness in addressing hostile architecture.
	<i>Sleeping Routines:</i> Usually sleeps around 1-2am and avoid nightlife zones 	Strategic planning is demonstrated by preparing sleeping areas in the early afternoon. They avoided chaotic night lives for more peaceful rest and sleep.

Source: Author, 2026

These findings suggest that the spatial behaviour of the homeless population is consistent and relevant to immediate survival and to human desires for safety, dignity, and belonging. These behaviours can be further explained through the theoretical framework in Figure 1, which comprises Architecture without Architects, the Hierarchy of Needs, and Environmental Psychology.

DISCUSSION

Intentional Spatial Practice

The themes indicate a logical order of homeless behaviour clearly within the framework. The spatial behaviours of the homeless in Kuala Lumpur are influenced by factors such as safety, access to resources, community support, and social networks. Instead of randomly occupying the chosen concentration nodes, Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Masjid Jamek, and Pudu reflect

intentional decisions made in response to their needs and limitations in the effort to survive. While behavioural themes such as choice of location, privacy and dignity, territoriality, coping and adaptation, and sleeping routines show how they interacted with hostile architecture and the environment. These actions demonstrate resilience and innovation in adapting to public spaces as a haven for survival. These behaviours can be understood through the theoretical perspectives of Architecture without Architects, Hierarchy of Needs and Prospect and Refuge.

Theoretical Perspective

The micro-architecture created by the homeless is an example of architectural adaptation to homelessness. Architecture without architects explains how this behaviour transformed urban features such as sidewalks, benches, bus stops, and underpasses into adaptive designs that allow the homeless to build for survival (Ferguson et al., 2015). The most basic need in the hierarchy of needs is physiological, which includes fundamental requirements for survival, such as food, water, shelter, warmth, and sleep. And, based on the availability of immediate needs, the homeless population chose locations including Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Masjid Jamek, and the Pudu area. For them, safety is their top priority, and, according to the study, they tend to choose well-lit areas for better visibility. According to research, these elements are important for reducing personal safety anxiety, suggesting that the chosen location is an intentional choice made under the pressure of unpredictable living circumstances (Paul et al., 2018). From the perspective of Prospect and Refuge, these choices are made through ongoing conflicts with their environment in an effort for safer conditions (Ferguson et al., 2015). This suggests that the concept of a safe environment is just as important as physical shelter. The preference for a well-lit, partially covered and visible sleeping area broadens the spatial logic as suggested by Prospect and Refuge theory. It is evident that homeless individuals prefer visibility to concealment, as evidenced by their reliance on the passive guardianship of potential passersby and on 24-hour restaurants or convenience stores as safety measures (Jacob, 1961).

Peer networks create a micro-community which reflects a sense of belonging. According to the hierarchy of needs, social connections can help individuals overcome isolation and loneliness (Nyamathi et al., 2010). Social connections built in shared spaces typically offer both practical and emotional support, increasing their resiliency (Paul et al., 2018). While dignity and esteem were expressed through coverings, partitions, and the organisation of personal items, creating boundaries. Homeless people often use their personal belongings to mark their personal space in public spaces (Ferguson et al., 2015). In addition, the behaviour exhibits territoriality, preserving their dignity by actively shaping their environment rather than passively accepting their situation (Nyamathi et al., 2010). This adaptability reflects their decision as they navigate a system that

tends to marginalise them. For example, their coping mechanisms, such as using cardboard for insulation or making makeshift covers, show how resourceful humans are in adapting to their environment (Paul et al., 2018). Overall, these behaviours demonstrate that their choices and decisions for survival show resiliency. Understanding these connections will help create an inclusive intervention that addresses their fundamental needs while enhancing their dignity and self-esteem in the urban environment.

Policy Implications

The Destitute Persons Act 1977 is the legal framework governing homelessness in Malaysia. The strategies employed under this law have proven to be ineffective. A broader, supportive, and needs-driven policy, combined with initiatives under the National Housing Policy and the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040, may help address homelessness issues. Transitional shelters have proven effective in helping the homeless transition from street living to permanent housing by providing a sense of security and stability (Warren, 2025). From the observation, it is suggested that the existing government-initiated shelter accommodations for the homeless are situated outside the functional urban web, which may explain why the homeless still choose to occupy these concentrated nodes.

Design Implications

The design of transitional shelter should take into consideration the behaviours and actions of the homeless by recognising how they adapt to their environment, as these behaviours are intentional rather than random. For example, a person's sense of safety, dignity, and acceptance is strongly affected by having access to semi-private spaces (Ajeen et al., 2023). These spaces with personal storage can address their concerns about misplaced or stolen belongings, thereby improving their overall shelter experience (Warren, 2025). These ideas are aligned with trauma-informed design, which takes into consideration the psychological impact of living in temporary shelters (Grittner & Walsh, 2024). Shelters that prioritise emotional and psychological factors may affect their mental health positively and prepare them for successful rehabilitation (Ajeen et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the homeless population in Kuala Lumpur chooses their locations intentionally rather than randomly, indicating a purposeful strategy. The selection of these locations, such as Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, Masjid Jamek and Pudu, is based on safety, shelter, resource availability, peer networks and community support. Their spatial behaviours demonstrate resilience through selecting their own locations, devising privacy measures, marking their territories, employing coping mechanisms, and maintaining daily

sleep routines. These behaviours create a micro-architecture of survival, as interpreted through the concepts of Architecture without Architects, the Hierarchy of Needs, and Prospect and Refuge. It points to their desire for safety, belonging and dignity even within exclusionary environments. The findings also emphasise that more inclusive, need-driven solutions should replace the government's current enforcement strategies. The design of transitional shelters should include an examination of homeless behaviours, as developing inclusive, equitable, and dignified policies and urban environments requires the involvement of homeless individuals, who are active participants in shaping urban spaces.

As a conclusion, the behaviours documented, where the homeless chose edge linear settlement along the five-footways, visibility, territorial demarcation, and improvisation of available material, correspond to the concept of Architecture without Architects, an informal design brief, written by the street occupants of Kuala Lumpur. The task of effective urban design and policy is not to erase these adaptations but to interpret them.

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