

# Re-Imagining *Kebun* Culture for Creating Place-Making: Case Study of Residential Urban Farming in Johor Bahru, Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the emergence of *kebun* culture as a means of creating place-making in Malaysia's urban residential neighbourhoods. This study focuses on the *Pondok Kebun* Project in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, i.e., a community-owned project operating on a SLOAP site. This study combined field observations and brief evaluations based on fifteen selected place-making indicators with ten respondents participating in questionnaire-guided interviews conducted from October to November 2022. The data were analysed using simple descriptive analysis. This study reveals that eight indicators (53%) demonstrated a high level of place-making, particularly in terms of "sociability" and "comfort and image" elements. However, the remaining seven indicators (47%) related to "uses and activities" and "access and linkages" showed a moderate level of place-making. The study found that the emergence of *kebun* culture has promoted the community's sense of ownership through the maintenance of the SLOAP in the urban setting.

**Keywords:** Urban farming, *kebun* culture, place-making, SLOAP, sense of ownership

## INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government Malaysia launched an urban agriculture-related policy known as the Urban Community Farming Policy (UCFP) (KPKT, 2021). This policy was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic to focus on improving local planning practices involving the usage of open spaces and/or any available spaces in urban and suburban areas for residents' benefit. The UCFP aims to empower urban and suburban communities living in high-density housing projects by optimising the usage of land and surrounding spaces for agricultural activities (Yusoff et al., 2017). The policy sets a target of establishing one community farm for each public housing project (KPKT, 2021), with the goal of contributing to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, promoting safe neighbourhoods, and maximising the utilisation of leftover spaces after planning (SLOAP), particularly in residential areas (Kamarudin, 2022). With relevant policies and support from agencies, communities, volunteers and nongovernmental agencies (NGOs), numerous urban residential open spaces have been transformed into agriculture plots or neighbourhood allotments.

According to Bhattarai & Adhikari (2023), urban agriculture refers to the cultivation and, where applicable, sale of food in city environments. It often takes place in community gardens, on balconies, rooftops, in residential yards, and sometimes through vertical structures. This form of agriculture is seen as a way to boost food security, encourage personal productivity, strengthen community ties, and contribute to environmental and economic sustainability (Nugraha et al., 2024; Abdillah et al., 2023; Mabon et al., 2023). Urban farming can take many forms, including traditional gardening, hydroponics, aquaponics, vertical farming, and space-efficient systems for raising animals. While much of the produce is for personal consumption, it can also be sold commercially. According to On (2024); Atmaja et al. (2021), urban agriculture not only addresses local food needs but also promotes environmental sustainability, health, nutrition, social interaction, economic development, and community empowerment. Urban farming offers numerous benefits to cities and communities. It provides

supplemental income or savings on food costs, improves access to fresh, healthy foods, preserves urban green spaces, fosters social cohesion, and reduces the need for food transportation, thereby supporting the overall sustainability of urban development (Nugraha et al., 2024; Murdad et al., 2022; Likitswat, 2021).

The success of the urban community farming concept and policy in encouraging the use of urban spaces for agriculture has led to the broader cultural movement in urban farming, known as “*kebun* culture”. The emerging concept of *kebun* culture in urban areas, showcased through community farming projects, exemplifies a remarkable trend that effectively transforms SLOAP into thriving agricultural sites, benefiting the entire community. The author discovered that the term *kebun* culture was popularised by Thompson (2019) in his study of smallholders in rural Malaysia, referring to orchards developed by individuals, primarily retirees, returning to their villages after working in the city. The urban *kebun* culture phenomenon as observed in this study, to some extent, mirrors the small-scale farming project practised by rural communities. Nevertheless, meticulous observations have revealed distinct characteristics that set apart these two types of *kebuns* (rural and urban), which will be further discussed in the following sections. By examining a case study of a community farming project in an urban setting, this study delves into the characteristics of *kebun* culture and its impact on place-making. The findings of this study shed light on the potential utilisation of SLOAP in residential areas for community farming purposes, while simultaneously promoting a sense of place in urban residential neighbourhoods.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Emergence of *Kebun* Culture

One of the main references for describing the emerging phenomenon of *kebun* culture (orchard/garden) is provided by Eric Thompson in his article “Urban Annexation of the Rural: *Kebun* Culture in Malaysia” (Kamarudin, 2022; Thompson, 2019). In his publication, Thompson argues that the emerging *kebun* culture was in fact, a form of urban annexation of rurality, i.e. *kebuns* (orchards) are detached from the social organisation of rural villages and incorporated into urban-centred Malay society. The reason for this argument is that many village *kebuns* were founded or developed on agricultural land after it was purchased by “outsiders”, mainly the government retirees/ pensioners originally living in the city or nearby town (Thompson, 2019). The land was purchased prior to or during their retirement, which gave them sufficient time to prepare the orchard before the moving in process. Kamarudin (2022) also found that in certain instances, the new owners of *kebun* (outsiders) seamlessly integrated into the local community by living harmoniously with the local residents. These owners actively participated in local organisations and engaged in various social events, mostly related to religious programmes. Some of them also utilised their extensive professional networks from their previous occupations to seek partners, donors, and sponsors for the establishment of private madrasahs (religious schools) or orphanage centres within their *kebuns*. Apart from receiving donations, the income generated from the sale of commercial crops, such as palm oil, was utilised to fund these facilities (madrasahs and orphanage centres) (Kamarudin and Rashid, 2020).

These new forms of *kebun* turned out to have challenged the traditional conception of “*kebun* in the *kampung*” (a village orchard), which is often associated with land ownership by local people/rural peasants and activities on the land were closely related to rural-oriented Malay society (mostly traditional and small-scale farming). However, in the late twentieth century, thoroughgoing urbanisation, which drove migration to urban areas (and in-situ urbanisation of villages at the fringe areas), produced an increasingly urban Malay society (Thompson, 2019; Kamarudin et al., 2020). Although this urbanite Malay society did embrace modernity and urban lifestyle, many of them remain steadfast in maintaining close ties with their history/traditional *kampung* values – which is evident in the form of urban farming within the compound of their homes. Therefore, the term *kebun* in the context of this study, should refer to an urban orchard with productive land cultivated with non-rice crops but with the image and nonphysical association with traditional rural *kampung kebun* (Kamarudin, 2022).

### Utilisation of SLOAP for Community Farming Project

In addition to individual farming efforts, certain urban communities residing in housing estates with available

plots of land, commonly known as space leftover after planning (SLOAP), have come together to form informal associations aimed at supporting their community farming projects (Kamarudin, 2022). The term SLOAP, as defined by Covatta et al. (2022), encompasses neglected areas of land sandwiched between streets and the rigidly rectilinear structures of international modernism, which often deviate from traditional street and urban patterns. Despite being perceived as “useless” spaces, SLOAP, which is often considered as the by-product of inefficient layout designs, may be intentionally created by urban planners to realise specific settlement patterns or layout designs. An example of this can be seen in residential layouts inspired by hexagonal shapes, where SLOAP is often generated at the corners or edges of the layout. This provides concrete evidence of SLOAP, an aspect that has been underexplored in this research (refer to Figure 1 - Mutiara Rini residential area layout).

Instead of being illegally converted into parking spaces or storage facilities by the residents, the SLOAP in this study was transformed into a community farming project, thereby enhancing the surrounding environment for the entire neighbourhood. As a result, this scenario reflects the original concept of *kebun kampung* (rural orchard) by a group of residents but obviously in suburban and urban settings. This effort is in line with the study’s argument that the urbanisation and modernisation of Malay society do not necessarily create separation and/or disintegration among urbanites, but rather unite and strengthen their tie with farming tradition or village *kebun* in a new setting. The second argument is that, due to the land ownership issue faced by a community to farming legally on vacant plots and/or SLOAP (reserve land or leftover spaces) in their residential area, there could be some opportunities for urban farming to promote a “sense of ownership” for their members through the place-making process (Kamarudin, 2022).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, utilising a combination of quantitative data collected through questionnaire-guided interviews with key respondents and qualitative data gathered through field observations and photography recordings. The research focuses on a neighbourhood farming project (*kebun kejiranan*), located in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. A total of ten respondents participated in the survey through questionnaire-guided interviews. Among them, two were committee members of *Pondok Kebun*, while the remaining seven were regular and active members. Determining the exact sample size proved challenging due to the presence of many inactive members, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions with the head of *Pondok Kebun* revealed that the selection of respondents should prioritise individuals engaged in ongoing farming activities and those who have actively contributed to the development and management of the *Pondok Kebun* project. The survey was conducted in multiple sessions between October and November 2022. The questionnaire-guided interviews were administered manually, allowing for face-to-face interaction at the farm. Each interview session, encompassing discussions and field observations, lasted approximately 30 minutes and took place from 17:30 to 19:00 (after office hours).

The questionnaire was formulated based on the widely accepted four main components of place-making as identified from the literature review (Figure 2). The relevant components were then translated into a list of indicators. (Details on the place-making indicators are provided in the subsequent section.). The data obtained from the questionnaire-guided interviews were then analysed using a simple descriptive analysis (frequency analysis) to establish the score value for each indicator that will represent their level of performance either high, moderate or low performance. The frequency analysis method was sufficient and reliable to assist the authors in determining the level of performance for each indicator as indicated by respondents using percentage values.

### Study Area

Due to the relatively recent emergence of *kebun* culture in both rural and urban areas of Malaysia, the authors have chosen to conduct a case study on a neighbourhood farming project to closely examine this phenomenon. A detailed site observation was conducted in *Pondok Kebun* (Orchard Hut), located at the heart of a main residential area of Mutiara Rini i.e., one of the prime residential areas’ outskirts of Johor Bahru, Malaysia (Figure 1).



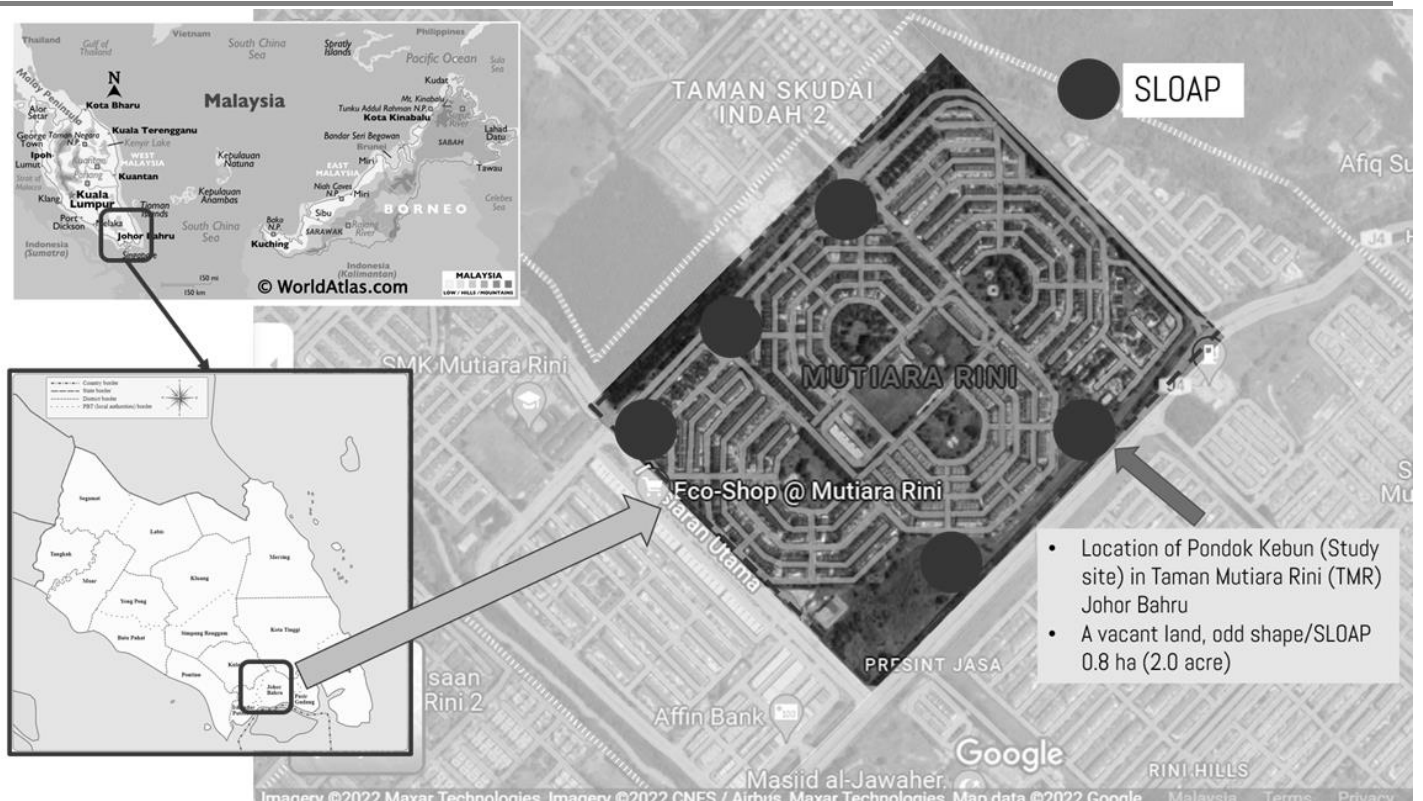


Figure 1. Location of *Pondok Kebun* in the Main Presint of Mutiara Rini residential estate, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

The *Pondok Kebun* occupies an irregularly shaped plot of flat vacant land, classified as SLOAP, with a total area of 0.8 hectares (2.0 acres). The land was originally designated for a clinic or health centre, but was never developed. The *Pondok Kebun* farming project has occupied the plot since 2019 with the support of 100 members and has successfully prevented the misuse of the plot by residents for illegal private parking or individual farming. However, farming activities were temporarily halted during the COVID-19 pandemic and only resumed in early 2021 when movement restrictions were eased by the government. Due to the prolonged period of inactivity caused by the pandemic, *Pondok Kebun* faced challenges in regaining support from all its members. Fortunately, dedicated members stepped forward and provided strong support to revive the farming activities. In November 2022, *Pondok Kebun* obtained official permission known as a Temporary Occupancy Licence (TOL) from the Ministry of Health, allowing them to occupy and manage the land for farming-related activities. Currently, *Pondok Kebun* is primarily focused on farming and animal rearing.

### Place-Making Assessment Components

This study has expanded the discussion on *kebun* culture by Thompson (2019) by conducting a preliminary place-making assessment based on selected elements as presented in Figure 2 and Table 1. In simple term, place-making refers to the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play and learn (Moreira, 2021; Project for Public Places, 2018). Authors are aware that place-making will reflect “a process”: it is a means to an end, and the end is the creation of “quality places” or in this case, the quality community farming project. A person usually will know and understand about quality places when he/she is in them (Sepe, 2017). However, it is more challenging to describe their characteristics abstractly without some guiding elements as stated in the place-making wheel (Figure 2).

Based on the place-making wheel in Figure 2, fifteen (15) relevant indicators were identified and selected for assessment during field observation at *Pondok Kebun*. Four indicators (street life, model splits transit usage, and rent levels) were excluded from the survey as they were deemed irrelevant to the study requirements and not related to the selected case study’s context. The performance level of each indicator, determined through frequency analysis of data from ten respondents, was categorised as high performance (100%-80%), moderate performance (70%-50%), or weak performance (<50%). The final list of elements and indicators is presented in Table 1.

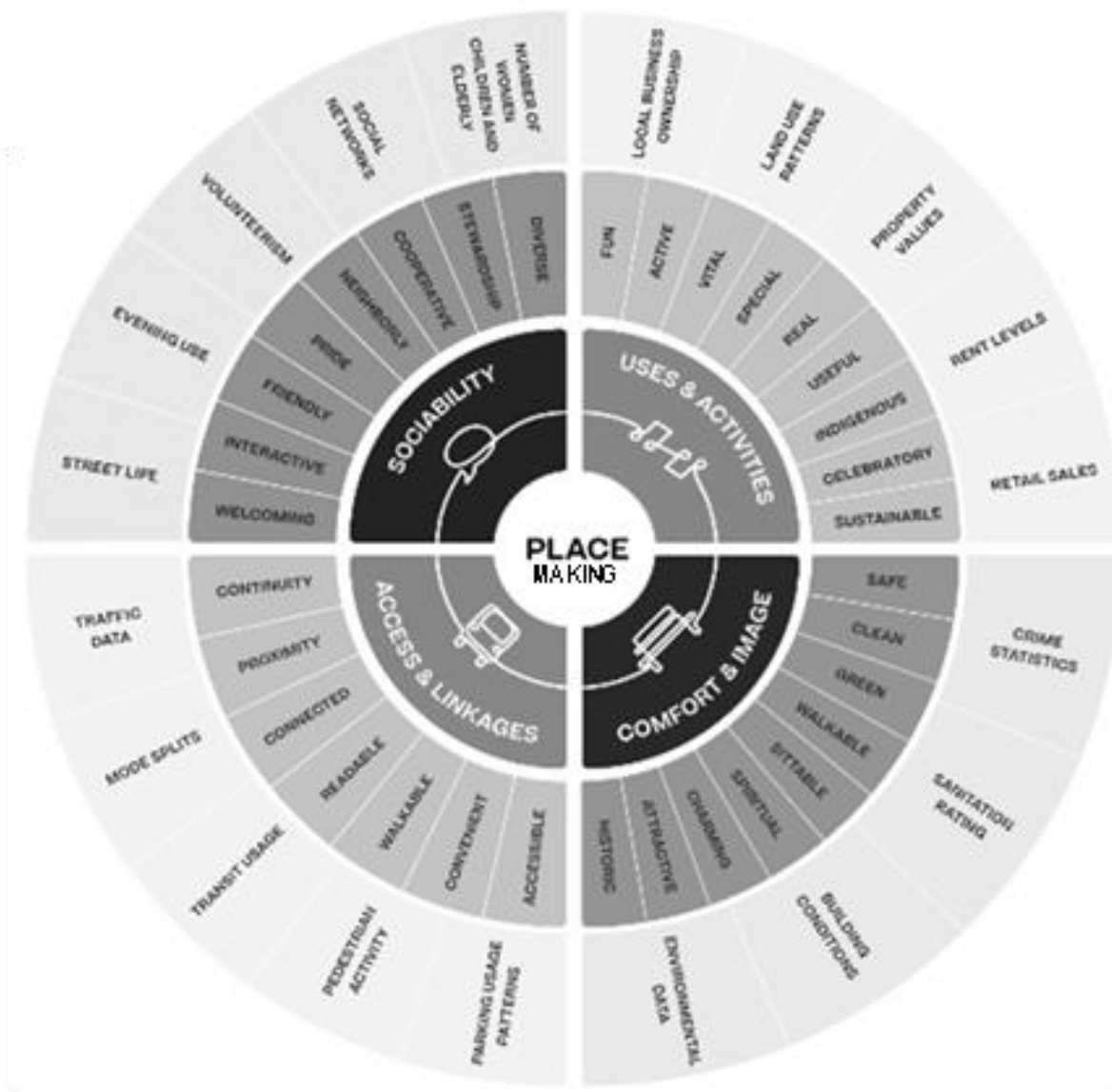


Figure 2. Four main elements that formed a great place-making

Source: Project for Public Spaces (<https://shorturl.at/kFM17>)

Table 1: The list of relevant indicators of place-making indicators selected for field assessment			
Elements	Indicators	Elements	Indicators
Sociability	(1) Number of women, children and elderly	Comfort and Image	(9) Building conditions
	(2) Social networks		(10) Crime statistics
	(3) Volunteerism		(11) Sanitation rating
	(4) Evening use		(12) Environmental data
Uses and Activities	(5) Local business ownership	Access and Linkages	(13) Pedestrian activities
	(6) Land use patterns		(14) Parking usage patterns
	(7) Retail sales		(15) Traffic data
	(8) Property values		

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Farming Activities at *Pondok Kebun*

As shown in Table 2, the farming activities at *Pondok Kebun* were divided into a few subprojects, including those for vegetable plots, stingless bee farms, a fish pond, chicken coups and huts/buildings for storage of farming equipment.

Table 2: The Site inventory of farming and farming-related activities at *Pondok Kebun*

Definition of SLOAP	Farming Project	Sub-Activities	Current/Existing Usage of Farm Land
Underutilised / vacant land (space leftover in hexagonal shape in housing project) (08 ha or 2.0-acre, worth RM2.8 million ringgit in current land value)	<i>Pondok Kebun</i> (Orchard Hut)	Vegetable plots	Vegetable cultivation (chilli, sugarcane, etc.)
		Stingless bee plots	Low productivity due to hot climate and lack of plants to produce flowers throughout the year
		Fish ponds	Have been down-scaling due to the rising cost of animal feed (but remain for recreation/sitting area)
		Chicken coup	Have been down-scaling due to the rising cost of animal feed
		Hut and storage facilities	Storage of farm equipment

Each project was conducted by its members on a voluntary basis including the management of each project. Most of its members are engaging with farming during weekends due to work commitments. Only a few members are highly dedicated to the project, particularly self-employed personnel and pensioners with more flexible time to help the *kebun* operations. Daily activities in the *kebun* include feeding chickens and ducks, collecting eggs, and chilli picking. Weekend activities include weeding (clearing weed plants), cleaning chicken coups, composting garden waste, and harvesting crops.

### Analysis of Place-Making of Community Farming Project

From October until November 2022, the authors conducted a series of fieldwork at *Pondok Kebun* to assess its place-making quality using the elements listed in Table 1. A simple assessment and feedback from the respondents and the field observation were recorded and presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Place-making assessment of *Pondok Kebun* based on the identified indicators (n=10)

Indicators (Refer to Table 1)	Score Value and Performance Indications	Feedbacks from Respondents
Sociability		
Number of women, children and elderly	100% (High)	Strong support and close interactions among women and children
Social networks	90% (High)	Active engagement in social/non-profit activities (including selling farm produce to members and neighbours to raise funds for the <i>kebun</i> )
Volunteerism	100% (High)	High level of volunteerism among members (e.g., community self-help/gotong-royong)
Evening use	100% (High)	Most activities were carried out during evening time (after office hours)
Uses and Activities		
Local business ownership	80% (High)	<i>Pondok Kebun</i> was established as a community platform to promote farming by utilising SLOAP in residential area
Land-use patterns	90% (High)	The land was gazetted for institution, but <i>Pondok Kebun</i> managed to obtain TOL (Temporary Occupancy Licence) that permits agricultural activities
Retail sales	80% (High)	Conducted in small-scale and seasonal (depending on harvest period). Sale of eggs and vegetables using WhatsApp chat and income from the sale is being re-invested into maintaining <i>kebun</i> operation

Property values	90% (High)	Strategic location in a prime area with increasing land value
Comfort and Image		
Building conditions	70% (Moderate)	All buildings and hardscapes are in good condition due to constant maintenance and have served farming purposes.
Crime statistics	70% (Moderate)	Establishment of <i>Pondok Kebun</i> and the presence of its members for farming at <i>kebun</i> provided public surveillance for the area/ neighbourhood
Sanitation rating	70% (Moderate)	Toilet and shower rooms are provided and cleanliness is maintained by users/members
Environmental data	70% (Moderate)	Data not available. However, the organiser is actively recycling farm waste through composting and rain-water harvesting
Access and Linkages		
Pedestrian activities	90% (High)	The <i>kebun</i> is located adjacent to the main road but with no through traffic/no direct access (gated community) making the surrounding area highly walkable and well connected to other parts of the neighbourhood
Parking usage patterns	60% (Moderate)	No designated parking spaces on site but visitors can park their cars/motorcycles within the compound of <i>kebun</i>
Traffic data	60% (Moderate)	Data not available. However, only internal vehicular circulation or local residents

The analysis of sociability indicators presented in Table 3 highlights the high performance across all categories, reflecting a strong sense of sociability within the *Pondok Kebun* community. The members actively engage in various activities, fostering a vibrant social environment. However, in the assessment of uses and activities, a nuanced picture emerged. The field observations revealed a minor disparity between the activity and place usage indicators. This disparity is attributed to the temporary nature of *Pondok Kebun*'s occupancy, secured through annual TOL certificate renewals and associated processing fees. Regardless, the community's activities are notably productive. The sale of farming produce, such as fresh sugarcane juice and free-range eggs, garners consistent demand, contributing to the project's sustainability. Proceeds from these sales are re-invested in the project's operations, ensuring its continued operation.

The *Pondok Kebun* project serves its primary purpose admirably, revitalising a once-vacant plot with active farming endeavours and providing essential public surveillance for the surrounding area. While the visual appeal might not be universally pleasing due to the use of recyclable materials in construction, the facilities cater to the basic needs of users and visitors. Functional amenities, including toilets and shower rooms, enhance the comfort of the space. Although the aesthetic may not be extravagant, the practicality and functionality of the structures align with the project's farming objectives, ensuring a balance between purposeful design and resourcefulness. Lastly, in terms of access and linkages, *Pondok Kebun* demonstrates a moderate level of connectivity. Situated within a gated residential area, the project enjoys limited direct access from the main road, Johor Bahru – Gelang Patah. Despite the absence of through traffic, the surrounding area benefits from enhanced walkability, reduced vehicular congestion, and seamless connectivity to other parts of the neighbourhood. Although designated parking spaces are not provided, the farm encourages eco-friendly modes of transportation, such as walking and cycling. Visitors can park their vehicles at their own discretion along the roadside in front of the farm. This approach aligns with the project's eco-conscious ethos while fostering a pedestrian-friendly environment.

## CONCLUSION

Findings from the data analysis and field observation indicate that the *kebun* culture in an urban setting (such as



*Pondok Kebun*) has transformed the irregular shapes and odd corners of SLOAP in a residential area into sociable activity, promoting a sense of togetherness among multi-racial society members, neighbours and visitors. Even with a small farmland acreage, *Pondok Kebun* is able to diversify its farming activities to include vegetable cultivation, animal rearing, a fish pond, and recreational activities, among others. The new image of *kebun* culture has strengthened the urban-rural integration in terms of social organisation (sense of ownership) and maintaining farming practices in modern residential settings. The community (in this case) did not fully detach from rurality, particularly from community organisation spirit and skills to do farming.

Based on the fifteen (15) indicators for the evaluation of *kebun* culture in relation to place-making, eight indicators (53%) indicated a high performance, while the remaining seven indicators (47%) received a moderate performance. In this light, the *Pondok Kebun* project to some extent reflected the three main pillars of place-making, namely public realm improvement (physical improvement) by transforming SLOAP into a functional, comfortable space; space activation by transforming a place with social activities that can be enjoyed by members/users and visitors of various age categories, shaping behaviour, nurturing volunteerism and contributing to community resilience; and finally, place management that focuses on how a space/place can be managed by a dedicated committee to ensure its sustainability and feasibility through farm and building management, business model to fund future projects while sustaining ongoing projects.

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