

Music in Malaysia: Issues, Challenges, and the Implementation of Soundscapes into the Built Environment

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, music has a major significance within the country with its diverse cultural diversity. However, the perception of music often faces challenges due to the declining music education within schools and the lack of easy access to venues for performances or learning, hindering the growth of the artistic talents in Malaysians and stifling the appreciation of music in their lives. This research attempted to discover the potential, the issues and challenges of music education in the country and the opportunity to implement musical elements into the built environment and soundscapes into urban spaces, creating environments where melody and nature to converge while slowly integrating the positivity in music and dispelling the negative perception to the subject. The research was carried out through documentation, surveys, and participant observation. Findings revealed that while not many people had any form of music education, there is an overwhelming want and need for music. The participants generally reported that they would prefer having outdoor venues like parks or amphitheaters to enjoy music. These results contribute to the inclusion of soundscapes into Malaysian urban environments and how they improve the well-being of its users while encouraging the need for music.

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INTRODUCTION

Like many youths across the world, the young people in Malaysia have a strong preference towards popular Malaysian music of all genres [1]. This isn't surprising as the availability of popular music is widespread through media channels such as the internet, television, and the radio.

Many Malaysians deemed music solely as a form of entertainment and creates a low-level importance of having music education in schools. Despite music being highly valued in general in multiple countries across the globe; in Malaysia it is not highly the case.

Therefore, this study is to study the importance of music in the development of students' potential and help our society to understand the need for music. The document would outline the exploration of park soundscapes. These soundscapes have been gaining traction in urban areas, particularly due to the rise in noise pollution. Since soundscapes are shaped by the interaction of people and their surroundings, there is a gap in understanding how the socio-demography of park users would affect their preferences and perceptions of park soundscapes in Malaysia. While there are many studies on soundscape perception in Western and Eastern countries, focusing on the link of mental well-being and the perception, there is little research done specifically addressing this aspect in Malaysian Parks.

Introduction of Music

The term "Music" comes from the Greek word "Moesia", which is associated with the ancient Greek god of poetry, literature and music. Music is a fundamental form of artistic expression that forms on the structured arrangement of sounds and is universally recognized throughout history, across different cultures. The key components of music consist of melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, and it can be created by a wide range of instruments or even the human voice.

Music holds a significant role in our lives as a means for artistic self-expression, emotional connection, storytelling, entertainment, preservation of a cultural heritage or even in fostering social connections to other people. It is one of the most universally embraced forms of expressions and communication to this date and often evokes a broad spectrum of emotions and could bring people together, making it an integral part of human life and culture, no matter the different age groups [2].

These activities offer an outlet to express our feelings but also it could bring multiple positive effects for those who partake in them. There is an increase in experimental studies that delves into the benefits of music to the physical, social, educational, and psychological (emotional and cognitive) states of the human lifestyle - which can be enhanced through positive engagement in music [3].

However, the connection between music and emotions has been a relatively recent area of study as it is because of the advancement of our understanding of cognition and the specific neural mechanisms that are influenced by music in the past few decades. According to Hanslick, a prominent music philosopher, emotions have been traditionally associated with mental images and the feelings and thoughts that were evoked by music [4].

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Music in Malaysia

The country is rich in both art and music, thanks to its rise in various music genres from different ethnic groups and backgrounds. Presently, Malaysia has several music associations, Malaysia still lacks a government entity dedicated to the music industry. The Ministry of Communications and Multimedia is determined to solve this issue by establishing the Malaysian Music Industry Corporation (PIMM). This new agency is set up to ensure the development of the country's music industry is coordinated structurally while proposing strategies. PIMM will function as the music industry's ecosystem focusing on music production, music performance and music education.

Music was first introduced in Malaysian public schools starting from the establishment of the first official school in the country, the Penang Free School, in the year 1816. While it was the time in which Malaysia, known as Malaya prior to independence in 1957, was under British rule, music was used as a tool in teaching the English language.

Formal Music education in Malaysia and the schools was a recent development. It wasn't until 1972 in which the beginnings of music as a subject were seen through the start of the Lower Certificate of Education, an important examination in which all students were required to take, when a few schools had offered music as an elective subject. However, it still wasn't considered as a proper music curriculum for public schools [5].

Benefits of Music

There are several misconceptions on music that also plays a factor in the current state of music in Malaysia. One such misconception is that parents think that sending their children for music classes is a waste of time and that they should focus more on their studies or that they need talent to do well in music. Both are not true as music is just as important as other academic subjects.

Table 1: Benefits when Engaging with Music

Fine-motor learning skill	Hand-eye coordination, vocal and motor control
Sensory-motor skill	Performance correction and observation
Emotional processing	Emotional awareness, expression, and experience of reward
Memory processing	Episodic, semantic, and procedural memory
Attention and discipline	Memory and imagery with auditory and spatial, sustained attention, creativity, discipline, problem solving and decision-making skills

Note: This table is a summary of key findings in the literature and not a complete list.

As shown in the table above, music education prepares the children for the fundamental mental skills and capacities that they need. The cognitive functions could be improved with music such as the attention span, memory, and problem-solving skills. Music helps in enhancing the memory and developing cognitive function in both adults

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and children. [6-7]. Music also contributes to the development of the brain region that controls motor function. Children are encouraged to play musical instruments during classes [8].

Music is also highly popular in the medical industry. Even though music therapy is relatively new in Malaysia, it has become a successful complementary method. Music therapy helps individuals of all ages and backgrounds including children, adults, and seniors. While listening to calming or soothing music, our body releases a lower level of cortisol (a stress hormone). This has also a positive impact on the heart when the stress is alleviated which would lead in the reduction of blood pressure and aid in the recuperation process following heart attacks, cardiac procedures or strokes.

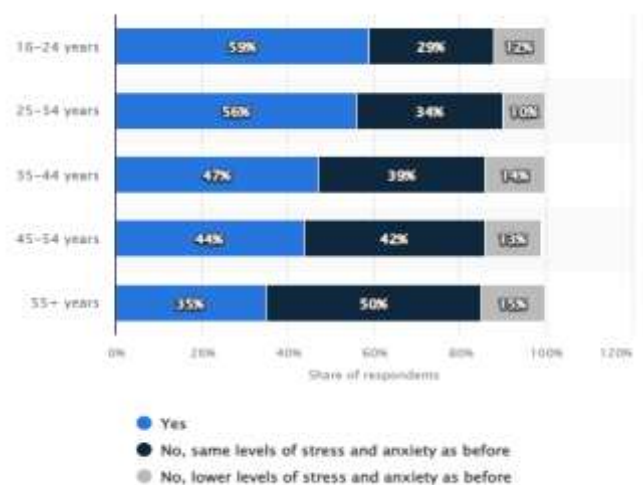


Figure 1: Statistic of Stress Levels of Malaysians

(Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1322323/malaysia-share-of-people-feeling-more-stressed-or-anxious-by-gender/>)

In Malaysia May 2022, a mental health and wellness survey was conducted by Rakuten Insight. It had stated that 59 percent of the respondents are in the 16 to 24 age group reported to experience increased levels of stress or anxiety the past year. While 34 percent of those 25 to 34 years old had stated that their stress and anxiety levels remained unchanged during the same year.

Issues of Music Education in Malaysia

During the initial stages of the introduction of music as a subject in primary schools, numerous challenges and difficulties were encountered such as the priority of music education which the Malaysian education system focuses more on the examination performance and tends to sideline non-exam subjects like music for “crucial” subjects like mathematics, science and English. The prioritization of these academic subjects such as mathematics and science over music education are emphasized to meet the economic and technological goals of the country, while arts including music, are left to the wayside, and are receiving less attention.

Other than that, music is considered as a non-examined subject and often receives less attention. This plays a role in the stigma that was created towards the subject. There

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are parents who think that learning music at school is a waste of time, and the students need to focus more on other important subjects that help in their future in securing a job.

Cultural attitudes and preferences could also influence music education in the country. In the initial stages of implementation, there were times where parents expressed extreme views regarding the contradiction between music education with the Malay culture and Islam. Consequently, this perspective deterred some students from pursuing music education in schools. In the Muslim community, it is not surprising to hear some people believing that music is *haram* (unlawful or forbidden). Similar challenges are not only happening in Malaysia but various parts of the world, where Muslim parents oppose their children's involvement in partaking music classes at their school as they believed that exposing children to music might lead to undesirable behaviours such as adultery, alcohol consumption and a decline in moral conduct [9]. It is important that music teachers should engage with both the parents and students to help them understand the advantages of music education in schools and to also clarify that learning music does not clash with the beliefs of Malaysian culture or Islam.

Music in Architecture

Art, throughout the ages, such as music, architecture, painting, poetry and literature is evolving in harmony and often would play a role in enhancing each other. Creativity in the human mind would also be sparked by the exposure to other creations of art from others so it is not a surprise if architecture would be inspired by music or vice versa. Notably, among the art forms, music and architectural compositions have the closest connection to the initial abstract origin since they both preserve a highly abstract form [10].

Music serves as a rich source of inspiration for architectural designs. This originates from the shared fundamental parallels between architecture and music as both are forms of composition. Music, an age-old discipline of arranging sounds in time, and architecture, a practice of organizing and shaping a space, share a foundation of common principles such as proportion, scale, rhythm, harmony, and texture.

This concept is shared by architecture with various other forms of artistic expression. The inevitable and subsequent reduction to silence in “compositional writing” is parallel to recent musical forms in which the crescendo of sound contrasts with sudden long pauses, serving as metaphoric expressions of the contemporary form. This is evident by Daniel Libeskind's collection of drawings the “Chamber Works”, present by its cryptic manner like how contemporary musical scores uses a system of notes without a stave (the set of five horizontal lines and four spaces that each represent a different musical pitch) that all ordinary music scores have.

The title “Chamber Works” itself is imitating the notion of “chamber architecture” akin to the concept of “chamber music”. It implies complete composition, utilizing only the essential elements needed to give the body of the written text. The two drawings, vertical and horizontal, create a continuation of graphic intervention described by Kurt W. Foster as “spatial music” [11]. The collection of lines and symbols that signifies the double axial structure of melody, sounds, and chords; horizontal and vertical structure regulated by the principle of liberal variation (Figure 2).

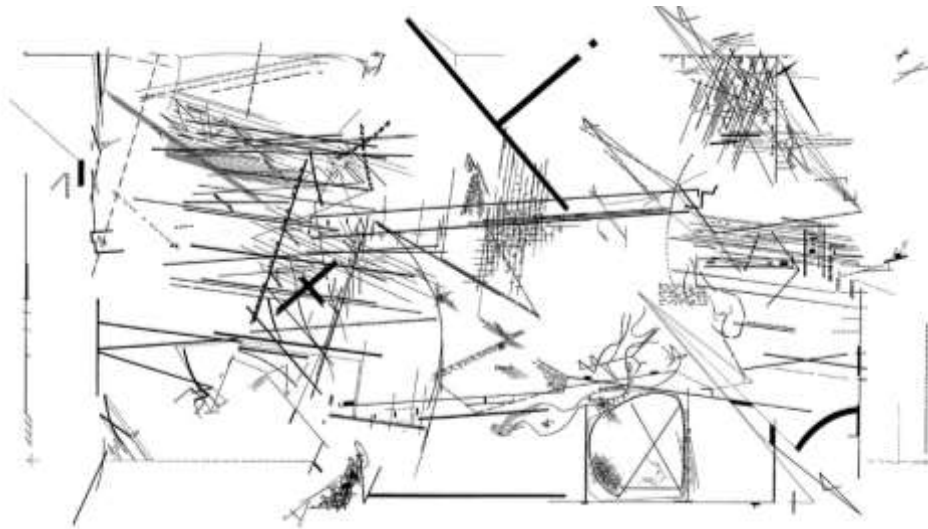


Figure 2: Chamber Works, drawing By Daniel Libeskind (1983).

The methodological process, tested in the pictorial within the “Chamber Works”, extends to the project for the Berlin Museum expansion, particularly the section dedicated to the Jewish Museum Department.

The topological distortion applied to the six-pointed star in the Berlin Museum’s plan, with the figure central to the conception of the space, transforms the neutral symbol of religious faith, the Star of David, into a reminder of the Holocaust. Through the alterations of its traditional geometry, the star has become unrecognizable and has become a guiding path through the building (Figure 3).

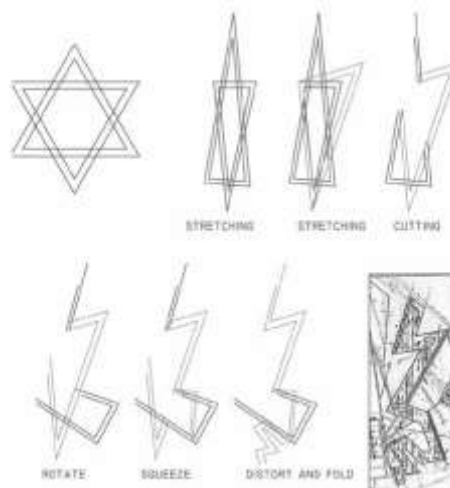


Figure 3: Topological transformation of the Star of David in the plan of Libeskind’s Berlin Museum with the Jewish Museum Department.

This precedent study shows that music could be an inspiration to the architectural design when symbols and parts are deconstructed to its basic form.

Concert halls, music venues and performance spaces emerge as a distinctive symbol of cultural vibrancy in the urban setting. It serves as city landmarks and often these structures invite residents to engage in and appreciate artistic expressions,

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cultivating a feeling of community and connection. Much like architecture, music offers an immersive experience that envelops and surrounds us.

Other than that, it is the study of music as a method in the design process. Peter Cook, an author of design experiences, had brought ideas from diverse disciplines into architecture such as the application of Steven Holl's construction project in Texas. Here, Holl's work had interpreted the play of continuous and discontinuous tonal properties in both the horizontal and vertical structures.

The design of the Texas Stretto House captures the spatial and rhythmic dynamics similar to the concert piece "Music for String Instruments, Percussion and Celesta" by Bèla Bartók [12]. In its four movements, the composition presents a distinction between heavy percussion components and the ethereal, continuous flow of the string elements (Figure 4).

The interplay between music and architecture creates a dance of artistic expression and structural ingenuity as both disciplines share a common language of form, harmony, and rhythm allowing for an integration of concepts. In architecture, the spatial arrangements, proportions, and flow of spaces could echo the cadences and tempo found in music compositions.

Similarly, the emotions evoked from music could resonate with the architectural design, the spaces creating feelings of grandeur, tranquillity or intimacy like music could do. Beyond the surface-level aesthetics, the parallels between architecture and music could be delved deeper into the structure and how each discipline works so well via principles of balance or proportions. Thus, the relationship between music and architecture is more than mere aesthetics, it offers a rich and creative exploration and cultural significance. This brings us to the next study about the relationship between the feelings of music or sounds created within architectural spaces.

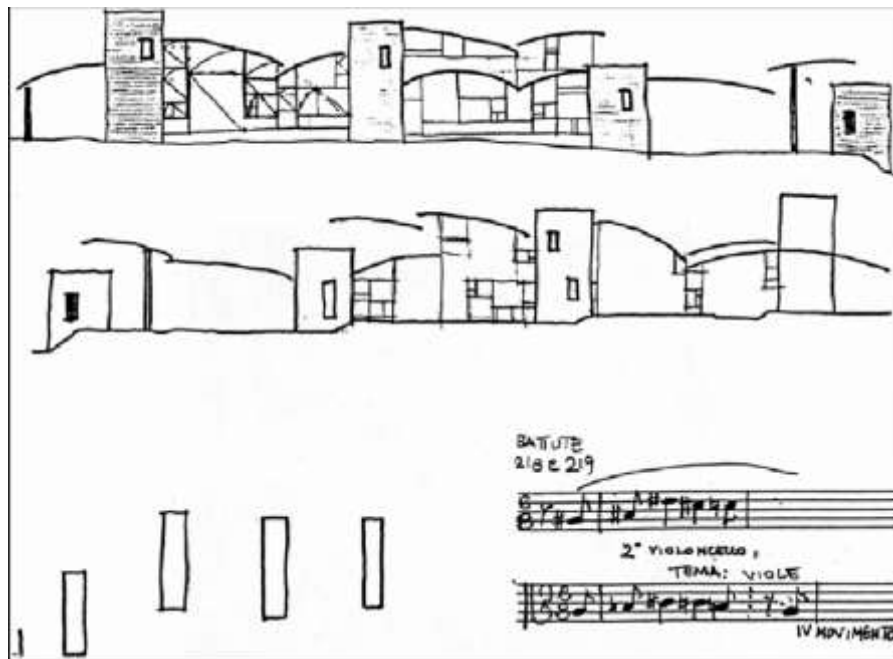


Figure 4: Comparison of Bartók's specular composition and Holl's Stretto House.

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Soundscapes and the Built Environment

When immersing in a soundscape, a concept that was first formulated by Schafer (1977) about how we are immersed in a sound field, we are also constructing an internal perception of a space [13]. The soundscape envelops us in audible expressions of various activities. For instance, within the soundscape, we might hear children playing, shouting street vendors, or moving automobiles. Soundscapes rely on these activities as without them there would not be considered a “soundscape”. As activities change so does the soundscapes. Each sensory experience whether through sound, sight, touch, or smell contributes to the perception of the place and location, forming an internal representation of the external world.

Our very sense of identity depends on how we interact with the outside world through our senses [14]. Every individual exists someplace. Furthermore, when deprived of sensory inputs, our internal frame of reference becomes detached from the social and physical environment, leading to rapidly creating hallucinations. The lack of a sense of space tends to induce disorientation and it is not considered to be a normal state. Unfortunately, modern cultures often underestimate the importance of soundscape as a crucial element for sensory connection.

Sound possesses a distinctive quality that originates from a dynamic occurrence that converts mechanical energy into a traveling sound wave. This wave then serves as a conduit, broadcasting the happening event over a wide area. While periodic vibrations and sudden impacts would produce sound, it is crucial to note that we perceive the event itself, not merely the sound being separate from the event. While we may link sound sources directly to the events that it had come from, listeners can never perceive sound exactly as it originates from a distant location. As sound waves travel towards the listener, they undergo changes due to the acoustic properties of the environment. Spatial acoustics produce resonances, reverberations, reflections, areas of diminished sound, sonic channels, focused intensity, and more, all which have an audible manifestation, through engaging in auditory spatial awareness, listeners can interpret the audible characteristics of spatial acoustics.

Sound is studied extensively using several traditional disciplines such as acoustics, music and oral communication, but their connection to landscape architecture is minimal in comparison. Environmental psychology, on the other hand, focuses on the human sensory experiences in outdoor environments and landscapes [15]. Sound is typically considered as noise when its volume has surpassed a certain decibel value or when it poses a threat to the well-being of people. Noise is further defined as unwelcome, unwanted, or random sound that disrupts the existing environment. The same aspect of sound is often dubbed as a stress-inducing factor instead of a valuable resource [16].

Environmental psychology has increasingly adopted a visual orientation, in parallel with landscape architecture, building architecture and urban planning [17]. However, there are exceptions within building architecture, particularly in architectural acoustics and the designs of spaces such as theaters or concert halls. These demonstrate the importance of sound in architectural design, away from only focusing on the visual aspects in both environmental psychology and other related professions.

This place is typically referred to a physical, often outdoor, area with specific visual and other elements, whether natural or human made. It serves as a gathering area in which people would engage in various daily activities, and in which they would also interact with the environment. When engaged in these activities, individuals would experience auditory stimuli from the surrounding acoustic environment. Figure 5

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illustrates a process framework of the perception and interpretation of an acoustic environment. The result of the perceptual construct of the acoustic environment would be termed the *soundscape*. In that specific context, soundscapes can evoke responses in individuals and lead to outcomes that could be attributed to it.

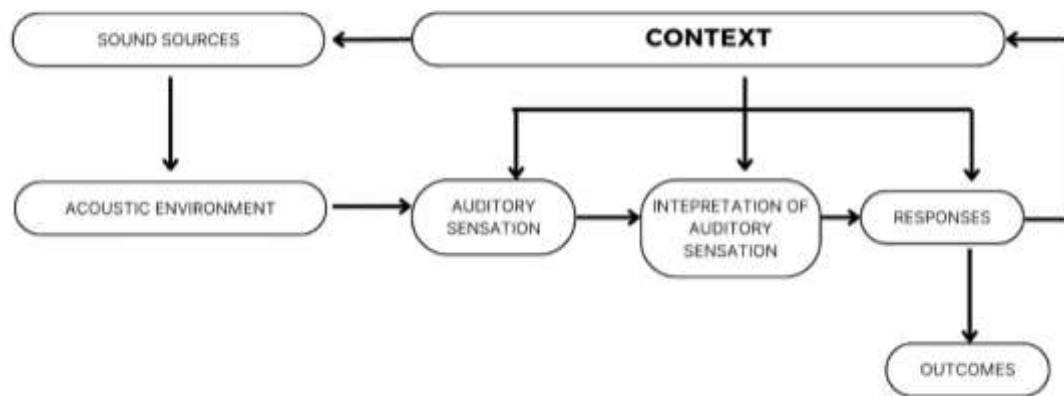


Figure 5: A diagram illustrating how individuals perceive and construct a soundscape within an acoustic environment.

The significance of what the spaces would sound like is undeniable and important [18]. Sounds in a space could subtly convey cues about the proportions, identity and even guessing its function of the room. Despite this, discussions about sound in architectural design would often tend to centre around strategies for minimizing or avoiding unwanted noise [19].

Green spaces provide a respite from the noisy and bustling city environment, often being filled with traffic and other human-generated sounds. While urban areas would have no choice but to include roads and traffic, it is crucial to protect spaces such as urban green areas where the citizens could enjoy the natural soundscapes of nature, Urban Park thus serves as sanctuaries within the cities, offering solace from unpleasant and disruptive noises from vehicle traffic and machinery. The soundscapes of urban parks play a vital role in connecting and immersing oneself in nature, as it offers a 360-degree perception of the surrounding environment [20]. A serene and harmonious soundscape can induce positive physiological and psychological changes. For example, many individuals find natural sounds like ocean waves and birdsong to be calming and comforting, which can lead to reduction of stress levels and blood pressure as was studied using music as well.

Of course, several countries are currently engaging in ongoing research on exploring on the use of nature sounds, calming sounds like running water, to help mitigate the impact of distracting conversations from other people [21].

Paley Park in New York has frequently been praised as a clever solution to the challenge of minimizing traffic noise within the urban design. Established in 1967 the vacant lot left by the demolition of the Stork Club on 53rd Street, the small public park, often known as a pocket park, was developed by Zion and Breen. The acoustic space is able to mask the noise of the city by the inclusion of a waterfall at the far end of the lot. The addition of the dense greenery along the side walls also contributes to creating a natural sound barrier and absorbing the noise. The presence of music would significantly influence how we interact and experience within space.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of carrying out this research is to identify the benefits of music in relation to architecture and how music would affect the occupants within the environment. The research method focuses on a lot of research and surveys of the opinions of people in regard to what spaces they would like to have most in Malaysia. The research would also touch on more with the state of music within the country and how each factor would affect the need for soundscapes.

In this research, successful case studies from other countries were studied on what made it the soundscapes and music architectures thriving and how each element could be applied to Malaysia. Sounds, vibrations, human sensory and the psychology of people are studied extensively so that these elements would be achieved when designing a soundscape. The types of sounds would also affect the design and the acoustics of the spaces.

A survey would also be made to understand the people's understanding to music and the spaces that they would like to relax in, whether would they like to go there and if the introduction of soundscapes would be well received in Malaysia.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Survey

A survey was conducted with a total of 132 respondents on the current situation of music in the country and the need for soundscapes. Based on the results of the survey, it is evident that a significant majority, specifically 55.3% of the 132 respondents, have not pursued learning music. This observation aligns with the broader situation in Malaysia in which a considerable portion of the population lacks the privilege or opportunity to have a musical education. Several factors could have caused these findings as mentioned in the literature review such as the financial constraints in which music lessons and instruments are expensive. Additionally, the emphasis on academic achievements and career focused education may lead to the lack of classes for the artistic subjects, like music, in some schools. This could be backed up by Figure 8 and Figure 9. In essence, the survey findings echo the diminishing musical skills among Malaysians, which enforces the need for initiatives and movements for music.

Do you have a musical background (Music lessons or playing an instrument)? Please pick one of the following:
132 responses

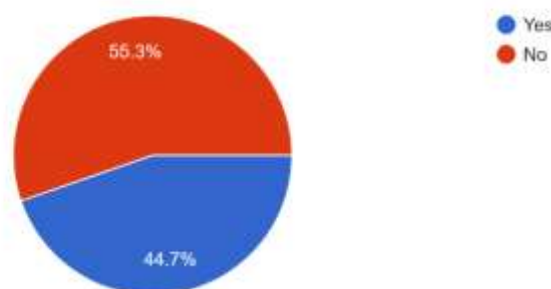


Figure 7: Pie chart of number of applicants who had learnt music

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Did you have mandatory music classes during your primary school?

73 responses

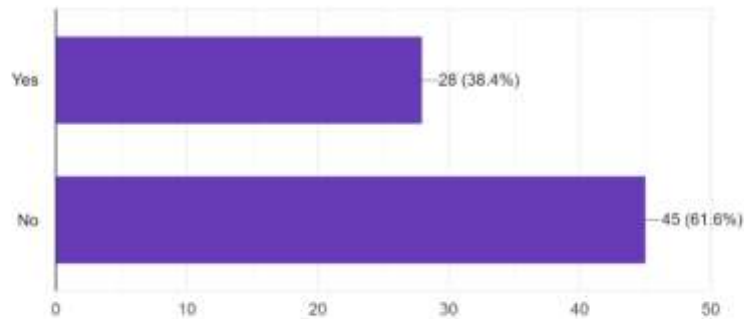


Figure 8: Bar chart of the presence of music classes in primary schools for those who had never learnt music.

Many young Malaysians receive their music education outside of school, via private institutions like Yamaha Music Schools. This limits the students in only having the chance to learn music within formal educational settings. This is evident from Figure 10 where most of them had private music lessons. However, this caused a challenge for those who couldn't afford to learn music.

Did you have mandatory music classes during your primary school?

59 responses

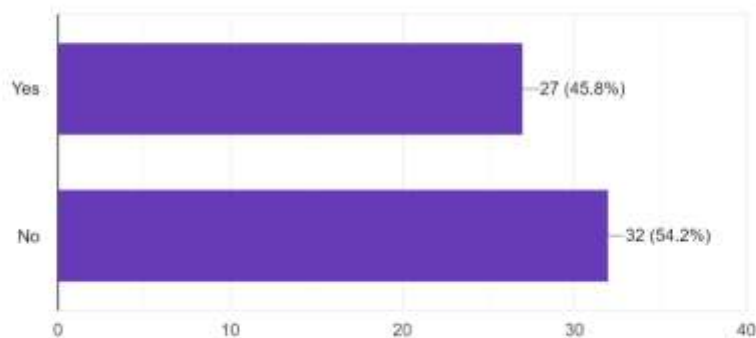


Figure 9: Bar chart of the presence of music classes in primary schools for those who had learnt music.

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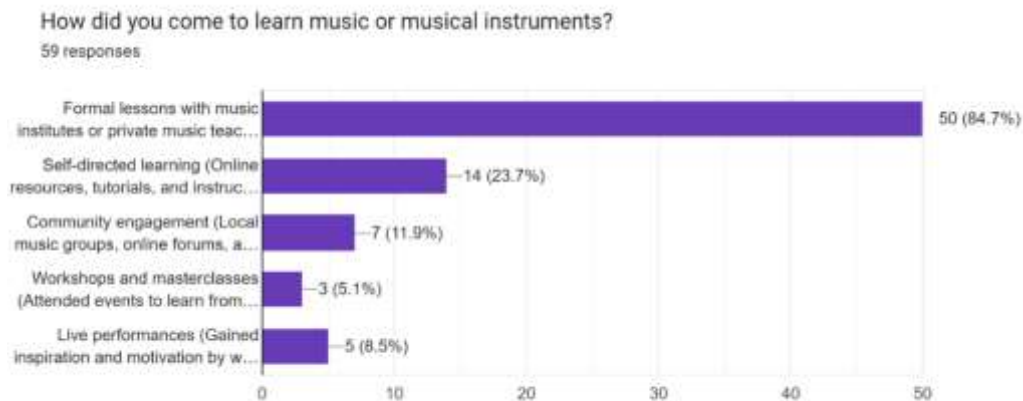


Figure 10: Bar chart on where the 59 occupants had learnt music.

Surprisingly, based on the findings of Figure 11, 95 of the 132 respondents think that the mandatory music classes in the primary schools are important in the education of the students. This aligns with the earlier observation that music holds a lot of value for people, whether in terms of health or their education, many studies were already conducted on the benefits of music, as previously discussed, that music helps in the academic performance and creativity of the students. Other than the cognitive benefits, music has positive effects on mental health by reducing stress and enhancing the well-being of individuals. The survey results have shown that even though people who had no musical background have the common consensus of the benefits of music and the importance of the music classes (Figure 12).

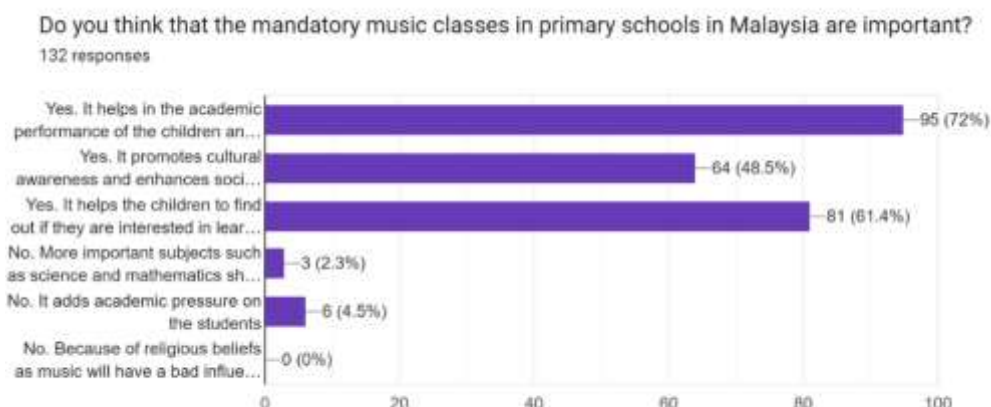


Figure 11: Bar chart of the opinions of people regarding the importance of music classes in Malaysian primary schools

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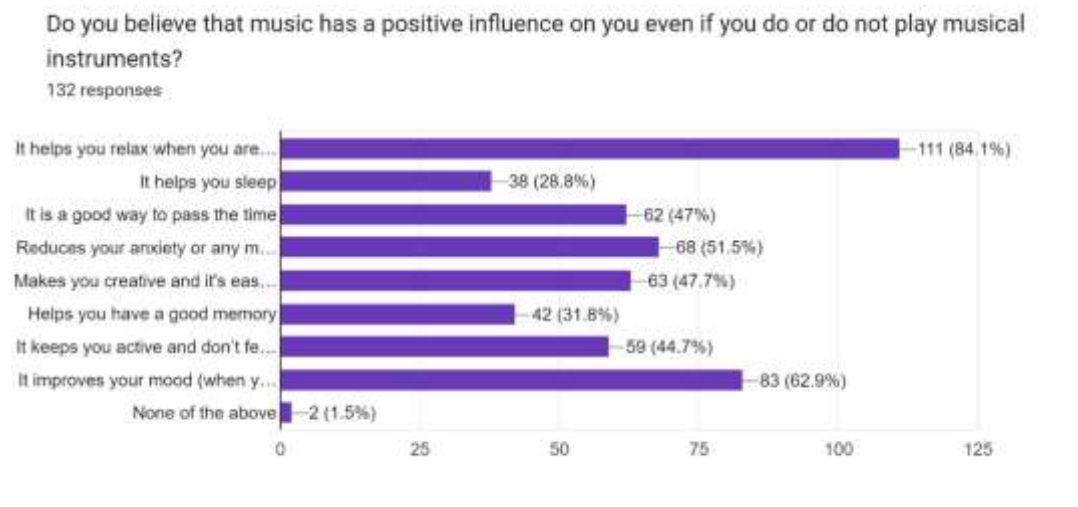


Figure 12: Bar chart of whether music has a positive influence.

While music education is important to everyone no matter if they had any formal musical education or in schools, a space is required with the proper acoustics for any sort of music. It would be said that some schools do not offer the music lessons due to the lack of proper space for the lessons or the resources required (Figure 13).

Music and spaces work well together, the preferences for background music in spaces is the most effective. Background music often sets a mood and atmosphere without it being intrusive while allowing individuals occupying the space to feel more pleasant and engaging within the space while fostering relaxation. It shows that people enjoy listening to music and that spaces with music are much more enjoyable than being completely silent.

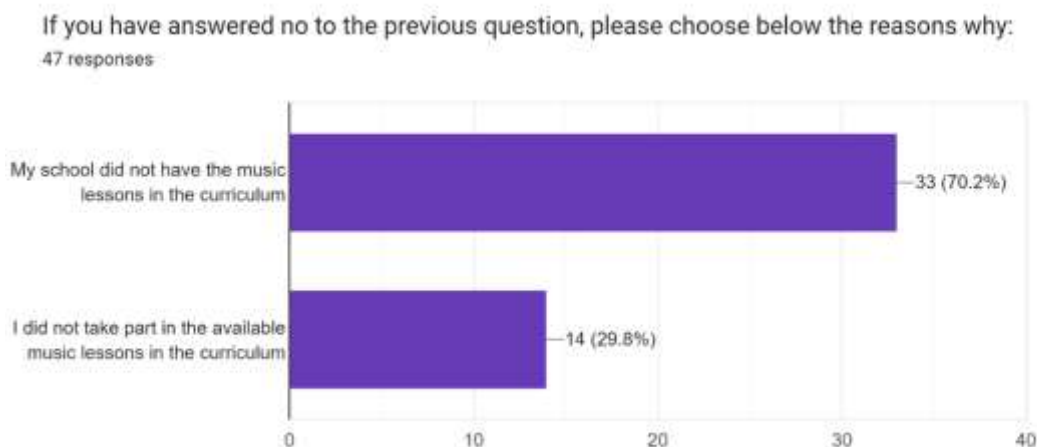


Figure 13: Bar chart on why people did not take music lessons in primary school.

Acoustic is a crucial factor for all spaces as it shapes the overall sensory experience of the environment. Effective acoustics would impact how the sound would behave and sound in the given space, impacting the quality of music, the perception of

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the atmosphere or even influencing the clarity of communication. In the architectural design, consideration of acoustics is vital in creating environments (Figure 14). This shows that spaces with good acoustics are important for people to enjoy music at its fullest and one could not work well without the other.

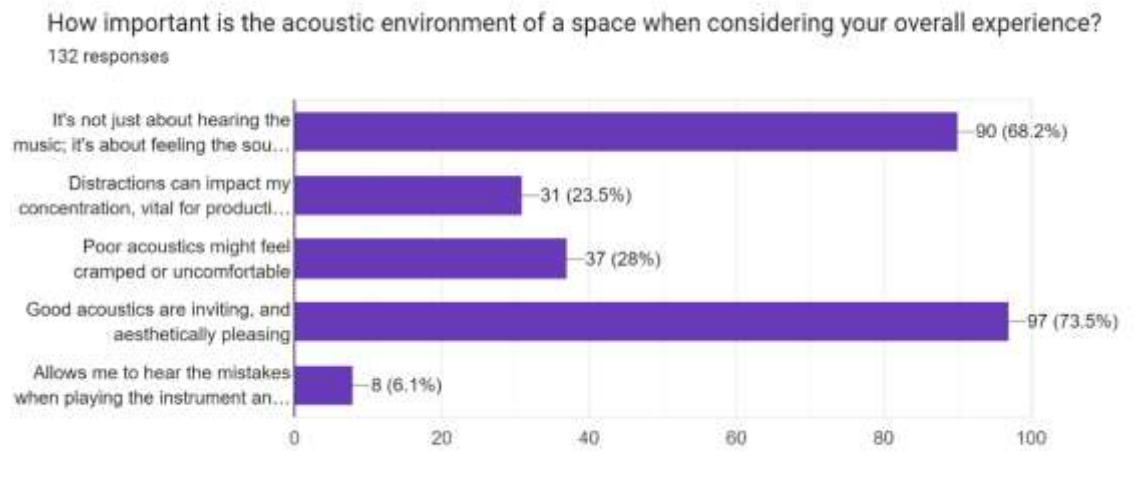


Figure 14: Bar chart of how good acoustics would affect the experience within a space.

While Malaysia do have multiple spaces that are dedicated to music such as concert halls, there are not many spaces that are outdoor such as open amphitheaters or open spaces dedicated for music. There are also spaces where people need to spend money to listen to music and not many public spaces where people could listen to music unless there are events in these spaces. While this has been more available in other countries, it is a growing potential for such environments in Malaysia as it would greatly benefit from rich cultural diversity and vibrant outdoor lifestyle. Music has the power of creating a sense of community, joy and relaxation, making the outdoor spaces dynamic and inviting. With the tropical climate of Malaysia, it allows for year-round outdoor activities and music could be a valuable addition in these spaces to enhance the experiences. Moreover, studies have shown that music has positive effects on the mental well-being and stress reduction for people thus validating the potential for public spaces that incorporate music. This is evident that Malaysia needs these public spaces like urban parks that incorporate music or sounds that are soothing such as the sound of nature.

The soundscape approach has been implemented in various settings in Malaysia, including highlands [22], campus landscape areas, and urban shopping streets but it has not been applied to urban parks. The perception of soundscapes differs due to the cultural differences between Asian Countries and Eastern Countries. This is evident as the communities in Malaysia are more eager to visit the parks for leisure activities or sports unlike the Western recreational activities of having picnics and relaxation activities.

Ultimately, it is to hope that Malaysia should achieve a growing awareness and appreciation of music along with the multisensory nature of human perception would spread through the community to develop more buildings and urban spaces that are dedicated to music and the emotional well-beings of its occupants.

CONCLUSIONS

Music is an underappreciated subject in Malaysia due to its lack of policies and structure plans. These obstacles hinder the advancement of music in Malaysia. The country would need to start on expanding the availability and accessibility of music lessons in more schools to provide the students a chance to learn music. The aim for this research is to identify the relationship between music, architecture, the urban spaces and the experience both invoke on the people. The research identifies the challenges in the integration of music in the built environment, considering factors such as preferences of the Malaysian populace and acoustics of the spaces. The need in having soundscapes into architectural spaces shows the profound impact that music has on individuals and communities. As the country continues to evolve, the collaboration of music and venues are opening opportunities for community engagement and encourages cultural enrichment. By solving the challenges and tackling the issues associated with the combination of music and spaces, this forges a future where music becomes an integral part of the country's cultural pride, fostering a sense of unity and its well-being of the community.

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