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THE INFLUENCE OF URBAN STREET FURNITURE TOWARDS HOMELESS IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Urban street furniture stands as a silent yet influential force in shaping the city's landscape and the lives of its residents. By studying urban street furniture in the context of homelessness, urban planners can work towards creating more inclusive cities for sustainable urban development. Thus, this qualitative research utilised three methods for data collection: literature review, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. This comprehensive approach aimed to thoroughly understand the relationship between urban street furniture and the experiences of the homeless population in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings of the observation in the case study, followed by the interviewed survey, revealed the multifaceted impact of urban street furniture on homeless individuals. Recognising and incorporating features such as comfortable seating, proper lighting, multi-functional planter boxes, access to clean water, and enhanced mobility through transportation hubs can all contribute to creating more supportive and inclusive urban environments for those experiencing homelessness.

Keywords: exclusionary architecture; homeless; hostile; street furniture; urban

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness typically refers to people living on the streets; they have no permanent residence and constantly move from one temporary shelter to another. Homeless people stay in hostels, and anyone who defines "no place to call home" on their census forms is considered homeless (Alowaimier, 2017; Hamdan et al. 2020). Several factors contribute to homelessness in Malaysia, including unemployment, low income, lack of affordable housing, ageing, debt, drug, or alcohol addiction, and mental or health problems (Kay Li, 2018). This phenomenon is a social issue that has affected the whole world, including Malaysia. Homeless people living in public spaces, particularly in big cities such as Kuala Lumpur, have drawn significant visual attention from various community groups (Schindler, 2015; Yeoh, 2017). The phenomenon of "hard-to-reach" urban refugee communities is growing, even though Kuala Lumpur City Planning and Development has consistently aimed to strengthen equitable urban life and an inclusive society. As a result, the majority of the homeless are currently living in towns and cities rather than in camps (Hamdan et al., 2020).

Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040 (KLSP2040) was established in 2020 to guide the city's strategic development over the next two decades. The vision is to secure the city's long-term viability and prosperity for all its residents—"a city for all." KLSP2040 comprises six (6) goals to establish a framework for spatial development and planning in Kuala Lumpur and incorporates previous census input into the KLSP2020. The second goal of KLSP2040 is "an Inclusive and Equitable City", that addresses homeless issues in Kuala Lumpur (Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa Negeri Selangor, 2017). A study of the number of homeless people in Kuala Lumpur revealed that 46% of the homeless were due to unemployed, while 18% were due to a lack of income to rent accommodation (Ahmad Yani et al., 2016; Kay Li, 2018). Despite efforts to provide transit housing for the homeless with minimal rental costs in Kuala Lumpur City, the number of homeless remains worrisome (Badrudin et al., 2022).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

An overview of the number of homeless people in Kuala Lumpur which was provided by research found that Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang had the highest percentage of homeless populations in Malaysia. Despite the efforts carried out to provide transit housing for the homeless with minimal rental costs in Kuala Lumpur, the number of homeless is continually rising. The number of homeless has increased from 600 in 2014 to 1500–2000 in 2016 (Michael et al., 2023). Homelessness is on the rise in Malaysia, as well as in developing and developed countries globally (Amalina et al., 2018).

Figure 1 shows the research case study area which is located in Kuala Lumpur city centre, within the City Region Triangle. This research location was chosen because it has the highest number of homeless people in Malaysia.

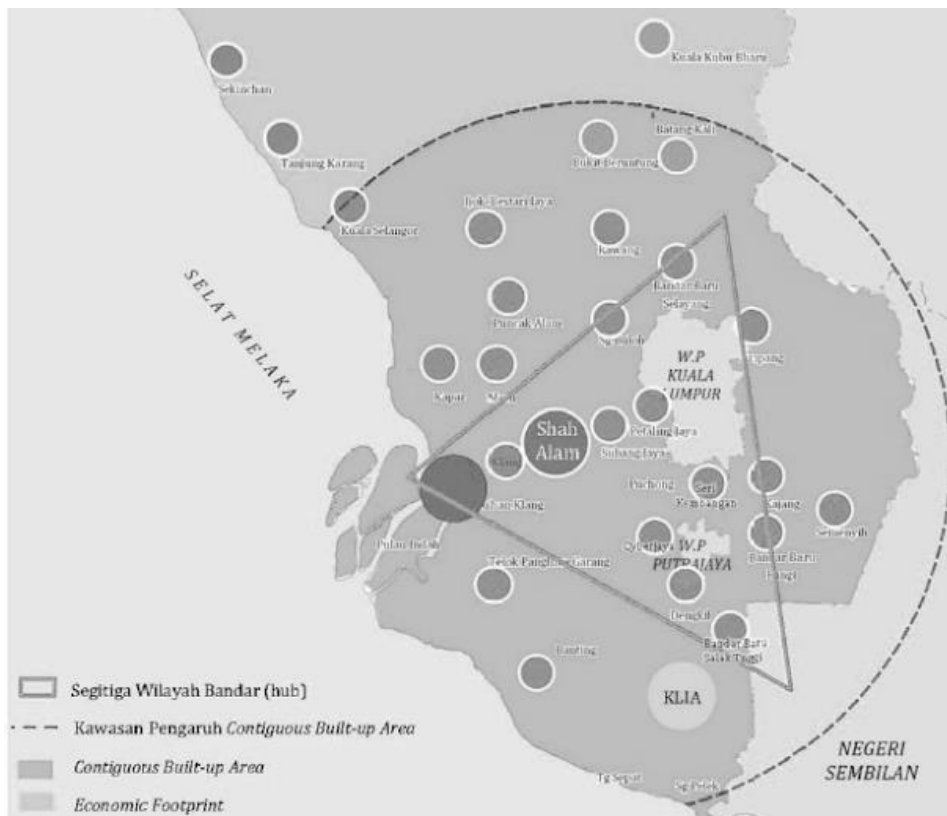


Figure 1: City Region Triangle in the Selangor State Structure Plan
 Source: *Jabatan Perancangan Bandar dan Desa Negeri Selangor (2017)*

HOMELESSNESS TYPOLOGY

Homelessness typology refers to a classification system that categorises homeless people based on specific characteristics or needs. The typology helps researchers understand the diverse nature of homelessness and tailor interventions accordingly. There are several typologies, each focusing on a different aspect such as the conceptual category, operational category, and individual living condition. Table 1 shows the homeless typology in European countries. The conceptual categories and living situation in Kuala Lumpur have been derived from Table 1 to understand the living situation of the homeless on the urban street.

Table 1: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS)

Conceptual category	Operational category	Living situation
ROOFLESS	1 People living rough	1.1 Public space or external space
	2 People staying in a night shelter	2.1 Night shelter
HOUSELESS	3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel 3.2 Temporary accommodation 3.3 Transitional supported accommodation
	4 People in women's shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation
	5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation, reception centres 5.2 Migrant's workers accommodation
	6 people due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions 6.2 Medical institutions 6.3 Children's institutions/home
	7 People receiving long-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people 7.2 Supported accommodation for formerly homeless persons
	8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends 8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy 8.3 Illegal occupation of land
	9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented) 9.2 Repossession orders (owned)

Source: (Amore et al., 2011; Pleace&Hermans, 2020)

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

To achieve the second goal of KLSP2040, which is to resolve the social problems associated with homelessness, the Malaysian government has proposed transit housing nearby to commercial areas and mixed development areas to cater to the homeless, newly hired youths, and other forms of household. *Pusat Transit Gelandangan Kuala Lumpur* and *Anjung Singgah Kuala Lumpur* are co-living houses initiated by the Malaysian Government. Regardless of the initiatives taken to address this social issue and work towards accomplishing the second goal of KLSP2040, some people continue to sleep on the streets. Some people choose to sleep on the streets because they are unwilling to pay the daily expense of public transportation and prefer to sleep in public areas closer to their workplaces (Mohamed et al., 2018; Syafiq, 2018).

The government of Malaysia, including the local authorities, has launched several initiatives to resolve the issue of homelessness in Malaysia. Some of the initiatives launched by the Malaysian government include *Ops Qaseh*, *Anjung Singgah*, and *Desa Bina Diri*, while *Kechara Soup Kitchen*, *Dapur Jalanan*, and *Kaseh4U* were several food-serving initiatives conducted by Malaysia's Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Ramlan et al., 2014; Syafiq, 2018; Uta Dietrich, 2018; Young & Petty, 2020). Other initiatives

implemented by local authorities include addressing unemployment issues among the homeless through extensive partnerships with NGOs (Amalina et al., 2018; Yeoh, 2017). KLSP2040 has been announced and launched by Kuala Lumpur City Hall in 2020 with six main goals. The second goal is to resolve the issue of homelessness inclusively and equitably. As a result, this research intends to address the challenges encountered by Kuala Lumpur urban areas, which are to identify the urban street furniture elements that contribute to the number of homeless and provide insight to Kuala Lumpur City Hall on how to achieve their visions for future urban living.

HOMELESS-INCLUSIVE URBAN STREET FURNITURE

The local authorities have designated pedestrian areas as places to rest. In contrast, the homeless who prefer distant and quiet locations to sleep see pedestrian areas as a place to reside. A study postulated that landscape and street furniture have been recognised as indicators of a well-kept area and give visual cue to pedestrians that the area is being maintained and safe (Alamouh et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2020). The study identified six types of public spaces that might attract the homeless in Johor Bharu, Malaysia. These public spaces include the building corners, open corridors, hallways, under the staircases, public seats, and abandoned stores (Ismail & Turiman, 2016).

In this intricate tapestry of homeless preferences on street furniture, Valado (2006) revealed five (5) prevalences of homelessness regarding urban street furniture that might attract them, including the seating, lighting, planter boxes, fountains, and bus or taxi stands. Each of them is explained as follows:

Seating: Public seating can provide a resting place for people experiencing homelessness. Designing seating areas with features such as armrests or dividers offers a degree of privacy, and some cities have explored incorporating cultural elements that can bring the identity of the place.

Lighting: Adequate lighting in public spaces is crucial for safety. Well-lit areas can provide a sense of security for homeless people, making public spaces more welcoming and lowering the risk of crime. In addition, lighting design can be considered for the needs of people who may need to navigate public areas at night.

Planter box: Planter boxes have a variety of uses. They can be designed to provide comfortable seating, and some innovative designs include storage compartments built right into the planter boxes. Additionally, community-driven initiatives might use planter boxes for urban gardening projects that involve homeless people, promoting a sense of purpose and community.

Fountains: Fountains can be a source of water, addressing the basic need for hydration. Designing fountains with accessible features and water refill stations can benefit not only the homeless population but the broader community as well.

Bus/Taxi stand: Bus and taxi stand provide access to public transportation, enabling people to get to shelters, social services, or employment opportunities. Designing these areas with seating and information about local services might make them more accessible to homeless people who rely on public transit.

Understanding the function and effect of street furniture in Malaysia and European countries based on previous research gives valuable insights into the similarities and differences in the challenges faced by homeless populations. The street furniture in many European cities is often designed to enhance public spaces and provide facilities for residents and visitors. Public benches, bus shelters, and other street furniture may serve as places to rest, socialize, or wait for public transportation (Abusaada&Elshater, 2021; Carmona, 2021). Homeless people may use these structures for shelter, especially in adverse weather conditions. Certain European cities implement initiatives to design street furniture that discourages prolonged use for sleeping or dwelling, while others may incorporate features to make public spaces more welcoming and inclusive (Pable et al., 2022; Reeve & Batty, 2011).

In Malaysia, however, street furniture may have different designs depending on cultural preferences and urban planning strategies. Public seating, transit shelters, and other street furniture are intended for the convenience and comfort of the public, access to services, and public perception (Ismail &Turiman, 2016; Uta Dietrich, 2018). A detailed analysis of urban planning, laws, and community dynamics is necessary to comprehend the particular applications of street furniture that homeless people make (Rashid et al., 2020). Research conducted locally and globally can shed light on how street furniture functions as a part of the urban environment for both the public and the homeless. Thus, Figure 2, which was extracted from past research, illustrates the four (4) influences of urban street furniture on homelessness.



Figure 2: The Influence of Urban Street Furniture on Homelessness
Source: Author (extracted from Carmona, 2021; Uta Dietrich, 2018)

Even though the issue has been discussed widely in the literature, the urban street furniture that attracts homeless people into city centres such as Kuala Lumpur is still underexplored. Thus, this research will identify the level of homeless preference towards street furniture and indications of urban street furniture that attracts homeless people to the city centre.

METHODOLOGY

The research deployed qualitative approaches. The data collection involved three methods, consisted of a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. These methods aim to fully comprehend the relationship between urban street furniture and the experiences of the homeless population in the specific context of Kuala Lumpur. The written documents on homelessness from academics and the local city council served as the foundation for the literature review. The data was also collected through reports, newspapers, and local authority websites, where the local authority provides guidelines, policies, strategies, the local agenda, implementation plans, and current practices as relevant resources. The street furniture preference and related activities that the homeless chose to do in those locations were the focus of the observation.

Table 2: Research Method Procedures

Procedures	Description
Research Design	Qualitative – literature review
Data Collection	Conduct semi-structured interviews and participant observations to gather qualitative and quantitative data regarding the homeless' preferences and indications of preference toward urban street furniture. In the photography and visual observation session, the focus was on investigating how urban street furniture influences homelessness. It aims to investigate and verify key variables such as homeless typology and the types of street furniture. The interview questions, utilising measuring indicators for street furniture physical settings, were derived from the literature review and the observation method in the study area, focusing on elements of seating, lighting, planter boxes, fountains, and bus/taxi stands.
Sampling and Participant Selection	Identify and interview 20 homeless people staying in Kuala Lumpur within the city region triangle who are available during interview sessions. They were selected through simple random sampling and interviewed via face-to-face guided interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire.
Data Analysis	Analyse the collected data using thematic analysis, to identify the level of homeless preference toward urban street furniture and understanding preference indications among the homeless.

Procedures	Description
Finding	Prepare findings outlining the conclusions drawn from the analysis, providing insights into the factors of urban street furniture that may influence homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.

Source: Author

A qualitative content analysis method was used in this study to summarise the data from all three methods. The research discusses the theoretical and empirical evidence for factors that cause or influence homelessness to stay in the city centre, as well as identifies the categories of urban street furniture that contribute to the number of homeless in Kuala Lumpur. To determine the measuring indicator, the homelessness preference was asked during the interview session to identify the level of their preference towards the categories of urban street furniture. Public furniture preferences for homeless people can be quite subjective and dependent on personal experiences and needs. Nonetheless, certain types of public furniture might be more conducive to meeting the basic needs and enhancing the well-being of homeless people. The preference level for the homeless on the current street furniture will be highlighted in the discussion. Thus, the categories of urban street furniture that attract homeless people are being examined based on that satisfaction level. Following that, a conclusion was reached regarding the urban street furniture relationship to homelessness in Kuala Lumpur.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Through photography and visual observation, this study discovered three (3) categories of homeless people with different profiles and living situations in Kuala Lumpur city centre (see Table 3). The study will focus on the first and second categories, as the third category is not intended to stay in public spaces.

Table 3: Observation Results of Homeless Typology in Kuala Lumpur

	Profile category	Living situation
Conceptual Category	1) People with no home or shelter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Living in urban streets and public spaces. ● Long stay period.
	2) People with mental health or illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sometimes living without a shelter can be characterised as living space. ● The period of stay is intended to be short-term in a certain space and will move to another space.
	3) People with drug dependence or alcoholism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make use of the public spaces for overnight shelter. ● Not intend to stay

Source: Author



Figure 3: Visual observation photography of homeless typology in Kuala Lumpur
 Source: Author

The following analysis determines the differences in the level of preference for the homeless when using urban street furniture for daily routine purposes. To further understand the feeling of being homeless, the following conditions were given to create a scenario for the homeless, with the statement “I am comfortable if there is...”. The results obtained from the interview regarding the level of preferences of those who are homeless are shown in Table 2. This is a very important analysis to find answers on how urban street furniture has attracted homeless people whose preferences are also influenced by their diverse needs.

Table 2: The mean score of the analysis regarding the level of homeless’ preference for urban street furniture

Urban Street Furniture	Measuring Indicator	Mean Score
	1) Seating	4.65
2) Lighting	4.30	
3) Planter Box	4.45	
4) Fountains	3.40	
5) Bus or Taxi stand	4.20	

*1-Strongly Disagree
 5-Strongly Agree

Source: Author

Most of the homeless who responded to this question indicated that they either 'strongly agree' or 'strongly disagree' with the statements given regarding their level of preference for urban street furniture for transit in certain spaces. It is presented in the Table above that seating has a higher indication of preference regarding urban street furniture with a mean score of 4.65. The second level of preference indication was highlighted by the planter boxes. The results of the third-highest, fourth and lowest average scores are presented in the Table above.

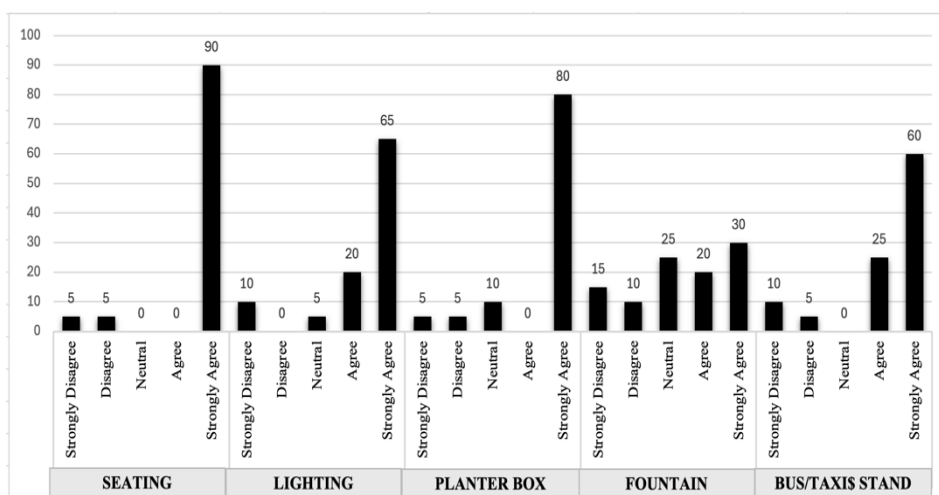


Figure 4: Homeless preference indication for urban street furniture
Source: Author

Figure 4 illustrates the breakdown of feelings according to the situation given to them, ranging from 'strongly disagree to strongly agree'. The findings revealed that more than 65% of the total respondents indicated 'strongly agree' that they are comfortable with the street which has seating, lighting, and a planter box.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the analysis revealed significant insights into the factors of urban street furniture that attract the homeless population in Kuala Lumpur. The homeless people interviewed expressed varying preferences regarding the specific features of street furniture. The recommendations drawn from the analysis are as follows:

Seating Preferences: Homeless people showed a strong preference for well-designed and comfortable seating options. Enhance the public seating features such as armrests and dividers were particularly favoured. The availability of such

seating not only addressed the basic need for rest but also contributed to a sense of welcome and well-being.

Lighting Impact: Adequate lighting in public spaces was highlighted as a crucial factor. Well-lit areas not only enhanced the safety of these spaces, but they also positively influenced the overall well-being of the homeless population. Properly illuminated spaces were perceived as more inviting and contributed to a sense of security at night.

Planter Boxes as Multi-functional Elements: Planter boxes were identified as multi-functional elements that could serve multiple functions in urban design, such as productive and therapeutic activities, and can create inviting and aesthetically pleasing environments. Beyond their traditional use, some homeless people valued planter boxes that doubled as seating. Engaging homeless people in urban gardening projects within these spaces also emerged as a positive and inclusive initiative.

Access to Fountains and Hygiene Facilities: Fountains were seen as potential sources of clean water, meeting the fundamental need for hydration. The provision of accessible water fountains positively improved the daily lives of the homeless. Furthermore, the availability of nearby hygiene facilities, such as public restrooms and handwashing stations, contributed significantly to improved personal hygiene and general well-being.

Utilising Bus/Taxi Stands for Accessibility: Bus and taxi stands were recognised as essential elements for accessibility, enabling homeless people to reach shelters, social services, and employment opportunities. Design features that incorporated seating and information about local resources at these locations were found to be valuable in supporting the homeless population's mobility and access to necessary services.

In conclusion, the analysis emphasizes the importance of thoughtful urban street furniture design in addressing the needs and preferences of the homeless population in Kuala Lumpur. The findings of observation in the case study area are discussed, followed by the questionnaire interview. The influence of urban street furniture on homeless people was found to be multifaceted, impacting various aspects of their daily lives and well-being. Figure 3 shows how five (5) factors of urban street furniture influence the homeless in Kuala Lumpur.

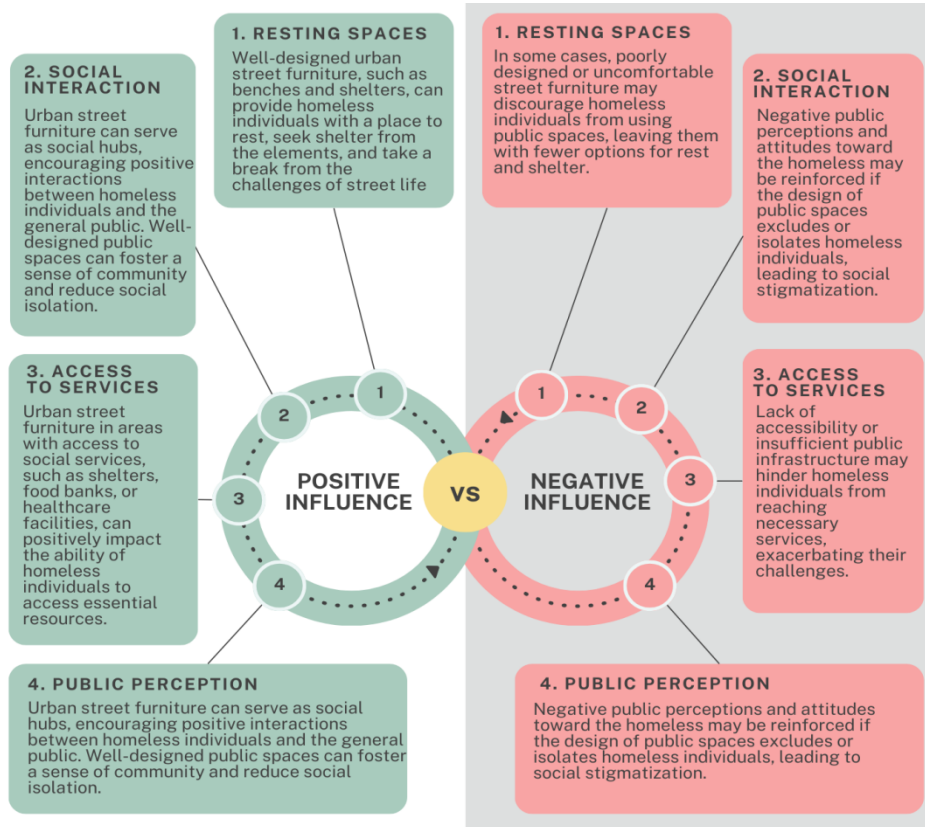


Figure 4: Interview findings on the positive and negative influence of urban street furniture on homeless
 Source: Author

CONCLUSION

In summary, researching urban street furniture in the context of homelessness is crucial for creating urban environments that are not only functional and aesthetically pleasing, but also compassionate and supportive of the diverse needs of all community members, including those experiencing homelessness. Understanding the complex interplay between urban street furniture and homelessness requires a holistic approach that considers the physical, social, and psychological aspects of public spaces. Successful initiatives often involve collaboration among local governments, community organizations, and urban planners to develop inclusive environments that address the diverse needs of homeless people. Providing significant value to street furniture, which ranges from seating to public spaces and amenities, plays a pivotal role in determining the accessibility and comfort of public areas. Even while these elements are

designed to enhance the overall urban experience, their impact on vulnerable populations, particularly the homeless, requires nuanced exploration.

Suggestions for Future Research

By examining the influence of urban street furniture on the well-being and social dynamics of homeless people in Kuala Lumpur, future research endeavours could explore and determine the characteristics of urban street furniture that invite homeless people into the city centre. Collaborative efforts can help to ensure that public spaces are designed inclusively. These dynamics are crucial for crafting more compassionate, effective policies and fostering a city that truly serves all of its residents. Exploring the well-designed seating, lighting, planter boxes, fountains, and bus or taxi stands could contribute to providing respite and a sense of security for those experiencing homelessness and the general public. Thus, it is suggested that future research explore the cultural nuances and variations in homeless-inclusive urban street furniture initiatives across different regions. Identifying culturally sensitive design elements that resonate with diverse communities experiencing homelessness is also important. By focusing on these areas, future researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between urban street furniture and homelessness, resulting in informed policies, inclusive design practices, and better outcomes for vulnerable populations.

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