HOW CHILDREN USE AND VIEW THEIR MOSQUE CASE STUDY OF MASJID AT-TAQWA, TAMAN KOTA MASAI, JOHOR

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ABSTRACT

Mosques are built for the use of all people in community including children. Yet, children are often neglected in many aspect of mosque development especially in built environment. There are few studies related to children and mosque in the topic of religious study, but yet to discover on how children interact with physical environment in mosque complexes. This study investigates on how children uses and perceive the physical environment in Masjid At-Taqwa, Taman Kota Masai, Pasir Gudang, Johor. The study approach includes observation, behavior mapping and focus group guided by the theory of affordance. Forty four (44) boys have responded in this pilot study with age range from 9 to 17 years old. Findings indicate different uses of spaces in the mosque are related to children age. Children's perception on preference and ideal mosque can be divided to several categories namely resources, comfort, facilities, landscape, recreation, and rest. This study could contribute on new insight of mosque design through behavior of children in mosque. It is hoped that the findings could facilitate guideline to design mosque that are more children friendly in the future.

Keywords: Masjid; Mosque Design; Children Friendly Environment; Environment-Behavior

1.0 INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that mosque is an important institution for Muslim community. It is a place where unity and religiosity can be expended. It is also a place where a Muslim could mold his or her Islamic identity and value through learning and practicing. Mosque has been long made as a community development center – thus, it is supposed to cater all level of community including children.

However, we could see discussions about unimpressive presence of young people attending the mosques. Number of mosques being built in Malaysia increases year by year as urban population increases, however the attendance of young people do not reflect the population (Badaruddin Mohamed, 2003). The programs such as talks and classes that usually target adult audiences are also uninviting for the children, and worse, sometimes even the adults mosque comers are harsh toward children (Zainul Abidin, 2013).

But recently the light of improving the role of mosque in Malaysia has emerged. A convention on management and *imarah* (flourishing) of mosque has been held few years back. SIRIM is now developing a Malaysian Standard for mosque planning and asset management (SIRIM, 2014). But still, mentioning of children is scarce even in the study of mosque architecture. If children are important for our future, why are they not highlighted as a big concern in designing a mosque?

2.0 BACKGROUND

This research links the study of mosque architecture with environment-behavior study specifically on children. Children friendly environment is a body of study in environment-behavior that relates children as user with environment. The study has started from decades ago covering some essential environments such as neighborhood, playground, school ground, class rooms and health care infrastructure and services Yet, there are very few studies of children in religious places especially on mosque

Table 1: Children Friendly Environment studies

Type of Environment	Author
Neighborhood	(Björklid & Nordström, 2007; Broberg, Kyttä, & Fagerholm, 2013; Cosco & Moore, 2002; Haikkola, Pacilli, Horelli, & Prezza, 2007; Halseth & Doddridge, 2000; Kyttä, 2002; Nordström, 2010; Parra et al., 2010; Ramezani & Said, 2013)
Playground	(Blinkert, 2004; Czalczynska-podolska, 2014; Dewi, 2012; Min & Lee, 2006),
School ground	(Atmodiwirjo, Yatmo, & Paramita, 2012; Aziz & Said, 2015; Bagot, Allen, & Toukhsati, 2015; Lewis, 2004; Oluremi, 2012; Weinstein, 1979)
Class room	(Barrett, Davies, Zhang, & Barrett, 2015; Yang, Becerik-Gerber, & Mino, 2013)
Health care infrastructure and services	(Evans, 2003; Isawumi, 2015; Said, 2003; Verschoren, Annemans, & Steenwinkel, n.d.).
Religious place	(McPhillips & Russell, 2011)

Mosque is a religious institution with a main role to house congregation prayer. There are spaces and places that are considered sacred (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004; Taib & Rasdi, 2012). Yet, mosque can hold various functions and be used as community development centers (Khan, 2015; Mohamad Rasdi, 1999) which might include classes, talks, community activities. Mosque itself can be considered as a complex institution or center for local community if it is being utilized to the maximum.

There are several concept of measuring Child-Friendliness of environment. Firstly the concept of affordance which is defined by Kyttä (2002) as:

"..functionally significant properties of the environment that provide a psychologically relevant concept for the analysis of the evolving child-environment relationship."

The concept of affordance usually used for play or outdoor physical activities (Aziz & Said, 2015; Broberg et al., 2013; Kyttä, 2002).

However, mosque is not purposely built for play – although children might see opportunity or affordance in it. Mosque is a unique environment. Sometimes it has specific function at specific times. In addition to that, some spaces in Malaysian mosques are very multi-purpose and some are specific to genders at times. Thus there is a need to explore and investigate what it means to have children friendly environment in mosque in Malaysia.

3.0 AIM & OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to explore what makes mosque children friendly. In design decision, what should planner, architect or designer consider to create a physical environment that is more inviting and purposeful for the children? But firstly we need to understand how children experience and view the environment of their mosque from the perspective of children themselves. Therefore, the objectives of this study are (i) to investigate how children experience and view their mosque and (ii) to test the chosen methods of research with children.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

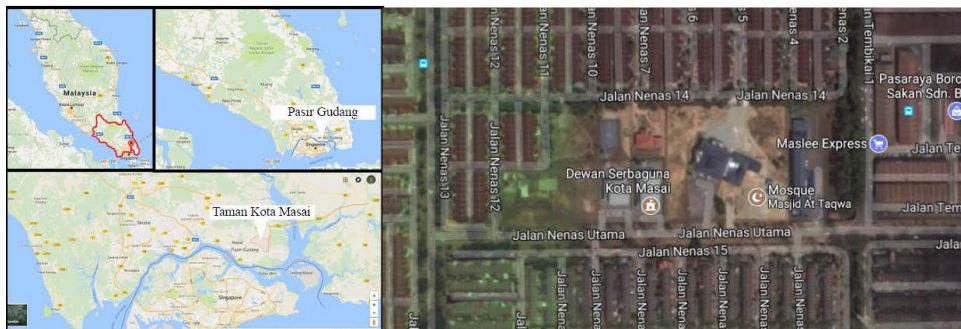### 4.1 Case Study: Masjid At-Taqwa, Masai

It is important to select a communal mosque as the participants would be likely have greater familiarity and social interaction compared to a larger mosque such as state mosque or national mosque. The mosque chosen for this pilot study is Masjid At-Taqwa, Taman Kota Masai, Pasir Gudang , Johor, Malaysia. This mosque was chosen as it is a communal mosque situated in neighborhood area which means the mosque has a permanent *qariah*. Masjid At-Taqwa is also located in a housing area with high population of Malay residents and children. Taman Kota Masai is a good example of a new-developing neighborhood. This case can be a good example for future mosque development in new housing area.

Figure 1: Masjid At-Taqwa, Taman Kota Masai

Masjid At-Taqwa was built in 2012. It has a capacity of 3000 people at a time. It is located at the focal point of the neighborhood alongside other amenities such as convenient stores, field and state government religious school. Many children can be seen coming to the mosque during night time, thus high probability to get young participants from the '*qariah*'(community). It is said by the committee and participant that the mosque will need to be expanded due to increasing number of congregation during Friday prayer.
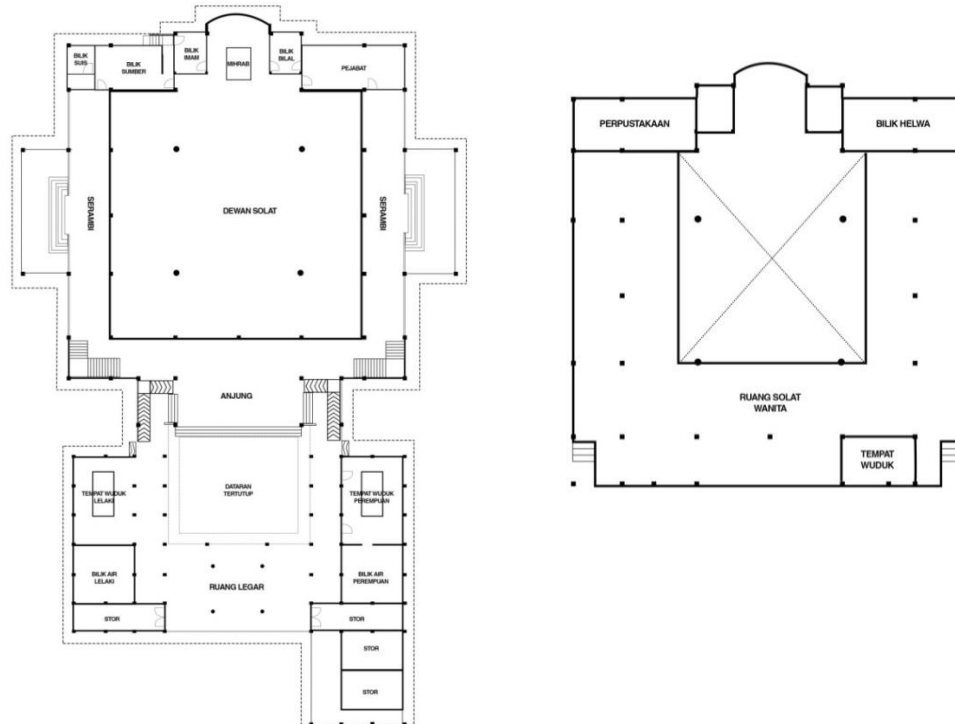
Figure 2: Location of the case study mosque

Figure 3: Plan of the mosque

GROUND FLOOR

MEZZANINE LEVEL

4.2   Research ethics with Children

The respondents for this study consist of children from age range between 9 and 17 years old boys, living in Taman Kota Masai, Masai Johor. At this stage, only male participants were taken because they have more exposure and experience interacting with the mosque.

The data collection was done in a form of workshop for children. Letter of Consent was written to the chairman of the mosque and permission is granted. The workshop is promoted through a social media application - 'Whatsapp' group of the *'qariah'* (community). Parents or guardian contacted the researcher to register their children to participate in the workshop. Permission letters were signed by guardians during registration on the day of the workshop.

4.3 Research Methods

The nature and objective of this study is an explorative one because it needs to venture on meaning of children's behavior and perspective on their mosque. For this research, qualitative method will be applied. The tools that will be used for this pilot study are observation and focus group discussion which includes behavior mapping, interview and work group discussion. Data from children's verbal descriptions will be analyzed using thematic analysis and there is no preset of categories.

For observation, contextual observation was chosen as this study. Contextual observation involves observation of action, behavior, event or objects that that happens in a context being studied (Min & Lee, 2006) such as mosque in this case. The instruments used for recording event, actions and behavior of children are photographs and field notes. Contextual observation was carried out on Thursday night (or what is called by Malaysian Muslim as '*malam Jumaat'*) from *Maghrib* prayer (7.30pm) until after *Isya'* prayer, when the talk end (around 10 pm). This particular time is chosen because attendance is considered high for both men and women for weekly occurrences. '*Malam Jumaat'* is also a time when mosques in Malaysia usually hold weekly event of *surah Yassin* recitation or Islamic talk (*ceramah*) whereas Friday prayer are only compulsory for men. This would allow researcher to observe activities of local children during an event held by the mosque in a neutral manner.

Figure 4: Children during workshop having Focus Group Discussion

Meanwhile, focus group discussions were done during the workshop. The workshop was held on Friday morning – which creates a time constraint to finish before Friday prayer. Sets of plan drawings of the mosque and questions in a form of booklet were distributed. . Participants were grouped according to age range; 9-12 years old, 13-15 years old and 16-17 years old. This is to ensure participants would not feel intimidated by older participants if they are grouped randomly (Leeuw, 2011).

For behavior mapping, participants will be asked to map two categories of places ; i) places they often go, ii) places they like. After that, participants will be brought to a tour around the mosque building based on places they have mapped. During the tour, participants will be interviewed about their activities and reason they chose the places using focus group discussion. Afterward, participants will be asked to work in group to discuss about the criteria of children friendly mosque according to their opinions and present them to the researchers.

5.0   RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1 How children use their mosque

Children of younger age were more active and mobile throughout the mosque complex. During observation, they can be seen playing at the back side of the prayer hall where it is more open. It was raining during the night of the observation where the rain splashed a bit at the entrances wetting some parts of the ramp (Figure 5A). Children took this opportunity to play slide at the ramp because it was slippery. Other than that, children were seen in groups under the staircases (Figure 5B), corridor and foyer.

Figure 5: Photo taken during observation (A) Children playing slide on the ramp (B) children meet in a group under the staircase

In term of use, children like to occupy places that are secluded such as under the staircases, mezzanine level. To no surprise, younger children find affordances in many spaces or details in their physical environment. Children mentioned that play tag with border defined by the darker colored tiles.

Figure 6: Pattern of tile create affordance for children.
Children playing hop on darker colored tiles

Older children or teenager are more passive in terms of mobility probably due to their maturity. As the talk (*ceramah*) was held after Maghrib prayer, some teenager can be seen relaxing at the back of the prayer hall and foyer. Some teenagers were sitting at the back – near to the praying hall's entrance during the talk. Most of teenagers were leaning on something such as column and wall. As children grow older, they are becoming more mature thus less movement.

Figure 7: Photo taken during observation (A) Anjung or foyer area (B) teenagers are seen sitting and lying around the corridor in front of women's ablution area

This can also be seen in the behavior map (Table 2) where younger children mapped more places they frequented compared to the older children. Children or teenager at the age of 15 and above can be seen more focused to certain places. They have started to define their places suggesting that they started to have sense of place. However, just based on how children used or experience their mosque would be insufficient information to find the design indicator of a child-friendly environment of mosque. We need to know more on how children perceived their environment and what ideal do children hold.
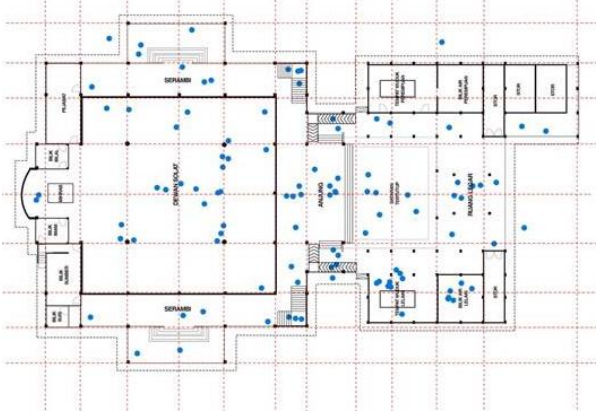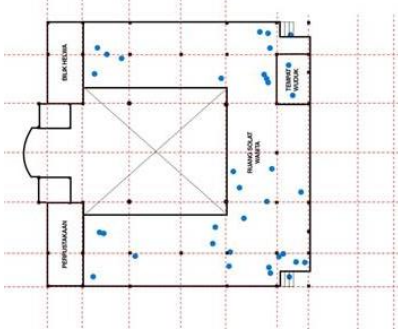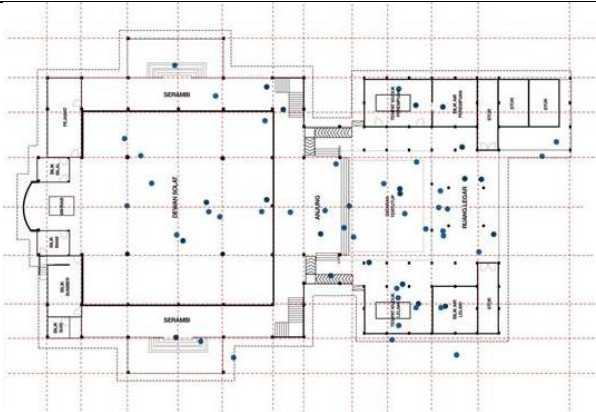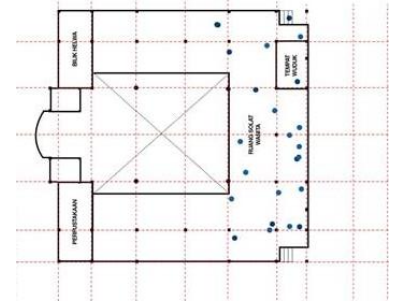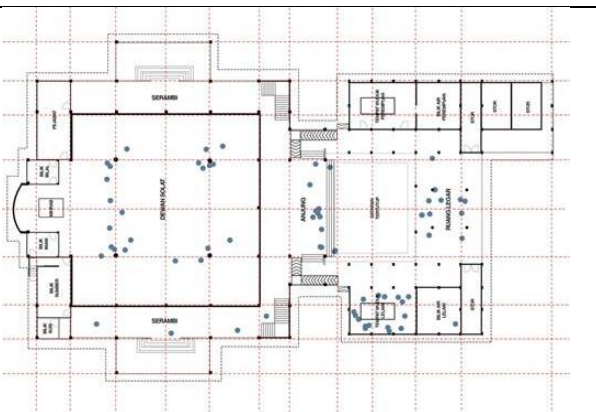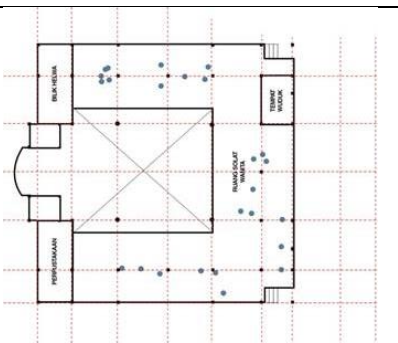
5.2 How children view their mosque

Children perspectives on their mosque were asked in the form of preference and ideal. Children were asked to map places that they liked (Table 3). Children have also worked in group to discuss and present the 'criteria of a children friendly mosque' and changes they want to have on Masjid At Taqwa.

Most places children like are places that are at the back such as back of prayer hall and back of mezzanine level. These areas are claimed by children to be out of sight of adults which allow them to play. Furthermore, children especially older ones like places that are near to access point such as the foyer and *anjung*. These places allow them to exit the prayer hall or mosque early to avoid crowdedness. Children also mention that the *anjung* and foyer are cooler due to better air circulation. However, not all the places that they pointed to like are The places that they like do not reflect places that they always frequented. Some children had mapped the library which they have used for the first time during the workshop just because it has air conditioner. places that they always frequented. Some children had mapped the library which they have used for the first time during the workshop just because it has air conditioner.

From the children perspectives, an ideal children friendly mosque would have resources especially internet. This is not surprising as they grow up in digital era with rapid technology development. All groups of children participated in the workshop suggested for the mosque to have WiFi services for free. Some suggested computer and library (real library with books and other resources) to be available at the mosque so they can do school's assignment. Also, a group had detailed up that the library should be accessible on ground floor.
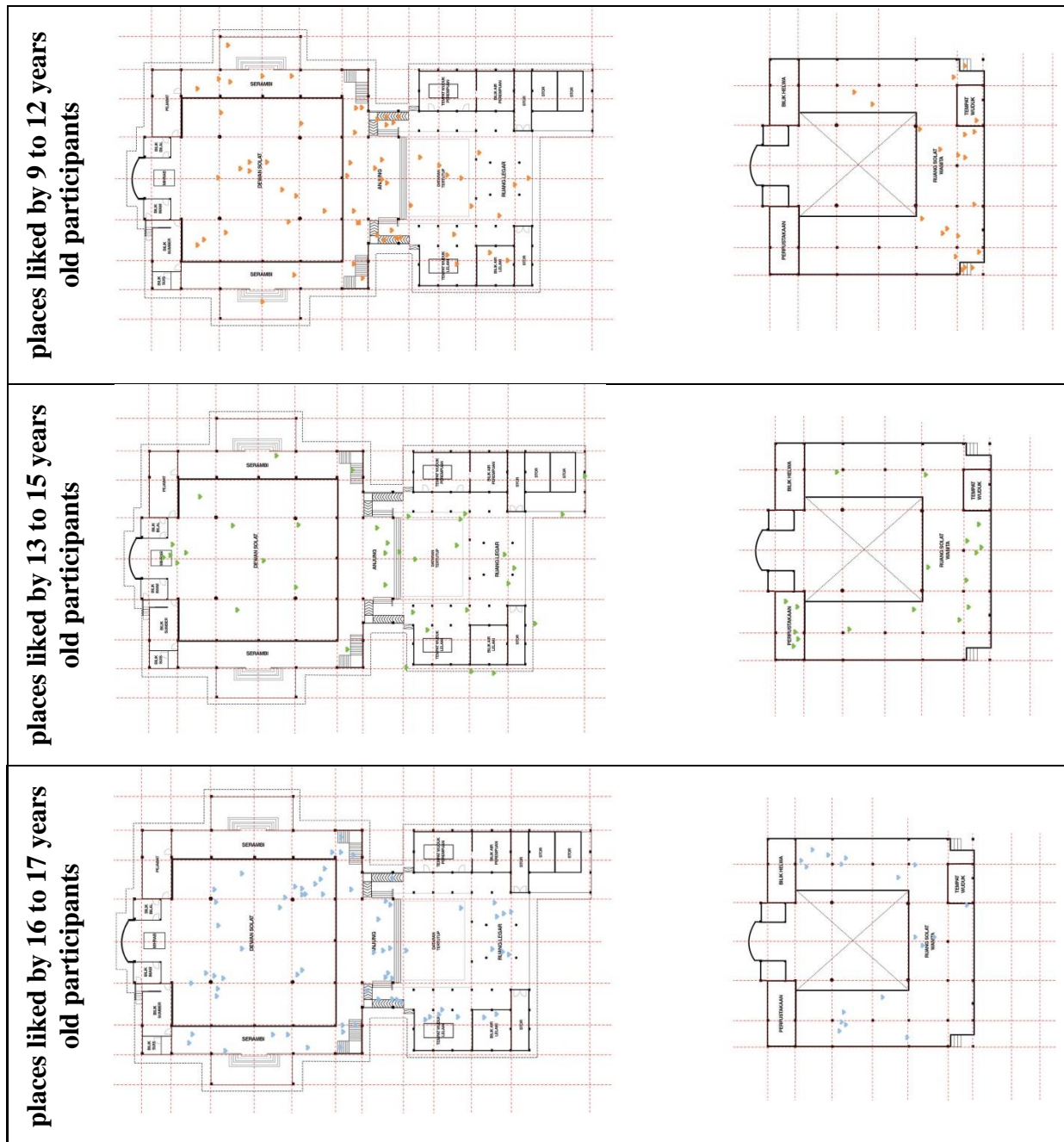
Table 2: Behavior Mapping - Places frequented by children

	Ground Floor	Mezanine level
places frequented by 9 to 12 years old participants		
places frequented by 13 to 15 years old children		
places frequented by 16 to 17 years old children		

Secondly, children like to be at places that are comfortable. This includes places that have fans and airy. Many would like to have air conditioner. One group suggested having tinted windows. The current design will let heat and strong light in, in the afternoon, making the interior quite hot. Children also go to places with fans (standing fans, wall fans or giant fan) as seen in the map. Probably more openings on walls and good roof design could create a good air circulation and bring more comfort to the attendees.

Table 3: Behavior Mapping – places liked by children

Ground Floor	Mezanine level

places liked by 9 to 12 years old participants

places liked by 13 to 15 years old participants

places liked by 16 to 17 years old participants

Other criteria that could be considered as physical are the need of facilities, recreation and rest, landscape fittings and esthetic. As the mosque was built only in 2012, the landscape was quite barren. Therefore it is not a surprise to have children suggesting criteria such as recreation (e.g.: mini gym, futsal court), landscape (e.g.: fish pond, vegetable garden) and resting areas such as *wakaf*. Children also want the mosque to held programs for children in weekly basis and prepare free food. This mosque could be a lot more if it is turned into an institution with permanent staff that could organize programs for children. Mosque can be a focus center where children and youth hang out, learn and socialized if there are facilities that they can benefit from.

Table 4: Children's ideal on Children Friendly mosque

Categories listed in highest to lowest number of responses	
Categories	**Suggestion by children**
Resources	Internet, computers, books, library
Comfort	Air conditioner, thick carpet, clean, mosque extension to add covered space
Facilities	Parking for bicycles, dedicated children's space, mobility facilities such as lift, escalator and automatic door
Recreation	Mini gym, futsal court, playground, jogging track, play area

Rest	Resting area, wakaf
Landscape	Vegetable Garden, flower garden, fish pond,
Program	More activities for children in weekly basis
Free food	Eat together, free food
Esthetic	Wall paper, color
Safety	Guard post

However, the criteria suggested by children do not mean it can be used solely as an indicator of a children friendly mosque. The ideal of children should also be balanced with ideals or ideas from adults especially parents of children and other 'stakeholders' such as the mosque committee, state's religious department and architect.

6.0 RECOMMENDATION

A quality environment could attract more children to come to mosque and build good attachment with it – therefore an opportunity to build quality Muslim generation. Understanding children's perception will lead to the understanding of children's needs, preference, behavior and activities. For further study on this topic, there are several recommendations.

For doing research with children, it is best to apply different methods of data gathering to allow various and rich information and triangulation. It also could avoid boredom among children participants with lengthy interviews. In addition to that, for the next stage, participant of the study should also include adults. This is for triangulation of data and also to validate some of the answers given by children.

The number of participant was unexpectedly high during the workshop as it is promoted as a program to a large *qariah*. Higher number of participant might be good in terms of more or wide range of information. However to understand deeper on a topic with time constraint, small number of participant is sufficient.

Behavior mapping with floor plan(s) gives good information, but not enough to understand children's perception on the place or space they have mapped. Moreover floor plans are two dimensional that could not tell much on real experience of space and place. It needs to be topped up with other data of different methods. Photographs or auto-photographs (where they take photos of places themselves according to theme that we are looking for) could add information in term of ambiance of space and details such as colors, light and occurrences from children's perspectives. Of course both behavior mapping and photography need to be assist with in-depth interview to know the meaning.

In-depth interview is recommended to obtain richer information for better understanding. However when doing research with children, lengthy discussion or in-depth interview might not be suitable for younger children as they have shorter attention span. Too many or difficult questions might result in children answering playfully or falsely (just because they want to give an answer).

The study on child-friendly environment of mosque could benefit a neighborhood in building a sustainable community. It is important to make mosque child-friendly so it could attract children to come to mosque. Attending mosque would create more opportunity of social interactions, learning one's religion and gaining spirituality which leads to attachment to the mosque and generating sustainable community. Therefore, architects and designer should also start to put children as important stakeholders when designing a mosque.

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