



Sembang Buluh with panelists Angela Hijjas of Rim bun Dahan and Lim Khim Joe of Kebun-Kebun Bangsar saw an engaging discussion on urban spaces and community interaction with gardens. Moderated by Thary Gazi Goh of Urban Biodiversity Initiative (UBI), the two-hour forum held at University of Malaya’s botanic garden Rimba Ilmu covered on matters concerning landscaping, land development, community-led actions, disconnection with nature and utility over aesthetics.

The forum opened with a conversation on the roles of different parties in land development. In Malaysia, it is common practice for engineers to be the first to come in and advise on land development when it should be landscape architects instead. “Landscape architects’ opinion should be the first step of the project so they can evaluate what the land has to ensure the ecosystem is not being disturbed,” says Khim Joe. It is only after minor interventions to help restore the ecosystem should engineers and architects advise on the ways to work with the existing landforms, but it proves to be difficult to change the way landscape architecture works in Malaysia. The roles of landowners and clients are also highlighted as they actually have the most power in kick-starting change.

Sembang Buluh



Organised by



Special thanks to

Angela Hijjas from Rim bun Dahan
Lim Khim Joe from Kebun Kebun Bangsar

“The small things make big things work”

“Urban spaces are important because they are the only places where people can get access to these plants”

Angela Hijjas @ Buluh in
the City 2020



Khim Joe introduced Kebun-Kebun Bangsar (KKB) as an initiative led by landscape developer Ng Seksan. Situated in the heart of the city, it was built on empty land under TNB transmission tower and provides an escape from the concrete city. Seksan saw its disuse as an opportunity to establish a park-garden-farm hybrid where people can experience interacting with plants and animals at the same time use the space for communal activities like picnics and gatherings. It utilises the space for community interaction with nature where people learn how to co-create with existing landforms and work with what they already have. KKB is sustained purely by donation and manpower of volunteers in line with Khim Joe's beliefs that "by working from your heart, you can get paid in many other forms." KKB is on a permaculture basis which views garden as a living organism rather than just a garden.

Rimbun Dahan on the other hand is a private arts centre and home to Angela Hijjas and her husband, Hijjas Kasturi. Angela's landscaping objective for Rimbun Dahan was to complement her husband's architecture. She tried to enhance the space by focusing on indigenous plants, though she did not know the potential of the species. As she collected trees without prior knowledge, she was able to see the products of the trees. Researching the uses and cultural values towards local communities on top of learning how to utilise and plant the trees has provided her a sense of belonging through ownership of the landscape around her. Rimbun Dahan now has over 800 species on the site and they collect in conjunction with friends from Forest Research Institute (FRIM) and Rimba Ilmu.

During the tours Angela does of the garden at Rimbun Dahan, she engages visitors by telling them stories of the varying uses each tree has depending on the culture. She states that people need to be given human aspect points in order for them to engage with plants. "It is the intersection point of human and plants that make people appreciate the creatures. It is by remembering what you learn, which is not only just for the study of botany," says Angela. She emphasises that urban spaces are important as that is where people can easily access greenery.



“If you have fear you must go into your fear and find out why it is bothering you so much”

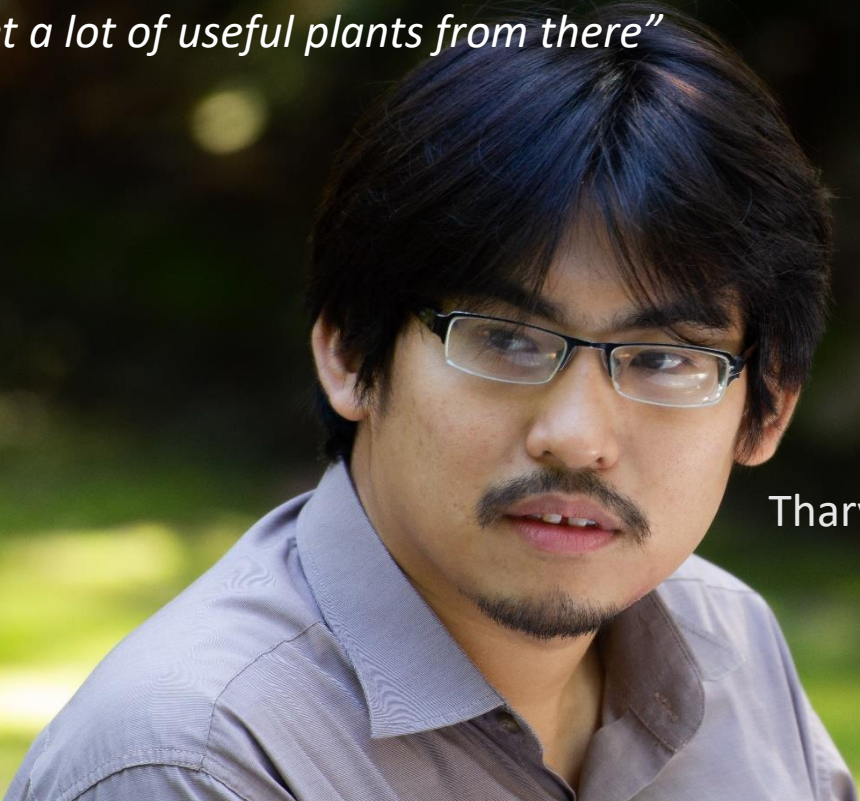
“Knowing why some species inhabit some places allows you to learn how to work with the species that you want or don’t. Create an area that is balanced with frogs and dragonflies which can feed on these mosquitoes”



Lim Khim Joe @ Buluh in
the City 2020

But what can we do when local spaces are becoming more marginalised and green spaces are being pushed to the fringes? Khim Joe says that we as members of the community should ask ourselves “What have I done to take part as a citizen? What can I do to contribute to the land I live on?” Angela, recalling how back in the 70’s she took initiative to build a playground garden on a designated green area turned dumping site together with her community, called for self-initiative by the people to create their own green spaces on abandoned lands. With support from municipal councils and organisations like Free Tree Society, it is only a matter of planning and organising. Apart from that, small gestures like getting to know local trees, knowing more about the environment around us could greatly help as there is power in awareness.

“A lot of people are afraid of semak or belukar but we get a lot of useful plants from there”

A portrait of a man with dark hair, glasses, and a goatee, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a blurred green field.

Thary Gazi Goh @ Buluh
in the City 2020

“Without developing an understanding of biodiversity, why would you protect it?” says Angela. We need to have a story and a sense of understanding attached in order to be able to fully appreciate what we have.

Speaking on the general disconnection between human and nature, the reluctance of the younger generation to step outside and interact with the environment can be rooted in a culture of not wanting kids to get dirty as it is deemed unclean and improper. Most if not all fear of nature stems from lack of understanding as “A lot of understanding of nature in cities now comes from myth and hearsay and folktales,” says Thary. Paired with a lacking curriculum for nature education in schools, it is no surprise that phobia of nature is common.

On supporting the public to overcome the phobia, green spaces should be more accessible and engagement with communities should be done more often. Individuals should take self-initiative to understand what nature has to offer by joining workshops, visiting parks, attending talks and reading more as this understanding will allow peaceful coexistence. It is also important to engage with people who are knowledgeable because to a layman a tree is just a tree - explanation and interpretation is necessary in order for it to become meaningful.

The issue in choice of plants commonly used in Malaysian landscaping was also raised as a lot of the trees planted in our spaces do not offer anything to the community. The problem is rooted in landscapers having no confidence in planting local species due to public's preference for ornamental factors i.e. flowering and bright-coloured plants and the general perspective of garden design that is defined by typical English perspectives. A Malay garden is a good example of a collection of useful plants that benefits the community as it disregards aesthetics and is built purely on utility of the plants - primarily on its ability to generate food. As kampungs are changing, forest reserves are decimated for timber and the younger generation is less interested in taking care of these trees, we are losing spaces to create a local garden. We should seek to change our European-skewed mindset of what a garden should be by reintroducing prioritisation of utility over aesthetic and apply this practice to local landscaping.

Briefly touching on conservation in Malaysia, the effort is mainly centred on conserving large mammals but they only represent less than 0.01% of our biodiversity. A large portion of our species are small-sized creatures and as Angela says, "The small things make the big things work." In the same way tiny animals play a huge role in our biodiversity, small actions of the community also make big ripples in the overall greening effort. Plants have great utility but they must be managed well and this can only be achieved if the entire community work together. Overall it was a relaxed and casual discussion that brought meaningful dialogue on matters close to the hearts of the community.

