

HEALTHY LIVING

Think about creating more 'breathable spaces'

NOW that some rules have been relaxed regarding the Movement Control Order (MCO), one can choose to go out a bit more now as long as we adhere to social distancing.

The outdoor environment, for instance, urban parks and gardens in the city, is vital for our physical and mental health.

These "breathable spaces" in the cities are often scenic, beautiful, colourful and inviting.

We need more of such "breathable spaces" as they give us a sense of freedom.

Parks and gardens provide space to stretch your legs. Go for a walk. Enjoy the fresh air and sunlight.

Sunlight provides us with vitamin D and helps to keep our joints and bones healthy.

As long as we are disciplined and

maintain a safe distance of at least two metres from other people, we will be fine.

The outdoor environment will help us to relax and feel calm. It will boost your mood, reducing stress and loneliness. It's where you seek solace in nature amid the worries brought about by the pandemic.

In Milan, the government is considering widening sidewalks to allow people to practise social distancing. It also intends to turn 35km of busy urban streets into new cycling routes. Other streets will also cater to just pedestrians.

Cities like Columbia, Berlin and Budapest are adding more bicycle lanes to encourage people to get on their bicycles. This is to reduce crowding as the virus can easily spread on the bus or subway.

In the United States, the New York city council has introduced legislation to provide pedestrians with more space outdoors. It intends to close streets to vehicle traffic, widen sidewalks and add bicycle lanes throughout the city.

All these will be implemented in areas which are near open public spaces to drive New Yorkers to city parks.

Some European cities only allow seating outside restaurants, besides transforming areas into "giant outdoor cafes" so the bars and cafes can reopen to support the industry and protect jobs. All these measures are meant to keep people safe.

In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, restaurants and cafes utilise public squares and streets during the coronavirus pandemic. The govern-

ment does not charge them any fee when public spaces are used.

Urban parks help reduce the heat in cities, producing oxygen and rejuvenating the outdoor air. Trees and vegetation help with humidity and even improve water quality.

Researchers at Harvard have studied the link between poor air quality and Covid-19 deaths. An increase of particulate pollution can increase a patient's chance of dying by 15 per cent. Thus polluted cities will make the health crisis worse.

The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, intends to remodel the city to allocate more space for pedestrians and cyclists. Besides a plan to ban older cars from entering the city, car lanes and parking spots will be phased out for wider sidewalks and more greenery.

In a nutshell, there should be fundamental changes and solutions to create "breathable spaces" in cities so that they become more resilient to future outbreaks.

We should look at the outdoors as a place that supports our efforts in social distancing.

There is something we can learn about this pandemic. It has given us different perceptions about outdoor spaces. Significant value can be gleaned from landscape architecture design and planning.

Once you learn to love the outdoors, you will have taken a valuable step towards better health and happiness.

JUITA WAN HASHIM

Founder/director of Verona Design
Kuala Lumpur