

**ENHANCING SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND SPIRITUAL WELLNESS THROUGH
ISLAMIC COURTYARD GARDEN (ICG)**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the potential of Islamic Courtyard Gardens (ICGs) to enhance social interaction and spiritual wellness within modern campus environments. While Islamic gardens have historically symbolized paradise and served as spaces for reflection and community, their role in contemporary architectural and urban planning, particularly within educational institutions, remains underutilised. This research addresses the gap by exploring how well-designed ICGs can foster social integration and spiritual wellness. The study focuses on case studies of two Islamic courtyards at the Tuanku Muhriz Islamic Center (TMIC) at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) and Masjid Al-Azhar at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS). The research methods include site observation and questionnaires survey. The key finding suggests that while the Al-Azhar Mosque courtyard garden better meets users' needs than TMIC, enhancing TMIC with seating, lighting, water features, and diverse vegetation could improve its appeal. While opinions on spiritual wellness are varied, there is strong agreement on the positive impact these spaces have in nurturing it. The study offers architectural and landscape insights to optimise ICGs in educational settings, advocating for their wider use to enhance social cohesion and well-being in academic communities.

Keywords: Islamic Courtyard Garden, Social Interaction, Spiritual wellness

1. INTRODUCTION

Across different civilisations, distinct garden styles have emerged, each representing the ideals and aesthetics of its time. Among these, the English, Japanese, French, and Islamic gardens stand out as archetypal examples, each with its own unique design principles and cultural significance (Jani et al., 2018). A garden is an outdoor space intentionally designed to provide a setting for relaxation and recreation, offering a tranquil environment that enhances well-being (Jani et al., 2018). The Islamic garden is widely recognised as a hallmark of the gardens established during the height of Muslim civilization (Ruggles, 2008). The concept of the first Islamic garden was deeply influenced by interpretations of garden imagery found in the Quran. Lehrman (1980) emphasizes that gardens in Islamic tradition are often seen as reflections of paradise, designed to evoke a sense of tranquility and divine beauty. Islamic gardens, particularly those in Persian and Andalusian regions, are frequently viewed as earthly representations of this divine paradise (Ansari, 2011). Beyond their resemblance to the paradise garden, these spaces also serve as places for reflection and rest, and, more significantly, as reminders of the oneness of God (Ruggles, 2008; Ansari, 2011).

In the context of a university campus, nearby pocket setting such as courtyard garden not only contributes to the mental and emotional health of individuals but also enhances social learning experience (Salih et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2023). Islamic Gardens (ICGs) in the campus environment serving not only as serene, spiritual sanctuaries but also as vital spaces for social interaction and community bonding (Firdaus et al., 2023). A thoughtfully designed gardens blend aesthetic beauty with practical functionality, providing a tranquil environment that fosters both individual spiritual wellness and collective social integration in the educational setting (Firdaus et al., 2023). In the fast-paced environment of modern life, especially within universities and educational institutions, the importance of ICGs becomes even more significant. These gardens offer a unique blend of natural elements and architectural design that can enhance the well-being of students, staff, and visitors alike (Salih et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2023). The presence of greenery, water features, and carefully planned open spaces creates a soothing ambiance that encourages reflection, relaxation, and informal social gatherings (Firdaus et al., 2023). The findings indicate that water bodies and trees serve both passive cooling and aesthetic purposes in Islamic gardens, which are valued traditional elements. Most participants identified these features as their favorite aspects of the garden (Mogra & Furlan, 2017).

Despite the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of Islamic Gardens, their potential to enhance social integration and spiritual well-being is insufficiently explored in educational campus settings. Many contemporary educational institutions lack well-designed ICGs that effectively promote social integration and spiritual wellness. This study aims to examine the characteristics of selected ICGs in educational environments and their influence on students' preferences. Additionally, it evaluates students' perceptions of the impact of ICGs on promoting social integration and spiritual wellness. The findings are intended to offer insights into optimising these spaces to support the well-being and social cohesion of academic communities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilised a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) and case study approach. Two research methods were carried out which included: i) visual observation and ii) online survey

questionnaires (N:50). A visual observation was carried out at two selected case study sites which included the courtyard gardens in TMIC, USIM and Al-Azhar Mosque, UIS to identify the similarities and differences of the characteristic of these two gardens. An online questionnaire survey was carried out to examine users' perceptions and preferences of the courtyard design of the selected mosque of the institutional buildings. The online questionnaire was distributed to USIM community including the students and staffs on May 2022. The survey was prepared using an online Google Form and later distributed to the respondent via WhatsApp.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, this paper discusses on the comparative study on the design layout and characteristics (softscape and hardscape) of the courtyard gardens in both case study sites. Further, it describes on the findings on users' preferences and perception on the quality of the courtyard gardens of TMIC and Al-Azhar Mosque.

3.1. Differences and similarities of the characteristic of the ICG in the case study sites

Based on the observation carried out in both case studies, the comparative analysis of TMIC and Al-Azhar Mosque courtyard gardens reveal significant differences in design elements and functionality. TMIC's garden lacks essential features such as seating, lighting, water elements, and diverse vegetation, which limits its appeal and usability. In contrast, Al-Azhar Mosque's garden is more inviting, with varied pavement, seating, lighting, water features, and a rich variety of plants, contributing to a more pleasant user experience. To enhance TMIC's courtyard garden, it is suggested to incorporate seating areas, lighting for ambiance, water features for tranquility, and diverse vegetation to create a more engaging and peaceful environment. This is in line with previous study which indicate that incorporating a well-designed courtyard gardens within the educational spaces enhance emotional well-being and promote social integration in the educational setting (Firdaus et al., 2023). Man et al. (2017) also highlights the use of traditional features like water elements, vegetation, and geometric patterns. These elements are essential for creating aesthetically pleasing, functional spaces that promote tranquility, cooling, and social interaction, reflecting the spiritual and cultural values of Islamic architecture (Man et al., 2017).

Table 1. Comparative study on the characteristic of the courtyard garden of both case study sites

Characteristic	TMIC (USIM)	Al-Azhar Mosque (UIS)
Layout of courtyard garden	Enclosed courtyard	Semi-enclosed courtyard
	A formal and symmetrical structure	
Year of completion	May 2017	May 2002
Hardscape - The non-living elements or man-made features		
Pavement Colour and texture	Less choice of colour pavement and texture	Variety of pavement colour and texture to enhance the gardens ambiance
Seating area	No seating area provided	Provide variety of seating area, wooden benches, concrete seating and table which serves as places for students' discussion
Pathways leading to the mosque	Lack of trees planted along the axis leading to the	Pathway served as a main axis leading to the mosque. Pathway were frequently

	Mosque.	surrounded by shrubs, flowering plants and shaded trees.
Lighting features	Lack of lighting features provided in the garden area	The garden equipped with lighting features to draw a dramatic effect during night time
Water features	No water fountain provided at the entrance or in the gardens of TMIC.	Provide water features at the main entrance of the mosque to arouse a welcoming feeling to the visitors Water fountain and pool at the central axis leading to the mosque
Softscape - The living elements of a landscape		
Variety of vegetation	Few types of vegetation No shrubs and flowering plants	The garden surrounded by variety of shrubs, colorful flowers and shade palm trees

3.2. Respondents' preferences of the courtyard garden in the case study sites

The findings from the user preference survey, as shown in Figure 1, indicate that the majority of respondents (75%) prefer the Islamic courtyard garden design at Al-Azhar Mosque, KUIS, compared to 25% who favour the design at the Tuanku Muhriz Islamic Center (TMIC), USIM. This preference suggests that the Al-Azhar Mosque courtyard garden resonates more with users, potentially due to its design features, layout, or ambiance, which may be perceived as more aesthetically pleasing or functional for their needs. This supports the findings of previous studies, which suggest that well-designed courtyard gardens that blend hardscape and softscape can enhance the campus atmosphere and improve students' educational experiences (Firdaus et al., 2023).



Figure 1. Respondents' preferences of the courtyard garden in the case study sites

3.3. Respondents' perceptions on the impact of the Islamic courtyard garden on the social integration and spiritual wellness

Based on figure 2 (a), the findings indicate mixed perceptions of the impact of the ICG on the social integration. A significant portion of respondents either disagrees or remains neutral about the gardens' impact on social integration, which surprisingly contradicts previous studies highlighting that courtyard gardens have a significant impact on students' social interaction (Salih et al., 2023; Firdaus et al., 2023). The mixed survey results may stem from respondents' limited interactions with the ICGs, leading to disagreement or neutrality regarding the gardens' perceived benefits. On the other hand, the opinions on spiritual wellness are more divided, with notable agreement on their positive effects in this area (See Figure 2 (b)). This aligns with previous studies

that highlight how gardens in Islamic tradition are often viewed as reflections of paradise, designed to evoke tranquility and divine beauty (Lehrman, 1980; Ansari, 2011).

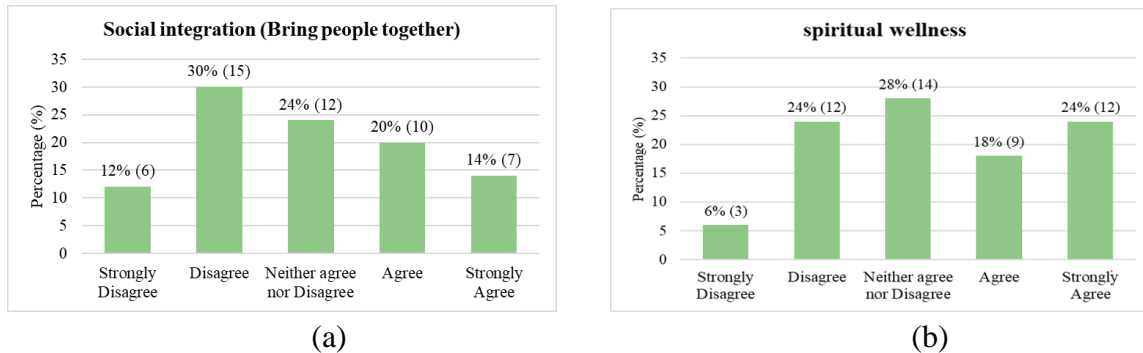


Figure 2. Users' perceptions on the impact of Islamic gardens to the social integration and spiritual wellness

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, the preference for the Al-Azhar Mosque courtyard garden over TMIC suggests that its design better aligns with users' needs. To improve TMIC's courtyard garden, this study recommends adding seating, lighting, water features, and a wider variety of vegetation to better match user preferences. While Islamic courtyard gardens are appreciated for fostering spiritual wellness, doubts persist about their role in promoting social integration. Future research should involve interviews with garden users to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions, while also expanding the survey to a more diverse group with varying levels of interaction with these spaces.

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