

Chapter 11

Placemaking Strategies for Public Spaces in Bahrain: By Integrating Inclusivity and Cultural Expression

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Introduction

With the rise of urbanism, it has become necessary to include nature in our built environment and coexist with it instead of pushing it away. In recent years, the success measure for cities has largely depended on the livability and quality of life (QoL) in those cities (Ballas, 2013; Amin, 2008). With the rise of mental health issues, the role of cities has expanded beyond merely providing functionality and speed to creating spaces where people can pause, socialize, and engage with their urban environment. Research indicates that walking in nature can significantly reduce stress and increase people's happiness levels. Therefore, integrating nature into our built environment is crucial for enhancing people's physical and mental health (Olcoñ et al., 2023).

Public spaces are integral in forming the social and cultural fabric of cities. They foster human and cultural interaction, and they offer numerous benefits to their users. These benefits cover multiple dimensions, including health, economic, environmental, and social benefits (Yılmaz & Mumcu, 2016). Moreover, the quality of public spaces often determines the quality of life in our cities. Consisting of parks, streets, plazas, and the spaces between buildings, these open spaces help shape our cities and define their image (Gehl Institute, 2017; Lynch, 1960).

One of the major benefits of public open spaces is that they foster communities and shape cultural identities (El-Kholei & Yassein, 2022). This implies the importance of understanding the culture in which these spaces are located and designed, as it helps adapt the design strategies to the needs of a specific culture (Gehl Institute, 2017). Therefore, given their benefits in creating a sense of community and promoting social cohesion, it is essential to design public spaces that ensure inclusiveness and cultural expression (Dalal et al., 2024).

Countries worldwide are now becoming more concerned with creating healthier public spaces by incorporating urban design guidelines that promote livability and enhance the QoL in cities (Cramer-Greenbaum, 2020). Bahrain is one of the countries that have been working diligently to enhance its public open spaces and improve their quality. This effort aligns with Bahrain's 2030 economic vision, which entails meeting UN SDG No. 11, which proposes the creation of more green public spaces to enhance safety and sustainability in countries (*THE 17 GOALS*, n.d.). Therefore, Bahrain has developed a plan to meet this SDG by creating more public spaces and improving the conditions of existing ones (*Sustainable Development Goals*, n.d.). However, these guidelines provide general regulations regarding only the physical aspects of public spaces, without considering the social or cultural aspects of the community (Zoning Regulations for Construction in Various Areas in the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2022).

For public spaces to be successful, they should offer a diverse range of activities and functions, attracting people from all walks of life (Priess et al., 2021). Placemaking is one of the concepts studied over the past few decades to enhance the quality of public spaces and foster a sense of community and belonging to their location. It employs a multi-layered approach that creates a range of functions to enable the space to accommodate multiple activities, cater to people from diverse backgrounds, and foster a sense of community by keeping the user at the heart of the design process (Figure 1) (Costa et al., 2024).

To transform public spaces into lively communities, Project for Public Spaces (2021) identified eleven main principles for placemaking. These principles are divided into four major groups: first, underlying ideas that entail the community is the expert and needs to be involved in the design of their public spaces, as the primary users of the space. Second is planning

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and outreach, which suggests observing the space and how people use it to understand how they feel about it and then creating a vision of what the place should be—third, triangulating and experimenting with quick and small projects to translate ideas into actions and lastly, implementing changes, keeping in mind that projects are never finished. It is an ongoing process that keeps adapting to changes in people's lives (Costa et al., 2024).

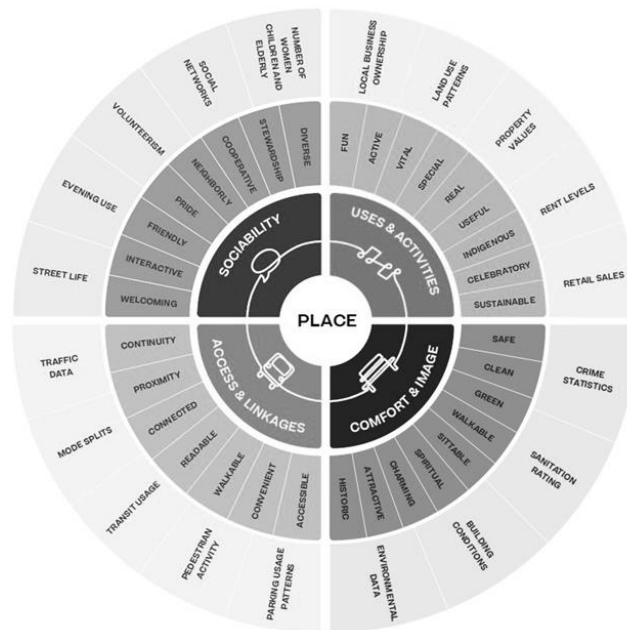


Figure 1. Attributes of a good place (Project for Public Spaces).

Inclusivity and Placemaking

Inclusivity means designing spaces that are welcoming and comfortable to everyone. It is about creating equitable places that empower all segments of society, allowing them to be a part of the community and belong to their city. This includes individuals who are more likely to face issues with comfort and safety in public spaces, such as women, children, elderly people, individuals with special needs, and those from diverse ethnic backgrounds (*Designing Inclusive Spaces*, 2018). This approach allows public spaces to cater to all users by creating a safe environment for everyone. Therefore, to achieve inclusivity in design, it is important to recognize the types of users of the spaces, understand their needs, and establish ways of offering them a safe and welcoming environment. (*Equity and Inclusion: Getting Down to the Heart of Placemaking*, 2016). Figure 2 shows the main users who could face issues with the design of the public spaces and the areas of improvement according to placemaking qualities.

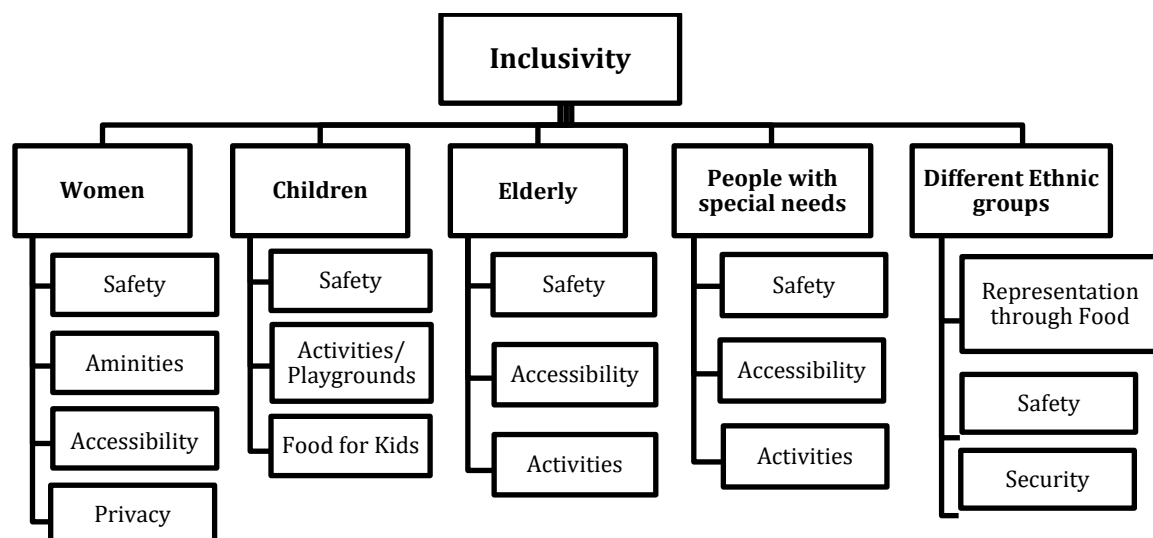


Figure 2. Main user groups' structure and the issues of public spaces (Author, 2024).

Safety and Security in Public Spaces

Inclusive public spaces should be comfortable and welcoming to everyone, with clean, well-maintained public amenities (*Designing Inclusive Spaces*, 2018). For women, facilities like clean restrooms, nursery rooms, and prayer spaces enhance comfort and safety, allowing them to stay longer (Malhotra & Aulakh, 2023). Well-lit areas and wide walkways improve nighttime security (*Safer Cities for Women and Girls Through a Place-based Approach*, 2011).

In addition, children's play areas should prioritize safety in design and function by being located away from streets and parking lots and using protective flooring to prevent injuries (*Designing Inclusive Spaces*, 2018). Furthermore, people with special needs should be able to navigate the spaces safely and independently. This can be achieved through the choice of appropriate materials, clear pathways, ramps, rails, and interactive or braille signage for visually impaired users (*Accessibility in Public Spaces – Definition and Explanation*, n.d.).

Moreover, elderly people require special attention to safety and accessibility, which can be achieved by implementing safe flooring and providing calming and low-effort activities that appeal to the older generations (*Designing Inclusive Spaces*, 2018). Lastly, to make public spaces inclusive for diverse ethnic groups, they should provide opportunities to celebrate their culture on certain occasions and make them feel welcome within their community (*8 Lessons to Promote Diversity in Public Places*, 2007).

Promoting Diversity

A good design influences people's lifestyles and helps improve social connections with others. To ensure public spaces are inclusive, the design should lay the ground for diversity and inclusion by providing spaces and platforms that can accommodate functions, uses, activities, and events to cater to people from all age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, and ethnic groups. Therefore, incorporating multiple uses allows users to find activities that suit them. Public spaces should be accessible to everyone, which means celebrating the diversity of our cities. The cultural fabric of society is made up of people from all backgrounds, ethnic groups, and social levels. Therefore, it is essential to create public spaces that celebrate this diversity. It could be facilitated by integrating different functions and activities representing people from various backgrounds through food, sports, and cultural celebrations. Moreover, it encourages all community members to participate in the design process and local activities to make them feel heard and appreciated (*8 Lessons to Promote Diversity in Public Places*, 2007).

Creative Placemaking

There are four main types of placemaking: Standard placemaking, strategic placemaking, tactical placemaking, and creative placemaking (Wyckoff, n.d.). This research focuses on creative placemaking, which is a term used to describe projects that integrate Art in the development of community projects (Ellery et al., 2020).

As the name suggests, creative placemaking involves transforming creative projects or activities centered on art, culture, and creative thinking. These projects can take place in cultural settings, utilize existing structures, or be implemented in other locations by incorporating artistic and creative activities, such as movie screenings in public parks, painting murals on walls, and outdoor concerts. These elements create a creative and lively atmosphere of art and culture to bring the community together (Wyckoff, n.d.).

Cultural expression and placemaking

With the rise of globalization, cities' local identities are shifting to meet global standards, and their cultural characteristics are fading with time. This causes our public spaces to lose touch with their local and regional qualities, alienating people and affecting their sense of belonging and attachment to their cities (Yan et al., 2024).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the role of integrating culture into people's experiences and activities to emphasize local characteristics and promote sustainable development (Yan et al., 2024). This results from understanding the importance of cultural activities in enhancing people's mental and physical health, as well as their educational and learning opportunities. Additionally, integrating cultural activities positively impacts the country's economic growth and fosters a cohesive community (Local Government Association, 2017).

Placemaking emphasizes the role of art and cultural representation in enhancing social cohesion and preserving cultural heritage, given that every community has its unique culture (Yan et al., 2024; Local Government Association, 2017). Cultural identity is mainly linked to people's sense of belonging, understanding, and appreciation of their place. This idea is capitalized in placemaking by employing the community's potential to create public events and activities that promote health and happiness (Local Government Association, 2017).

Impact of Cultural Expression

According to Yan et al. (2024), research on the design of public spaces and placemaking showed that relying solely on the physical aspects of the design proves insufficient. This results in public spaces void of human connection or lacking a link to cultural values and identity. Therefore, designing spaces that shape social interactions and promote cultural understanding is essential (El-Kholei & Yassein, 2022).

One of the significant impacts of cultural expression is building stronger communities by bringing the public together and engaging them in a project or allowing them to participate in cultural events. This builds up their sense of pride and

belonging to their community. The interaction between community members can create social cohesion and make the community feel a sense of responsibility and unity (Local Government Association, 2017).

Another positive impact of cultural expression is developing and supporting local talents. Culture is dynamic in that it is constantly changing and growing with the people. Therefore, the locals can contribute to their culture by playing an integral part in shaping it. Placemaking in open spaces creates the right platform for local talents to be directly involved in creative activities and showcase their talents in different ways (Local Government Association, 2017).

Lastly, effective collaboration between private, public, and community organizations to assist in delivering small community projects improves social cohesion and facilitates future developments (Local Government Association, 2017).

Art as a form of Cultural Expression

Art is an integral part of cultural expression in cities worldwide, serving as a means to communicate artists' feelings and perceptions, and fostering a dialogue between artists and their cities. Public spaces act as a platform to bring art closer to the people, contributing to the community's collective memory and creating meaningful experiences through art festivals and initiatives (García-Esparza et al., 2023).

Artistic practices such as reviving ancient crafts, historical storytelling through LED projections, and bringing back old music are all forms of cultural and artistic expression. This integration of Art into public spaces helps activate those spaces. It adds a layer of depth to the human experience, making it a personal experience tailored to the city's history and culture (Đukanović & Živković, 2015). Placemaking enables the creative incorporation of small interventions and events to enrich the meaning of public spaces and foster stronger community connections (Yan et al., 2024).

Integrating art projects inspired by the city's heritage within public spaces not only helps with cultural expression, but also placing historic objects in different contexts helps bring the experience of heritage and culture closer to the people. Moreover, drawing inspiration from the heritage and reintroducing it through contemporary art forms like photography, sculptures, and art installations makes it more accessible to people from all levels of society, which reintroduces public spaces on a more profound and multi-layered level instead of a linear process of design that ignores symbolic and cultural meaning (García-Esparza et al., 2023).

Bahrain Fort, one of the country's most valuable historic sites, has been bringing culture and history closer to people by hosting diverse cultural events, lectures, and activities either at the site itself or at the Bahrain Fort Museum next to it. One of the creative ways of engaging the public in learning about the history of this magnificent structure is through an event called "Sound and Light Show," which usually takes place at the fort during the 'Spring of Culture' event. The fort's walls become storytellers, projecting an engaging narrative about the history of Bahrain and the fort (Shubbar & Furlan, 2019)—figure 3.



Figure 3. Screening at Bahrain fort (Inserro, J., 2018) .

Despite the growing interest in designing public spaces and incorporating more greenery into urban developments, it is evident that most research has focused on methods and strategies for designing them from sustainable, economic, and social perspectives; little research has been conducted on inclusivity and the cultural aspects of designing public spaces. Inclusivity and cultural expression are key in defining how people interact with their cities according to their cultural preferences and needs.

This chapter addresses two primary research questions: whether the design of open public spaces in Bahrain lacks inclusivity and cultural expression, and how to utilize placemaking attributes to develop strategies that facilitate the incorporation of this concept into public space design.

The primary objective of this research is to develop strategies for placemaking in Bahrain that promote inclusivity and cultural expression in public spaces. By integrating these strategies into future planning policies, public spaces can improve their performance, serve the community, and attract more visitors. The research is based on the hypothesis that some public spaces in Bahrain lack inclusivity and cultural representation, aiming to address this gap by proposing placemaking strategies that can enhance their functionality and cultural significance.

The study examines placemaking and the design of open public spaces in Bahrain and worldwide. It begins with a comprehensive literature review, followed by data collection through field observations and questionnaires. A mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative analysis is used to identify and read patterns through NVivo. The

findings are then compiled and analyzed to establish clear strategies for enhancing inclusivity and cultural expression in public spaces in Bahrain.

Materials and Methods

The research is conducted through different phases: Data collection and case studies of three major open public spaces in Bahrain, questionnaires to be conducted to explore users' perspectives on the three public spaces in study, analyzing and representing the data gathered using NVivo and Excel, to find similar parameters and factors amongst the answers from the questionnaires conducted and lastly, creating strategies to enable the implementation of placemaking principles into the open spaces in Bahrain to create inclusive and culturally expressive places. Figure 4 illustrates the sequence in which these methods are applied, along with their respective types.

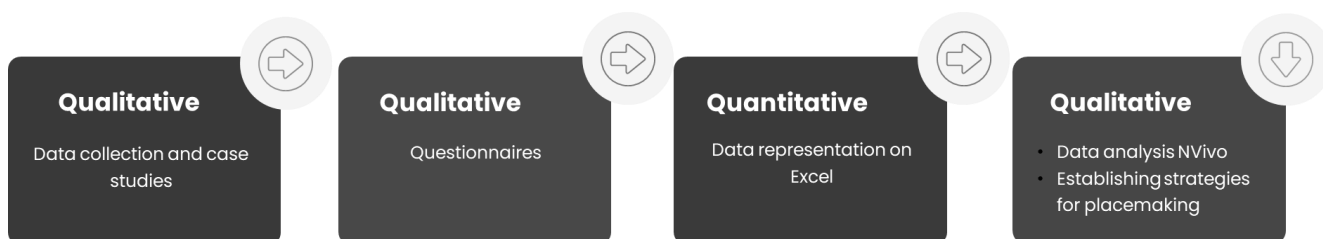


Figure 4. Methodology phases (Author, 2024).

Data collection and Case studies

To examine the current situation of public spaces in Bahrain and establish strategies for inclusivity and cultural expression, collecting data on existing governmental guidelines for designing public spaces is important. This data is found in the governmental building regulations, which present the details on allowable areas, functions, and green spaces (Zoning Regulations for Construction in Various Areas in the Kingdom of Bahrain, 2022). Furthermore, to analyse the current conditions of Bahrain's public spaces, three major public open spaces—Al-Fateh Corniche, Bahrain Fort, and Argan Village—are taken as case studies and assessed based on their physical attributes, such as their location, accessibility, and attractiveness, as well as their abilities to promote inclusivity and cultural expression.

The case studies were selected based on their cultural significance, the type of services and activities they offer, their intended user groups, and the duration of their existence. While Bahrain Fort is an ancient site that primarily offers a cultural experience to tourists and locals alike, Al-Fateh Corniche is a modern development that serves as an open public park for people to hang out, play, engage in sports, or socialize. Both locations cater to a large group of users from diverse demographic backgrounds and often attract people from various areas around Bahrain due to their central location and their functional variety. Additionally, the Argan Village is a new development that offers a range of commercial activities and an open public space for the residents of the Bu-Quwa residential area in Bahrain.

To begin with, Al-Fateh Corniche is one of Bahrain's oldest seaside open spaces, holding a significant cultural and social place in the minds of the Bahraini people. It has been recently developed by the Ministry of Municipalities Affairs and Agriculture to accommodate more functions and offer a more holistic experience for people in Bahrain (*Khalaf Announces the Completion of the Development of the "Al-Fateh Corniche" Walkway*, 2022).

In addition, Bahrain's Fort is the country's oldest and most significant historic site, dating back to 2300 BC. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which offers a rich cultural experience to both locals and tourists in Bahrain (*Qalat Al Bahrain Site and Museum*, n.d.). The site is a part of the collective memory of the people in Bahrain and plays a significant role in defining the country's cultural identity. Surrounded by an open space, a museum, and a café overlooking the ancient ruins and the sea, the area around the fort serves as an attractive spot for people to experience culture, food, and art.

Lastly, the Argan Village site is an example of a smaller-scale, well-designed, local mixed-use development that offers a shared open public space for the residents in the surrounding area (*ARGAN Village*, n.d.). However, the site does not live up to its full potential, as it is rare to see people using either the open public space or the shops and cafes in that area. This case can offer insight into what some public spaces lack in attracting regular users.

The analysis of the case studies is conducted through field observations, which involve visiting the sites and observing people's interaction with their natural environment (Zeisel, 1981). Data is collected to identify the current conditions and physical features of those spaces. This phase is essential for observing the existing conditions of the public spaces, which helps identify areas for improvement and strategies to overcome current issues.

Finally, a comparison is made between the three public spaces to measure their performance in terms of their response to the placemaking qualities that enhance inclusivity and cultural expression in public open spaces. This helps with upgrading the conditions of these public spaces to align with placemaking qualities.

Al-Fateh Corniche, Manama

Al Fateh Corniche is one of Bahrain's oldest waterfront open public spaces (Figure 5). Located in the heart of Manama. The Corniche was recently developed in 2022 to create a longer walkway that extends up to 3 km, as well as the longest biking trail in Bahrain, which spans 2.5 km. The Corniche is now home to four main sports areas, two playgrounds, a fishing area, a larger parking lot, and family areas. It also features green spaces that cover an area of 25,000 sqm. The walkway now leads to Al-Najma Sports Club, which is located close to multiple restaurants and cafes. This new development was done to emphasize the importance of incorporating sports into the lives of the Bahraini youth and encourage them to spend time outdoors (*Khalaf Announces the Completion of the Development of the "Al-Fateh Corniche" Walkway.*, 2022).

In its ongoing effort to enhance the quality of life for young people, the Bahraini government plans multiple sports events in this area to emphasize the benefits of training for both physical and mental health. Furthermore, the corniche is equipped with multiple amenities that enhance the user experience, offering an array of functions that encourage users to spend a longer time in the area. This aligns with some of the placemaking qualities: sociability, uses, and activities (*Khalaf Announces the Completion of the Development of the "Al-Fateh Corniche" Walkway.*, 2022).

Regarding inclusivity, the project provides free access to the Corniche and the open green areas, enabling people from different socioeconomic backgrounds to benefit from the place. The space fosters diversity by providing a safe environment for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to visit. Moreover, the place is open and features ramps to facilitate easy and free movement for individuals with special needs, making them feel welcome and respected.

Al-Fateh Corniche holds a special place in every Bahraini child's mind, as it is one of the oldest places in Bahrain for playing and enjoying family time. Although it has been extended and developed recently, this has not taken away its cultural identity. Bahrainis still visit this place to remember their childhood days and enjoy the changes made to the site.



Figure 5. Al-Fateh Corniche (Author, 2024).

Bahrain Fort

Bahrain Fort is one of Bahrain's oldest and most significant cultural landmarks. This UNESCO World Heritage Site is approximately 4,500 years old, dating back to around 2300 BC (Figure 6). The site holds a special place in nearly every Bahraini's mind and heart, as it has always been a part of the collective memory of the locals in Bahrain. This magnificent site not only offers beautiful ruins of the past but also features an almost 1 km long path surrounding it and overlooking the seaside, which has become a favoured spot for walking and exercising for both locals and residents in the country (*Qal'at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour And Capital of Dilmun*, n.d.).

The intervention in this area is minimal, given that this historic site is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (*Qal'at al-Bahrain – Ancient Harbour And Capital of Dilmun*, n.d.). However, surrounding it is the Bahrain Fort Museum and a café that creates a beautiful link between the past and the present (*Qalat Al Bahrain Site and Museum*, n.d.). The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities (BACA) often utilizes the site as a canvas for cultural and artistic purposes, bringing culture closer to the people. The ancient site is often revitalized by adding art installations and projections that serve as storytellers of the past, bringing history to life.

In terms of inclusivity, Bahrain Fort's site attracts locals, residents, and tourists from all over the world, reflecting the area's diversity. However, visiting this site could be a challenge to people with special needs, as the fort is not equipped with ramps or elevators to allow them to experience it fully. This is also understandable, given

the site's nature, which does not permit major structural or architectural interventions. Moreover, the site is free to enter for everyone, which makes it accessible to people from all backgrounds and levels of society.

Bahrain Fort is a culturally rich site that offers a unique experience into the history of Bahrain. Therefore, people visiting it often express a strong sense of emotional connection, whether they are tourists or expatriates. The fort's site has been utilized multiple times to showcase the story of the fort's past through creative art installations and light projections, which have brought people closer to the site and provided an educational opportunity to learn about Bahrain's culture (*Events and Activities*, 2024).



Figure 6. Bahrain Fort (Author, 2024).

Argan Village

Argan Village is a local mixed-use development located in the Bu-Quwa area in Bahrain (Figure 7). With a built-up area of 11,360 sqm, the project comprises six commercial buildings that can be used for shops, cafes, and an anchor tenant. A green park of 3,146 sqm is located in the centre, which can be utilized as a kids' playground (Figure 8). The design draws inspiration from traditional Bahraini houses to establish a cultural connection with the area (*ARGAN Village*, n.d.).

Argan village, which was built in 2015, currently has a few shops and spaces rented out, while the rest of the development is empty. Despite its sound design, visiting the area at different times of day on various occasions reveals that the place is often underutilized. The car-centric nature of the area could be one of the main issues, as the kids' playground (the park) is directly open to the main road and surrounded by cars on all sides. This limits access to the site to cars and restricts the accessibility and safety of kids. Although the development is located within a residential neighbourhood, it is believed not to be the best location for families to spend time with their kids. Moreover, the high rent in these shops makes it difficult for shop owners to sustain their businesses, forcing them to shut down.

Through observation, the site reflects a shallow emotional or cultural connection with the people of that area. Besides its architectural design inspired by Bahraini houses, no other elements or activities bring people closer to their roots or help them build a cultural bond with the site.



Figure 7. Model of the site (Argan Village, n.d.)



Figure 8. Argan Village open space (Author, 2024).

Questionnaires and field observations

Two methods are implemented to holistically understand the current conditions of open public spaces in Bahrain and get feedback from the direct users. First, field observations suggest visiting the sites and observing people's natural interaction with their environment (Zeisel, 1981). This can provide a realistic understanding of people's feelings and behaviour in a spontaneous setting. Second, conducting questionnaires is an effective way to gather

information about people's perceptions of a particular place, offering them the freedom to speak their minds and suggest ways to upgrade it.

The questionnaire used in this research is divided into three main types of questions: demographic, Likert scale, and open-ended. While the demographic questions are designed to collect data on the background of visitors to these public spaces, including their age groups, educational levels, gender, ethnic origins, and other information that helps understand the inclusivity of the public space, the Likert scale questions are primarily used to evaluate people's perceptions of the places they visit, allowing them to rate their feelings regarding safety, cultural activities, and sense of belonging in those places. Lastly, open-ended questions are asked to allow people to suggest ways to make places more inclusive, comfortable, and culturally expressive. Figure 9 shows the details of the questions used in the questionnaire.

Questionnaire:

Demographic Questions:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Education
4. Ethnic origin
5. Marital status
6. Employment
7. Area of residence

Questions about the places:

8. Have you visited Al-Fateh Corniche?
9. Have you visited Bahrain Fort?
10. Have you visited Argan Village?
11. How often do you visit this place:
 - a) Daily
 - b) Weekly
 - c) Monthly
 - d) Yearly

Likert Scale Questions:

12. Kindly rate the following statements based on your level of satisfaction with them (agree, strongly agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree):

- a) The place feels safe to visit
- b) The environment is safe and suitable for children to play
- c) The place evokes a sense of emotional connection and belonging
- d) The place embodies Bahraini culture through its activities, cuisine, and art.
- e) The place creates opportunities for social interaction
- f) The space accommodates a variety of activities, such as sports, dining, socializing, and walking.
- g) You frequently spend hours in this space, engaging in a variety of activities.

Open ended Questions:

13. If you or someone you know has special needs, how would you describe your or their experience in the place, particularly regarding safety and accessibility?
14. If you feel the space is unsafe, what changes would you recommend to enhance its safety?
15. How would you create a stronger sense of belonging in the place, ensuring it reflects and celebrates the local culture, traditions, and community values?

Figure 9. Questionnaire questions (Author, 2024).

Data representation and analysis using Excel and NVivo

The data collected from research papers, questionnaires, and field observations are then analysed to identify common patterns and themes that can be used to develop strategies for placemaking. For this task, NVivo software is used to conduct a thematic analysis by examining the text in the open-ended questions and highlighting the frequency of similar words used by the users. In addition, Excel is used to create charts for the demographic and Likert scale questions to present the findings.

Creating Strategies for Placemaking

The documents investigated provide an understanding of the essential qualities of placemaking, the common issues public spaces face globally and locally, and propose ways to solve them. In addition, they also offer an opportunity to examine in-depth case studies of similar projects worldwide and serve as a learning material for creating a new, coherent model for placemaking in Bahrain. Moreover, when creating patterns and extracting the words most frequently used in the questionnaires, it will be easier to establish strategies inspired by the placemaking attributes and respond to the need for inclusivity and cultural expression in open public spaces.

Furthermore, the data collected through documents, field observations, and questionnaires regarding the three case studies in Bahrain helps to understand the public's needs in Bahrain and how they would like to be involved in the process of designing their public spaces. This helps establish the strategies of placemaking in open public spaces in Bahrain.

Results

The questionnaires were conducted online, and 69 participants participated. They were designed to allow participants to answer questions regarding the place only if they had visited it, which explains why the number of participants is different for each case study. Figure 10 below shows the charts of the participants' demographic

information. This indicates the diversity of the people visiting these places, as they comprise various age groups, ethnicities, educational backgrounds, and professional backgrounds.

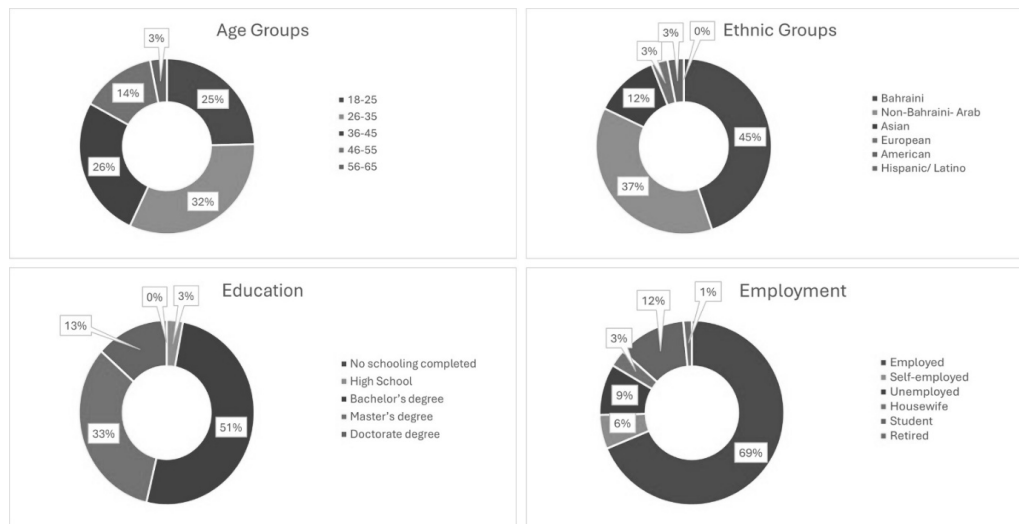


Figure 10. Demographic information of questionnaire participants (Author, 2025).

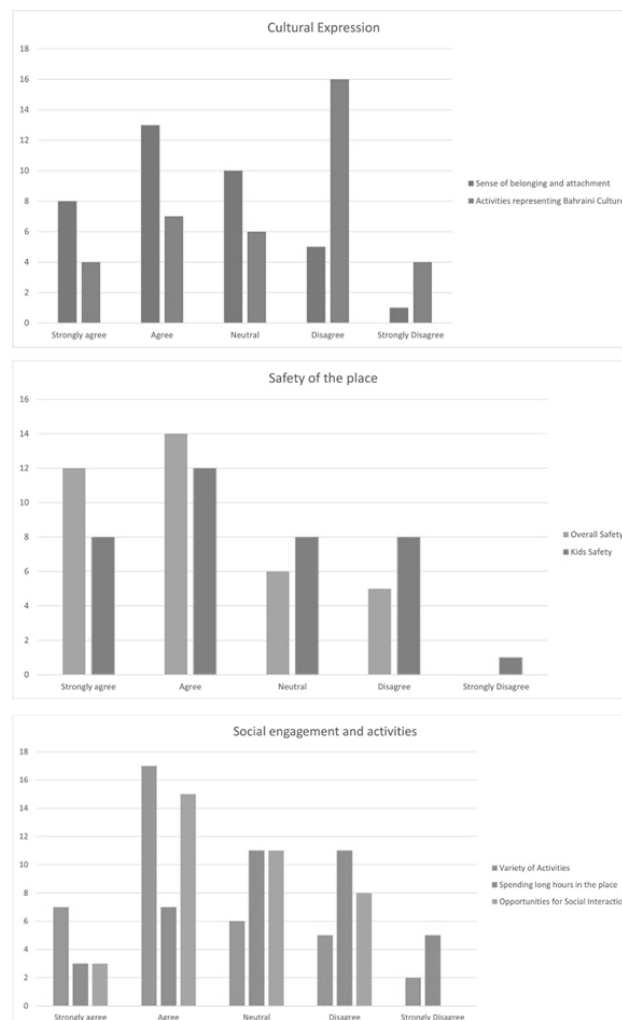


Figure 11. Results for Al-Fateh corniche by Excel (Author, 2025).

Questionnaire results for Al-Fateh Corniche

According to the questionnaire results, 37 out of 69 participants completed the questionnaire about Al-Fateh Corniche. Figure 11 shows the details of the charts based on people's participation in answering questions about

cultural expression, safety, inclusivity, and social engagement in the area. Participants were primarily satisfied with the level of safety in the place, and most of them expressed their sense of belonging or attachment to the place. However, many linked their sense of attachment to their childhood memories of this place, indicating that this waterfront open public space does not intentionally reflect the Bahraini identity through activities, events, facilities, or art. This means that the place is primarily used as a hangout spot for families with kids, or as a sports track for walking, running, or biking without interruption for residents. This is also partially reflected in the third chart, which evaluates the type and number of activities available in the space. Most people agree that facilities and amenities are available, but many were also dissatisfied with the types of activities and their lack of diversity.

While the questionnaire results were mostly positive, some open-ended questions offered a deeper insight into how people want to improve the place to create a stronger sense of connection. These responses were entered into NVivo to identify recurring themes and frequently used words. As shown in Figure 12, the most common suggestions (indicated in larger font) were centred around showcasing Bahraini culture through local art installations, cultural events, and activities that celebrate national identity. These elements seem fundamental for creating a stronger bond between the people and this place.



Figure 12. NVivo word cloud for Al-Fateh Corniche (Author, 2025).

Participants also emphasized the importance of using adequate lighting and diverse activities to enhance the sense of safety and encourage visitors to stay longer in the space. Additionally, mentioned less frequently (indicated in a smaller font), several responses suggested reviving traditional crafts and activities, which could involve fishing, pearling, weaving, and other traditional crafts. These suggestions not only serve as fun and engaging activities but also preserve the history of crafts in Bahrain and inspire future generations.

Questionnaire results for Bahrain Fort

Regarding Bahrain Fort, 58 out of 69 participants answered the questionnaire about this iconic structure, since it is one of Bahrain's most prominent landmarks, attracting both locals and tourists alike. As shown in Figure 13, most participants responded positively to questions related to safety and cultural value, expressing satisfaction with the site's preservation and overall experience. However, responses related to the social engagement aspect of the space were more neutral. Many visitors felt that the site lacked interactive activities and local events that could connect the visitors to the local culture.

Participants answering the open-ended questions commended the government's ongoing efforts to maintain and preserve the Fort. At the same time, they raised valid concerns about its limited accessibility for people with special needs and children. The walking paths were sometimes described as uneven and steep, making it difficult for people in wheelchairs or with visual impairments to use them. Additionally, the lack of child-friendly safety features indicates that an adult should always accompany children to ensure their safety.

The NVivo-generated word cloud, shown in Figure 14, highlights these concerns. The most recurring theme, shown in the large font, was related to the need for cultural programming. People suggested adding more cultural activities and events around the Fort to engage people in the experience. Accessibility and safety were also prominent themes, indicated in big, dark font. People suggested improving accessibility and safety to accommodate children and people with special needs and adding adequate lighting to make the area safer at night, especially for women.

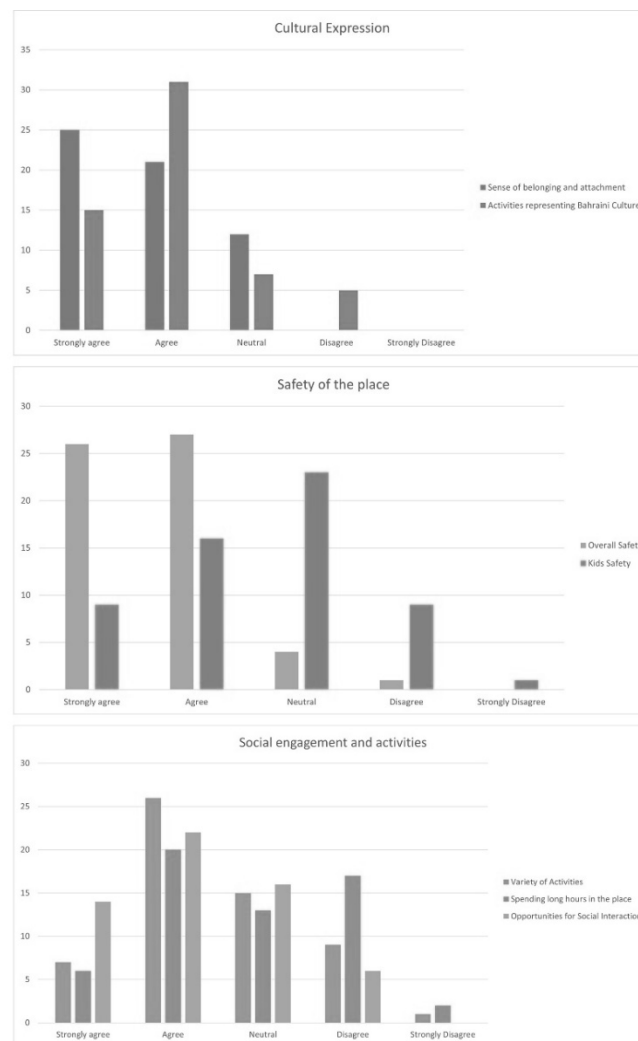


Figure 13. Results for Bahrain Fort by Excel (Author, 2025).



Figure 14. NVivo word cloud for Bahrain Fort (Author, 2025)

Questionnaire results for Argan Village

According to the results of the Argan Village questionnaire, 23 out of 69 participants provided feedback on their experience at this mixed-use development. As illustrated in Figure 15, the overall ratings were generally low across most categories, with the exception of safety, which participants considered adequate.

A recurring suggestion from participants was to pedestrianize the area, making it safer for kids to play and, in turn, encouraging more families to spend time there. Other participants proposed organizing cultural and social activities to bring the community together and enrich the area's cultural aspect. Additional recommendations included periodically hosting exhibits and art activities to promote creative expression and elevate the area's cultural scene.

[illegible]

Figure 16. NVivo word cloud for Argan Village (Author, 2025).

Comparison between case studies

A comparison is made between the three case studies based on people's answers to Likert scale questions in the questionnaire. Table 1 below shows the percentages of the highest votes (strongly agree and agree combined) that each of these case studies received in terms of safety, social engagement, and cultural expression. The overall performance is below average for all sites, despite people's overall satisfaction with some of the sites. However, when asked about the specific aspects of cultural expression, safety, and social engagement through different activities, the answers implied a need for improvement. Generally, Al-Fateh Corniche gets the highest percentages in both safety and social engagement, while Bahrain Fort gets the highest votes for its cultural expression, and Argan Village has the lowest percentage, with the cultural expression aspect being 3.4 %, which indicates the lack of any form of cultural connection with the people in that area. Social engagement is also very low, at 16.7%, and safety scores are 25 %. This makes the Argan Village site the weakest in terms of cultural expression and inclusivity.

Table 1. Comparison between case studies regarding safety, social engagement, and cultural expression.

	Al-Fateh Corniche	Bahrain Fort	Argan Village
Safety	39.7 %	34.8 %	25 %
Cultural expression	27.6 %	41.1 %	3.4 %
Social engagement	29.9 %	28.3 %	16.7 %

Strategies for Placemaking

Although the three chosen public spaces differ in nature and target users, most of the answers suggested similar ideas for inclusivity and cultural expression. These answers, along with the knowledge gained from the literature review, have led to the establishment of some strategies that could serve as guidelines for future developments of more inclusive and culturally expressive public spaces. Table 2 presents the placemaking strategies proposed to create more inclusive and culturally expressive public spaces in Bahrain, aligning with the UN SDG No. 11 indicators, along with the possible barriers for implementing these strategies. The indicators involve providing safe, accessible, and inclusive public spaces that make women, children, the elderly, and people with special needs feel welcome and included. Moreover, one of the indicators for preserving cultural heritage has been used as a basis for establishing strategies for cultural expression (Goal Eleven, n.d.).

Table 2. Placemaking strategies to create more inclusive and culturally expressive open public spaces in Bahrain.

SDG no.11 Targets	Proposed placemaking strategies	Barriers to implementation
Safety	1) Design clear and open public layouts to instill feelings of safety and security amongst users of the space (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014)	High energy and maintenance costs
	2) Use adequate lighting for the walkways to make the space feel safer at night (Malhotra & Aulakh, 2023)	
	3) Provide wide enough walkways for a comfortable walking experience to allow people to feel a sense of comfort and security (Malhotra & Aulakh, 2023)	
	4) Create safe playgrounds for kids by using the right flooring materials, locating the playgrounds away from cars, and closing off playgrounds to protect kids from running off to the streets	
Accessibility	5) Provide clean and well-maintained public amenities that allow users of the space to feel comfortable and safe, such as clean restrooms, nursing rooms for mothers, and prayer rooms (<i>Designing Inclusive Spaces</i> , 2018).	Requires funding and maintenance costs
	6) Ensure ease of accessibility for all users, particularly women, the elderly, and individuals with special needs, by providing ramps, elevators, rails, braille, and interactive signage, as well as using accessible floor finishes. (Malhotra & Aulakh, 2023; <i>Designing Inclusive Spaces</i> , 2018).	

Inclusivity	7) Create platforms for small, low-risk, low-cost community projects to help engage the public in altering their spaces and encourage them to be active members of society.	Requires funding and coordination with public institutions.
	8) Provide multiple functions and activities that cater to people from different age groups, ethnic and social backgrounds to ensure people from all walks of life feel welcome and foster a social cohesion (<i>8 Lessons to Promote Diversity in Public Places</i> , 2007)	
	9) Provide spaces to celebrate different cultures through festivals and activities for people from various ethnic backgrounds	
	10) Include people from other cultures, and offer a variety of food options from different cultures, such as Indian, Asian, and Middle Eastern cuisine.	
Cultural Preservation	11) Plan cultural events and festivals in open public spaces to unite people and strengthen social bonds (Sewell et al., n.d.)	Requires funding and coordination with public institutions. Historic sites have some physical constraints and barriers
	12) Plan cultural activities among community members to enrich their knowledge about their culture and create a sense of belonging (Sewell et al., n.d.).	
	13) Integrate art into public spaces by showcasing local artists and performers to empower local talents and connect the public to the city's art scene (Sewell et al., n.d.)	
	14) Use cultural and historic places for public events and activities to enrich people's knowledge about culture and create a stronger bond between the past and the present (Sewell et al., n.d.)	
	15) Provide local experiences by providing local cuisine, showcasing local crafts, and supporting local businesses.	

Discussion and Conclusion

This study builds upon previous research done on placemaking by establishing strategies that can be integrated into policies and guidelines for designing public spaces. These strategies aim to simplify and facilitate the incorporation of placemaking qualities into the design of open public spaces in Bahrain.

This can be achieved by creating measurable actions that integrate seamlessly into the planning system and offer more manageable and more practical ways to assess its performance. One approach is to collaborate with local municipalities to implement year-round cultural and social programs across various areas in Bahrain, ensuring that all programs are activated. Additionally, empowering communities to drive progress in their public spaces through community councils allows residents to propose improvements and act as a point of contact with governmental authorities. Lastly, developing online platforms for public open spaces enables users to suggest ideas, file complaints, and evaluate the quality of their facilities, promoting transparency between the people and their government (Figure 17).

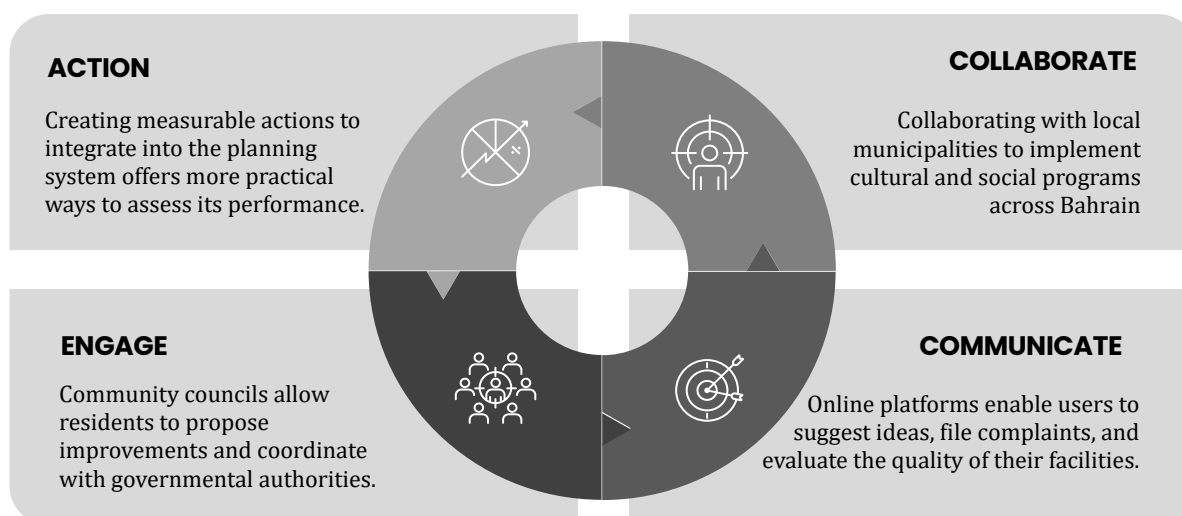


Figure 17. Plan to implement placemaking strategies (Author, 2025).

These strategies can enhance underutilized open spaces, such as Argan Village, by fostering collaboration between the community and governmental institutions. By assessing the current conditions of the place and collaborating with the residents, we can implement some of these strategies to help transform and improve its quality.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this research lies in establishing ways to empower people with a sense of ownership over their city, allowing them to become catalysts for change, since they are the direct users of these spaces. By involving the public through questionnaires and surveys, this bottom-up approach to design fosters more realistic and practical changes. Small-scale, low-cost, low-risk projects that can be developed can serve as a model for larger, future interventions.

This study also acknowledges several limitations. A lack of awareness about public space design may lead to misinterpretation of users' experiences. Additionally, a limited understanding of individuals' roles in changing their surrounding environment can result in disengagement. Lastly, the questionnaire sample size is relatively small due to time limitations, which may affect the applicability of the findings.

Barriers to implementation

Although the research proposes strategies for placemaking that could be implemented to enhance the quality of public spaces in Bahrain, some of these strategies may face barriers to their implementation. One of the most challenging issues in Bahrain is the harsh climatic conditions during the summer months, with temperatures reaching up to 47°C and humidity levels exceeding 85% during the warmest months of the year. This affects the functionality of these open spaces, limiting their usability to the cooler months of the year, when the average daytime temperature can reach as low as 20°C and the nighttime temperature is around 15 °C (*Climate and Monthly Weather Forecast Bahrain*, 2024).

Another issue is the funding of some of these projects, which could be a hurdle to implementing these strategies, especially those requiring significant design development and ongoing maintenance. Lastly, coordination with public institutions could slow down the implementation of some of these strategies due to the time required to liaise and obtain approvals from these institutions.

Implications and Future Directions

To enhance future research, a larger sample of participants could cover a broader range of users, producing more precise results. Moreover, incorporating focus groups instead of questionnaires may prove more effective. This approach would provide participants with a better understanding of the project and their role in enhancing their public spaces (O. Nyumba et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Public spaces are more than empty voids in the urban landscape. They are places of rest, leisure, activity, social interaction, and reflection. When designed through a top-down approach, these public spaces risk alienating their main users by focusing only on the physical aspects of design and neglecting the human experience. However, placemaking as an urban design concept involves people in designing their spaces and allowing them to adapt and change over time.

Placemaking is a never-ending process, treating public spaces as living organisms that grow with communities and adapt to people's changing needs. This constant evolution ensures that public spaces constantly respond to environmental shifts and people's needs, keeping this creative process alive and relevant.

To seamlessly integrate placemaking strategies into Bahrain's public spaces design guidelines and align them with Bahrain's 2023 economic vision in response to SDG no. 11, utilizing both a top-down and a bottom-up approach to design is essential. Collaboration among government officials, planners, architects, and the public is vital to creating a process that aligns with the country's values and norms.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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