From Policy to Practice: The Issues and Challenges in Urban Design Policies Implementation in Malaysia

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Abstract: Urban design policies play an important role in creating sustainable, livable and inclusive cities. They provide a framework to guide the physical, social and environmental aspects of urban growth while making sure development follows long term planning goals. This paper examining the issue and challenges in urban design policies implementation with a particular focus on local authorities in Malaysia. It also explains the conceptual understanding on policy implementation and urban design policy and why it is important for improving city quality, identity and livability. The review discusses the evaluation on models and theories of policy implementation by various scholars which help to explain the challenges and opportunities in putting urban design policies into practice. While many global cities have developed effective systems to ensure urban design policies are consistently applied, Malaysia continues to face challenges in translating policies into practice. Despite the existence of detailed policy documents and design guidelines, gaps remain between written policies and actual implementation, particularly at the local authority level.

Keywords: Urban Design Policies (UDP), Policy Implementation, Local Authorities, Governance, Urban Design

1.0 Introduction

In Malaysia, urban design has been integrated into development plans by local authorities with the aim of improving the built environment, visual quality, city functions and social aspects of cities. These policies emphasize the enhancement of public spaces, pedestrian-friendly environments, heritage conservation and the adoption of high-quality design standards. However, despite planning documents often providing clear guidelines, implementation in practice remains inconsistent. The gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes continues to raise questions about the effectiveness of urban design implementation in Malaysia (Shamsuddin, 2024). Various factors influence the effectiveness of Urban Design Policy (UDP) implementation by local authorities in the country. According to Punter (2007), the

biggest challenge for authorities is attracting and retaining urban design experts in the public sector, which is essential for successfully applying urban design as a public policy (White, 2015). Urban design has become an important part of contemporary city planning, particularly in rapidly developing nations like Malaysia where balancing urban growth with livability remains a pressing challenge. Cities today are evaluated not only by their economic performance but also by the quality of the build environment, accessibility, cultural identity and overall urban experience. Urban design policies play a key role in guiding development towards outcomes that are people-centered, sustainable and inclusive.

2.0 Concept of Policy Implementation

Policy implementation has been defined in many ways, but most scholars agree it is the process of turning policy goals into real actions, based on the directions and recommendations provided by decision-makers (Sager & Gofen, 2022; Selepe, 2023; Sa'at et al., 2023; Shahi, 2023; Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024). Policy implementation is widely recognized as one of the most critical stages of the public policy process because it determines whether policies achieve their intended goals or remain aspirational statements (Shahi, 2023; Sa'at et al., 2023; Selepe, 2023; Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024). Its importance is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where limited resources, overlapping responsibilities, and weak institutional capacity often undermine outcomes (Anderson, 2023; Shahi, 2023; Trinh et al., 2021). The success of policy is not just in the way it is conceived but also in how it is implemented which ultimately determines its impact on national development (Anderson, 2023). Effective implementation means achieving tangible outcomes and its benefits to the citizens (Stewart et al., 2008) and has a close association with policy success (Khan & Khandaker, 2016). Therefore, public policies play a critical role in national development because it establishes high-level goals, outline strategies and provide mechanisms that allow individuals and communities to grow (Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024; Khan & Khandaker, 2016). However, turning policy into practice is often a complex and challenging endeavour (Cetrulo et al., 2018). Many public policies fail not because they are poorly designed but because they are implemented without sufficient planning, analysis, or contextual understanding (Trinh et al., 2021).

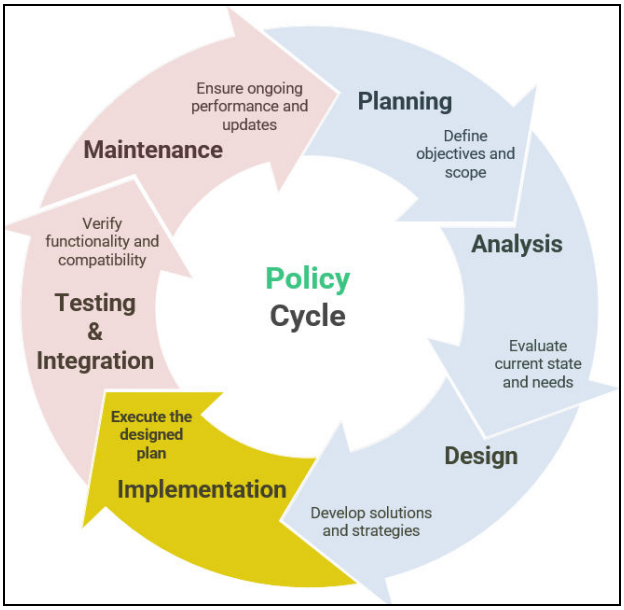

Figure 1 Policy Cycle

3.0 Development of Formation on Urban Design Policy

Urban design policies (UDP) have become an important part of planning, shaping the physical, social, and environmental quality of cities. While early roots can be traced to the 19th-century City Beautiful movement and post-war reconstruction in Europe, UDP only gained recognition as a distinct policy field in the late 20th century (Punter, 2007). At first, design was treated as secondary to land use planning, but growing issues such as urban sprawl, declining quality of life, and environmental concerns brought design to the forefront of planning agendas. Policy implementation has long been central to governance (Cavada, 2021), with early examples including the Aesthetic Advisory Committee in the Netherlands (1922) and design review panels in US cities by the mid-1970s (Punter, 2007). Jonathan Barnett (1974) was among the first to frame urban design as public policy, influenced by New York's redevelopment in the 1960s. By the 1980s, formal design review became standard practice across US cities, recognizing the need for structured assessment and professional expertise. Punter (2007) notes that the Urban Task Force (UTF) led by Richard Rogers in 1999 had a major influence on integrating urban design into planning (Paterson, 2012). Key policy documents such as Planning Policy Statement 1 (PPS1) (DCLG, 2005) and its companion guide By Design (DETR, 1999; CABE, 2000a, 2000b) provided a structured framework, with By Design often serving as an unofficial reference (Paterson, 2012). According to Paterson (2012), principles from Bentley (1985) were also embedded in PPS1 and By Design. Both PPS1 and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) reinforced the idea that good planning and good design are inseparable. Between 2000 and 2010, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) played a central role by shaping PPS1

and promoting tools such as the Building for Life criteria and design and access statements, now widely used by Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) to evaluate applications (Paterson, 2012). CABE also emphasized links between good design, property value, and design review, helping strengthen UDP in practice. More broadly, the rise of urban design as public policy is tied to the wider forces of globalization and neoliberalism (Punter, 2007). In increasingly competitive urban economies, design is seen as a strategic tool for attracting investment, boosting city image, and driving growth in real estate, tourism, and international events (Gospodini, 2002; Madanipour, 2006). Cities now view design quality not only as aesthetics but also as a driver of economic and social development. Over the past fifty years, UDP have broadened beyond architectural form and spatial layout to include sustainability, identity, and liveability (Nag & Ghosh, 2016; Ujang, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). The development of UDP in Europe has seen ups and downs, shaped by the need to preserve historic cities, redevelopment pressures and political-economic influences. While stricter design guidelines have been introduced, consistent implementation remains difficult, showing that balancing planning goals with economic development remains a major challenge for UDP worldwide.

In Malaysia, these issues are equally relevant. Although urban design is embedded in planning frameworks, a clear gap persists between policy development and implementation (Shamsuddin, 2024). The Malaysian case shows that successful UDP depends not only on good guidelines but also on institutional coordination, professional expertise, and political will. As cities expand, the real challenge is turning ambitious policies into tangible improvements in urban quality, identity, and resilience.

3.1 Introduction to Urban Design

Urban design is an age-old activity that has recently become a subject of increased interest and importance (Abd Elrahman & Asaad, 2021). Historically, Urban design, once focused mainly on beautification (Matan, 2011), is now seen as the art of shaping cities through design, form, and urban culture (Greed, 2014). Urban design was also considered as the planning and design of the towns, cities, streets and public space (UDGKL, 2024; Rahman, 2023). According to Cuthbert (2006), Elshater (2014) and Abd Elrahman and Asaad, 2021, the term urban design originates from the Latin word urbs meaning "city,". As Kevin Lynch defined it, design is a “the playful creation and strict evaluation of the possible (Madanipour, 2006; Nag & Ghosh, 2019) forms of something including how it is to be made.” Cliff Moughtin (1999) identifies three core objectives of urban design in creating urban environments that are structurally and functionally robust, aesthetically pleasing and enjoyable for their users. Nag and Ghosh (2019) and Rahman (2023) alleges that the fundamental goals of urban design can be encapsulated as to create sense of comfortable place, sense of identity and place, to make a city legible and a place of balanced diversity, meaningful and symbolic and to make a city educative and exploratory. It is also beneficial for environmental and quality of life of

urban inhabitants (Harahap et al., 2023; Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). Urban design is important for improving the quality of urban life by addressing social, economic, and environmental issues (Wall & Waterman, 2010; Abd Elrahman & Asaad, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). Its main aim is to create cities that are sustainable and comfortable for people to live in (Abd Elrahman & Asaad, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). Beyond shaping the physical form of cities, urban design also promotes social interaction, enhances quality of life and supports community well-being (Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). It goes further than aesthetics by offering practical solutions to challenges such as transportation, housing and public spaces, contributing to cities that are both functional and liveable.

Urban design, once centered on beautification (Matan, 2011), has evolved into the art of shaping cities through form, culture, and design (Philipsen, 2014; Greed, 2014). It involves planning and designing towns, cities, streets, and public spaces (UDGKL, 2024; Rahman, 2023), with its roots traced to the Latin word urbs meaning "city" (Cuthbert, 2010; Elshater, 2014; Abd Elrahman & Asaad, 2021). Kevin Lynch described design as the creative yet critical exploration of possibilities (Madanipour, 2006; Nag & Ghosh, 2019), while Moughtin (1999) outlined its objectives as creating urban environments that are functional, aesthetically pleasing, and enjoyable. Scholars such as Nag and Ghosh (2019) and Rahman (2023) emphasize urban design's goals of fostering comfort, identity, legibility, diversity, meaning, and exploration. It also improves environmental quality and enhances urban life (Harahap et al., 2023; Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024). More than aesthetics, urban design addresses social, economic, and environmental issues (Wall & Waterman, 2010; Abd Elrahman & Asaad, 2021), aiming to create sustainable, livable cities. Beyond shaping physical form, it supports social interaction, community well-being, and practical solutions for challenges such as transport, housing, and public spaces (Rahman, 2023; Shamsuddin, 2024).

4.0 Evaluation and Understanding of Policy Implementation Models

Policy implementation studies began with Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), who defined it as translating policy into action while highlighting the gap between formulation and execution; their work sparked further research that evolved through three main stages. The first generation of studies concentrated on empirical explanations for why policies frequently fail during implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). The second generation advanced the field by developing theoretical frameworks such as top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid approaches to understand how implementation unfolds in various contexts (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1983; Lipsky, 1980). The third generation shifted the focus toward embracing complexity, systems thinking, and the need for adaptation in real-world policy implementation settings (Pulzl & Treib, 2007; Orlandi & Rabie, 2021). The development of policy implementation models has changed over time from strict, top-down approaches to more flexible, interactive ones that involve many people and groups. Today, policy implementation is understood as an ongoing process that adapts to changing

situations. It is shaped by both systems and human behaviour and involves many stakeholders working at different levels of government. This timeline as shown in figure 2 shows how ideas and theories about policy implementation have grown and improved over the years.

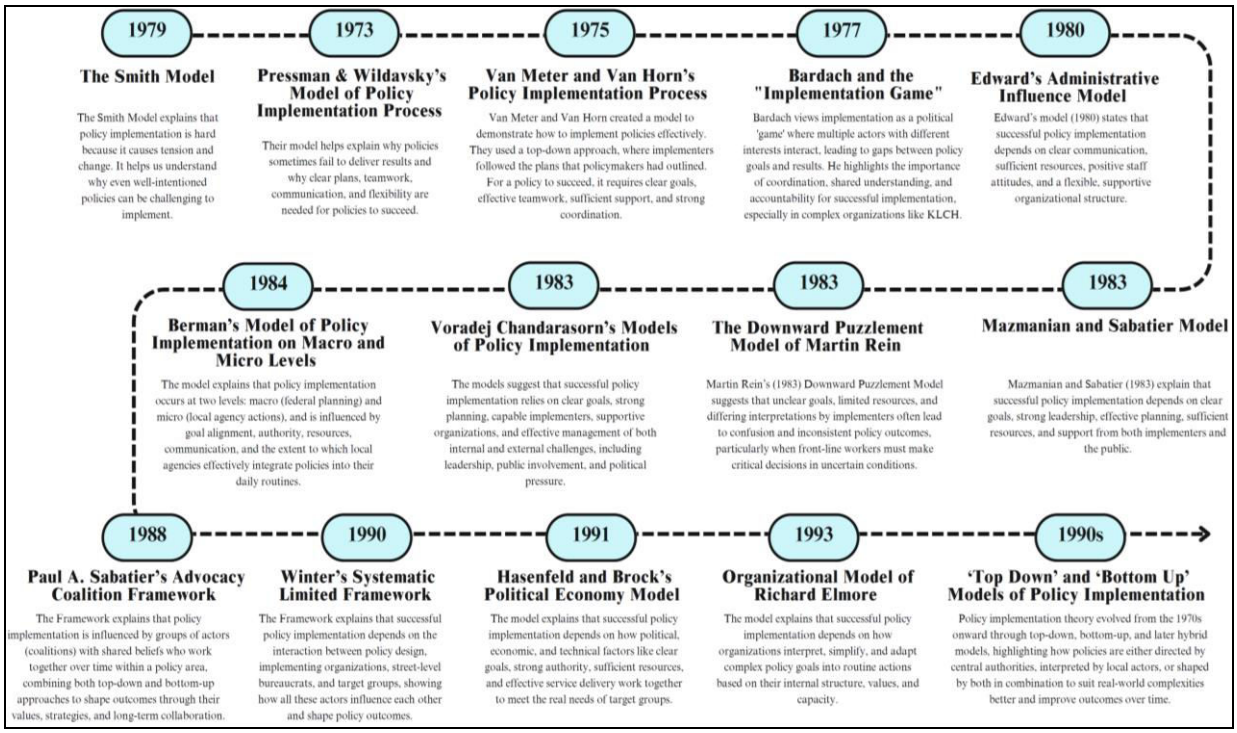

Figure 2 Evaluation of Policy Implementation Models and Theories by Previous Studies

4.1 The Smith Model (1973)

One of the earliest and most detailed models of policy implementation was introduced by Thomas B. Smith in 1973. As noted by Najam (1995) and Ren (2020), this model is still useful today for studying the difficulties that often arise when trying to carry out public policies. Known as the Smith Policy-Implementing-Process Framework, the model explores four key parts of implementation, (1) the idealized policy, (2) the implementing organization, (3) the target group and (3) the environmental factors that influence the process. Smith's model explains that policy implementation in developing countries is often hindered by limited resources, weak institutions, and social complexities, and it can create tension by disrupting established practices. According to Najam (1995), Smith's model sees implementation as a process that creates conflict since new policies often change or replace old systems. The model highlights the tensions between policy goals, implementing agencies, target groups, and external conditions to explain why some policies succeed while others fail. It views implementation as a tension-generating force in society and is considered one of the earliest bottom-up models, even before the term became widely used.

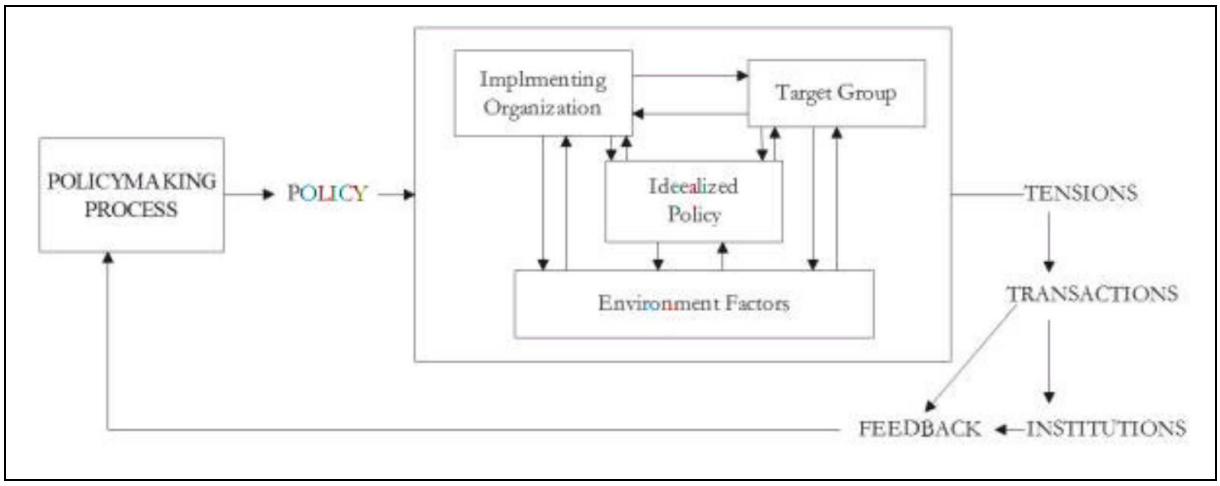

Figure 3 Smith (1973) Model of Policy Implementation Process
(**Source:** Najam, 1995)

4.2 Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) Model of Policy Implementation Process

Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) work are regarded as one of the earliest and most influential studies of policy implementation, marking the start of serious academic focus on the subject (O'Toole, 1986; Hill, 2002; Anderson, 2023). They showed that implementation is not automatic, but a complex process shaped by multiple actors, institutions, and public responses, making it an evolving process of learning. According to Anderson (2023), they identified over 300 variables grouped into four categories: (1) the policy itself and its clarity, (2) the implementing organization and its capacity (O'Toole et al., 1997), (3) the officials, including their skills and commitment (Lipsky, 1980), and (4) the wider political, economic and social context (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) emphasized that success depends on coordination between goals, local actions and public responses, requiring clear communication among policymakers, implementers and the public. They proposed combining top-down and bottom-up perspectives to explain why implementation is challenging and outcomes often diverge from original intentions. In sum, their model highlights that effective implementation relies on coordination, institutional strength, and adaptability.

4.3 Van Meter and Van Horn's Policy Implementation Process (1975)

Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) define policy implementation as the actions taken by public or private actors to achieve policy goals (Hussin, 2014; Islam, 2020). This one of the earliest model and most cited in implementation studies explains success or failure by highlighting six key variables: (1) clarity and relevance of policy objectives, (2) availability of resources, (3) interorganizational communication and enforcement, (4) characteristics of implementing agencies, (5) the socio-economic and political environment, and (6) implementers' attitudes and commitment (Indrani, 1995; Hussin, 2014; Islam, 2020; Ali, 2020). These interconnected variables (Figure 3) emphasize that communication, capacity, and commitment are essential for aligning implementers'

actions with policymakers' goals (Najam, 1995; Hussin, 2014;). Van Meter and Van Horn used a top-down approach to show how actions by implementers must match the goals set in the original policy. Van Meter and Van Horn emphasized that communication, capacity and commitment among implementers are crucial to overcoming these challenges (Najam, 1995). In conclusion, Van Meter and Van Horn's model provides a structured framework for analysing policy implementation by integrating both internal and external factors, showing that success relies on clear goals, adequate resources, institutional capacity, political and public support, and implementers' commitment.

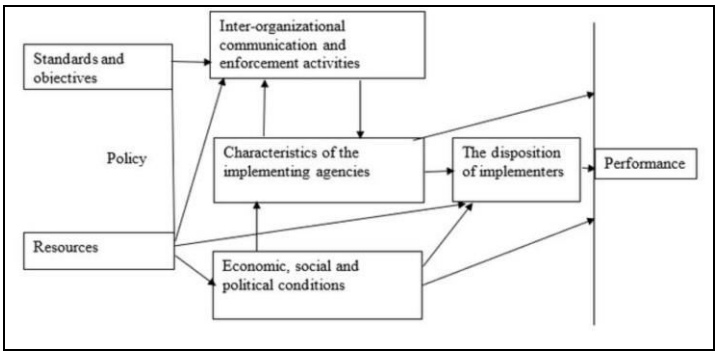

Figure 3 Van Meter and Van Horn's (1975) Model of Policy Implementation Process
(**Source:** Hupe et al., 2014)

4.4 Bardach and the "Implementation Game" (1977)

Eugene Bardach (1977) introduced a critical and practical view of policy implementation through his influential book "The Implementation Game: What Happens After a Bill Becomes a Law." Bardach described policy implementation as a complex political game where different actors with their own interests, power struggles, and limited resources interpret and apply policies in ways that can cause conflict and delays. One of Bardach's main contributions is the idea of the "implementation gap" the difference between the intended goals of a policy and what happens on the ground. The gap between policy goals and actual results often happens because of unclear goals, poor coordination, low commitment and resistance from those responsible for implementation. Bardach also pointed out that conflicts and competition between agencies for control or resources can make things worse. Different agencies might understand the same policy in different ways and follow their own interests which causes confusion, delays and poor results. Bardach shifted attention from just measuring outcomes to understanding the process of implementation itself. He raised the important question, "What happens after a policy is adopted?" and emphasized the need for policymakers to plan for real-world challenges, not just ideal policy designs. Clear goals and responsibilities from the start supported by fair resource distribution, better inter-agency communication and stronger accountability are crucial for successful implementation. This view helps explain how UDP are applied by local authorities in Malaysia. Bardach's framework also reflects the broader evolution of

policy implementation research, moving from early pessimistic views to more comparative and politically informed analyses. Building on earlier work that treated implementation as a socio-political process, Bardach contributed to what Goggin (1986) identified as the shift from first-generation studies, which emphasized individual failures, to second-generation research, which examined why implementation outcomes differ across contexts.

4.5 Edward's Administrative Influence Model (1980)

Edward's Administrative Influence Model (1980) provides a practical framework for understanding how administrative processes influence the success of policy implementation (Ali, 2020). There are four key factors that play a critical role (1) communication, (2) resources, (3) the disposition or attitude of implementers and (4) the structure of the bureaucracy (Ali, 2020). As illustrated in Figure 4, Edwards argues that effective implementation begins with clear and consistent communication. He highlights that "those responsible for carrying out a decision must know what they are supposed to do" (Ali, 2020). This means that policies must be communicated in a simple, specific and consistent so that implementers can fully understand their roles and responsibilities. Edwards emphasizes the need for adequate resources including financial support, staff, time and technical tools. Even well-designed policies cannot succeed without the proper tools and support systems in place. The success of any policy heavily depends on whether the human factors of the by ensuring the implementers are motivated, have the right skills and are committed to doing their tasks. In addition, the structure of the organization responsible for implementation should support good teamwork allow for flexibility and help with quick and effective decision making. Edwards also highlights the importance of strong administrative leadership that works alongside political leaders to guide, motivate and support frontline implementers.

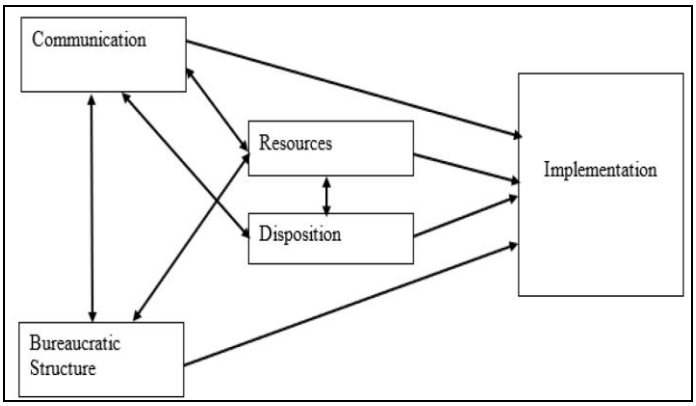

Figure 4 Edward's Administrative Influence Model

(**Source:** Edwards, 1980)

4.6 Mazmanian and Sabatier Model (1983)

Sabatier and Mazmanian (1983) define policy implementation as the actions taken to carry out major policy decisions established through laws, executive orders, or court rulings (Ali, 2020). Their model, a key example of the top-down approach, stresses that implementation starts with authoritative decisions by politicians and senior bureaucrats, whose roles strongly shape outcomes (Paudel, 2009; Ali, 2020).

They argue that policymaking is a continuous cycle of formulation, implementation, and reformulation, and that analysis should consider policymakers, ground-level implementers, and the target population (Najam, 1995; Ali, 2020). The model identifies three categories of variables affecting success: (1) problem tractability (how manageable the issue is), (2) non-statutory factors (political and environmental influences), and (3) the capacity of the law to guide implementation (Chompucot, 2011; Hupe et al., 2014; Ali, 2020). From this, they set six conditions for success: clear objectives, sound causal theory, legal and structural support, skilled and committed implementers, political and stakeholder backing, and stable socio-economic conditions (Hussin, 2014; Ali, 2020). Their model highlights the need for clear laws, adequate funding, and proper systems to guide agencies, while also recognizing that rigid hierarchies may not always work. By combining top-down structure with practical flexibility, the model emphasizes strong cooperation, leadership, and organizational capacity, along with the implementer's role and policy content, as essential for turning policies into effective action (Indrani, 1994; Hussin, 2014). As shown in Figure 4, it highlights the importance of the implementer's role, policy content, and organizational capacity in achieving successful implementation (Indrani, 1994; Hussin, 2014).

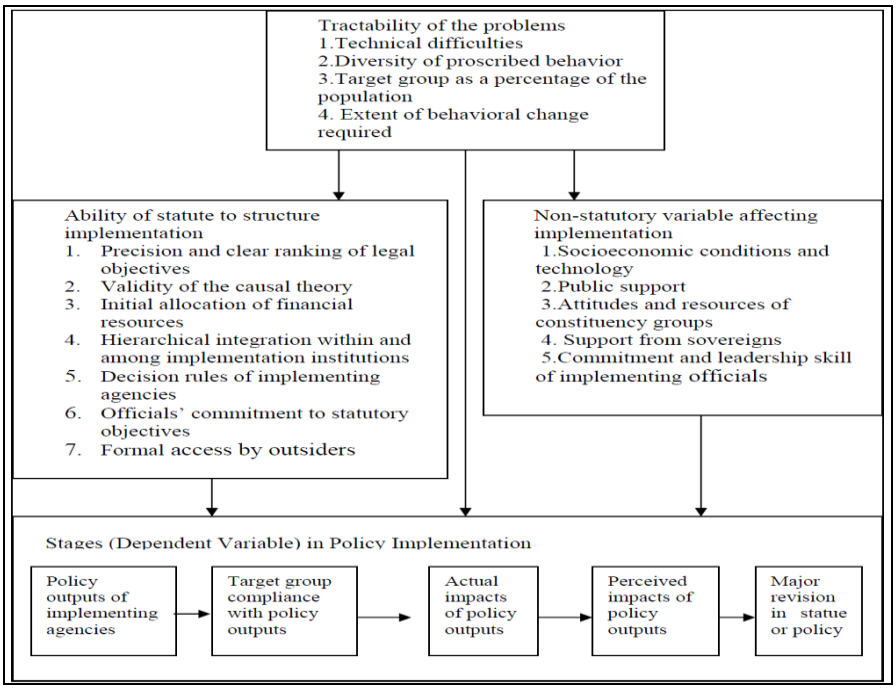

Figure 6 Variables Involves in Implementation Process
(**Source:** Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983)

4.7 The Downward Puzzlement Model of Martin Rein (1983)

Martin Rein (1983) introduces the Downward Puzzlement Model to explain the complexity of policy implementation, especially the difficulty in fully controlling how policies are carried out (Ali, 2020). He emphasizes that implementation is not just about authority and power but also about uncertainty and confusion or what he calls "puzzlement" as different actors try to interpret what should be done (Ali, 2020). Rein outlines three core components of the implementation process which are (1) the articulation of government preferences, (2) mediation by multiple actors and (3) a dynamic, circular process shaped by negotiation and power relations (Indrani, 1995; Ali, 2017). These processes are influenced by three often conflicting imperatives such as the legal imperative (which requires compliance with laws), the rational-bureaucratic imperative (which demands logical and accountable decisions) and the consensual imperative (which seeks agreement among stakeholders). Rein also identifies three main types of actors involved in implementation which are the guideline developers, interest groups and program administrators each playing a unique role in shaping the outcome of a policy (Indrani, 1995; (Ali, 2017). According to Rein, policy implementation is often filled with confusion due to three main issues such as (1) frontline workers and program administrators may be unsure of what is expected of them because policy goals are unclear, changing or contradictory, (2) available resources may not be enough to carry out the tasks effectively and (3) implementers may lack the skills, knowledge or tools necessary for success (Indrani, 1995; (Ali, 2017). Rein describes how this puzzlement deepens as unclear, or inconsistent policy objectives are passed down. When policy goals are vague, decisions are often shifted downward to lower levels of implementation where front-line workers become the real decision-makers through their daily actions.

4.8 Voradej Chandarasorn's Models of Policy Implementation (1983)

Voradej Chandarasorn (1983) developed a series of policy implementation models based on earlier studies by scholars such as Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Bardach (1977) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) (Chompucot, 2011; Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). His models fall into five categories: the rational model, management model, organizational development model, bureaucratic process model and political model, each highlighting different factors that shape implementation. The rational model focuses on objective, structured, a clearly defined roles, and accountability, from problem definition through evaluation of alternatives, implementation and the evaluation of its effectiveness (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). The management model focuses on organizational structure and daily operations, including decentralization, resource and budget management, availability of tools and technology and citizen participation as co-producers of outcomes, aligning with Edwards' (1980) view on the importance of competent frontline staff and strong organizational structures (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). The organizational development model stresses teamwork, leadership, motivated staff, public involvement, and a positive culture that

supports change and progress. The bureaucratic process model highlights the crucial role of street-level bureaucrats showing that frontline workers interpret and apply policies in real situations with their knowledge, skills and motivation directly affecting success or failure (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). The political model explains how external political, economic, and social factors shape outcomes, stressing that success depends on managing stakeholder conflicts and outside pressures. Finally, Chandarasorn proposed an integrated model combining elements from all five, identifying clear objectives, effective monitoring, adequate human and financial resources, digital infrastructure, public involvement, leadership and political support as essential for successful policy implementation (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020; Chompucot, 2011).

4.9 Berman's Model of Policy Implementation on Macro and Micro Levels (1978)

Berman (1978) provides a clear distinction between different levels of implementation by introducing the concepts of macro and micro implementation. Macro level implementation refers to how national or federal policies are translated into action especially the difficulty in getting local delivery agencies to align with the intended goals of the policy (Indrani, 1995). This level often involves coordinating between large institutions and was described by Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) as creating an "implementation machine" (Indrani, 1995). The micro level focuses on how local agencies interpret and apply federal policies in their everyday operations. It examines how these agencies use their internal procedures to implement policy and how they adapt the policy to fit their standard practices. There are four key factors influence micro-level implementation which are (1) the level of agreement on policy goals between organizations, (2) differences in authority and influence across agencies, (3) resource limitations that may affect implementation and (4) communication problems between agencies and organizations (Indrani, 1995). These issues also contribute to implementation challenges at the macro level. At the micro level, he outlines four possible outcomes based on two dimensions that the extent of change in the local agency due to the policy and the degree to which the project itself is adjusted to suit the agency's routine procedures. He defines micro-level implementation as a function of both the nature of the adopted project and the internal characteristics of the implementing organization. This means implementation is shaped by how the project fits within the agency and how the agency itself might change as a result. However, Berman does not clearly explain what causes these changes or how they connect to the outcomes observed (Indrani, 1995).

4.10 Paul A. Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework (1988)

Paul A. Sabatier (1988) developed the Advocacy Coalition Framework as shown in Figure 6 is an attempt to integrate both the top-down and bottom-up approaches in policy implementation (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). This framework offers a broader and more flexible perspective on policy implementation by highlighting how different coalitions comprising individuals which is the implementer and organizations with shared

beliefs interact and collaborate over time within a specific policy domain. These advocacy coalitions often include a mix of public and private actors such as administrative agencies, legislative committees, interest groups, researchers, journalists, policy analysts, and stakeholders at different government levels who influence policy formulation and implementation processes (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). The framework introduces four essential characteristics that define advocacy coalitions. First, coalitions are composed of a wide range of actors who cooperate around shared beliefs, regardless of their formal roles in the policy process. Second, the unit of analysis in implementation is not solely the top policymakers or the street-level bureaucrats but the coalition itself within a specific policy subsystem such as urban development, education, or environmental protection (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020). Third, the unifying element of each coalition is a shared belief system, which can be broken down into three levels: (1) deep core beliefs, which are basic normative values, (2) policy core beliefs, which are strategic views on how to achieve core values within the subsystem and (3) secondary beliefs, which include instrumental decisions and knowledge used to support policy actions. Fourth, the framework emphasizes the need for a long-term perspective typically over a decade to understand how coalitions influence policy through cycles of formulation, implementation, and reformulation, allowing enough time to assess policy change, success, and failure (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020).

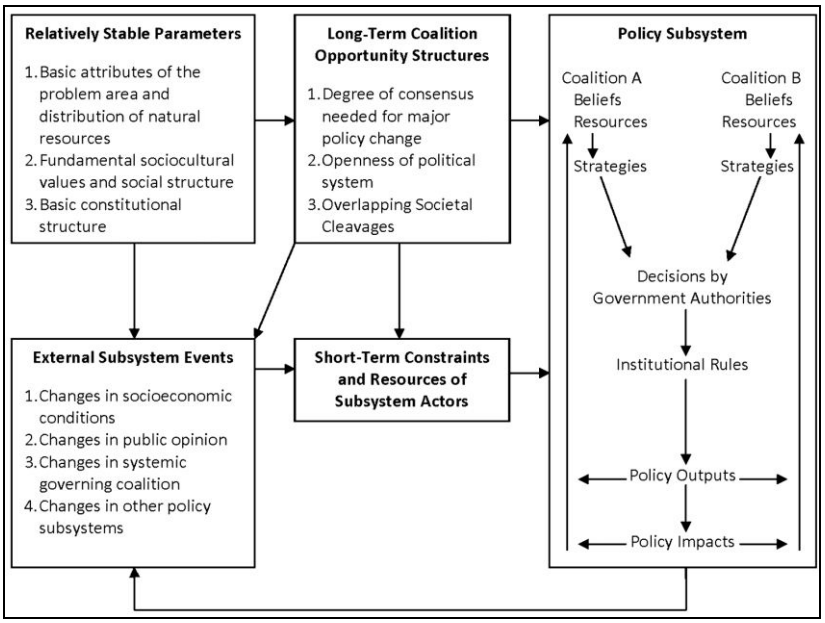

Figure 6 Advocacy Coalition Framework
(**Source:** Weible et al., 2011)

4.11 Winter's Systematic Limited Framework (1990)

Winter's Systematic Limited Framework (1990) provides a comprehensive approach to analysing policy implementation by combining ideas from both the top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Hussin, 2014). This model identifies several important factors that influence implementation success. These include (1) the nature of the policy

formulation process before the law or policy is officially introduced, (2) the behaviours and interactions of organizations and agencies responsible for implementation, (3) the actions and decisions of street level bureaucrats and (4) the responses of target groups and changes occurring in the broader society. In this framework, the implementation outcome is the dependent variable, measured by comparing actual results with original objectives and by assessing the policy's impact on the target group's behaviour (Hussin, 2014). Winter (1990) emphasized that these four variables are closely connected and are strongly influenced by how the policy was designed during the formulation stage. Winter's framework highlights the importance of how implementing organizations work and how well they cooperate with other agencies and these behaviours are central to achieving successful policy outcomes.

4.12 Hasenfeld and Brock's Political Economy Model (1991)

Hasenfeld and Brock (1991) developed the Political Economy Model to explain policy implementation through a combination of political, economic and technical factors. Their model identifies six main components that interact in shaping the implementation process: (1) policy output, (2) policymaking, (3) policy instruments, (4) critical actors, (5) driving forces and (6) the service delivery system (Hussin, 2014). In this model, policy output is assessed by the actual services delivered to the public and how well they meet the needs of the target groups, rather than by formal decisions or written laws. Policy performance is measured in two ways: (1) how much of the target population is actually reached (the overlap between those eligible, processed and served) and (2) how well the services provided match the needs identified in the policy (Hussin, 2014).. This output-based view offers a practical way to evaluate policy effectiveness in real situations. In Hasenfeld and Brock's model, policymaking follows the classic stages: identifying the problem, considering alternatives, making decisions, and selecting instruments for implementation. These instruments are the tools used to carry out the policy, which include three main types: (1) authority, (2) program design, and (3) resources. "Authority" gives implementers the legal power to enforce policy rules. "Program design" involves setting clear goals, steps, and services to meet target group needs. "Resources" cover funding, skilled staff, equipment, facilities, and incentives to support participation and cooperation among stakeholders.

4.12 Organizational Model of Richard Elmore (1993)

Richard Elmore (1993) highlights the important role that organizations play in shaping how policies are implemented. According to Elmore, a major challenge in policy implementation is converting complex policy goals into practical administrative actions. This process almost always involves some level of simplification especially in large public organizations (Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020; Islam, 2020). He explains that public agencies typically break down broad policy goals into smaller, manageable tasks and then assign those tasks to specialized units within the organization. Each unit based on its role and expertise, interprets and carries out the tasks according to its own internal

structures and procedures. Elmore further points out that implementing organizations often adapt, modify or simplify policy directives to fit their existing systems, values, power dynamics and decision-making processes ((Ali, 2017; Ali, 2020; Islam, 2020). This means that different organizations may interpret and implement the same policy in different ways and it depends on how well it fits with their operational procedures and internal culture. As a result, policy implementation is not just about following instructions from the top but also about how those instructions are interpreted and managed at the organizational level.

4.13 'Top Down' and 'Bottom Up' Models of Policy Implementation (1990s)

Policy implementation studies gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s they became more structured through comparative approaches. Two of the most widely discussed models are the top-down and bottom-up approaches, which form the foundation of implementation theory. The top-down model views implementation as carrying out central policy decisions, assuming authority lies with top officials while agencies execute policies (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981; Winter, 2006; Indrani, 1995; Tezera, 2019). Elmore (1980) also supported this structured process of separating decision-making from implementation. However, critics argue that this model oversimplifies reality and overlooks the role of frontline implementers (Pülzl et al., 2007; Islam, 2020). In response, scholars such as Elmore (1978) and Lipsky (1978) developed the bottom-up model, which emphasizes local actors and street-level bureaucrats. This model sees successful implementation as dependent on how policies are interpreted and adapted by those directly involved with the public (Ali, 2020). Lipsky (2010) notes that frontline workers often make critical judgments in uncertain situations (Tezera, 2019), meaning success is measured not only by achieving central goals but also by how well policies meet local needs (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Matland, 1995; McConnell, 2015; Hudson et al., 2019). Policy outcomes emerge through daily interactions between implementers and stakeholders (Nilsen et al., 2013; Anderson, 2023). Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of both models, Matland (1995) proposed a hybrid approach combining top-down control with bottom-up flexibility. This hybrid model allows feedback and learning to improve implementation over time (Islam, 2020; Sager & Gofen, 2022). However, there is still no single agreed theory of implementation (Imperial, 2021). Although research was most active in the 1980s, newer "third generation" studies are more rigorous but still lack common ground (Imperial, 2021). In practice, successful local implementation depends on balancing top-down control with bottom-up flexibility. Figure 7 illustrates these three main approaches: top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid models.

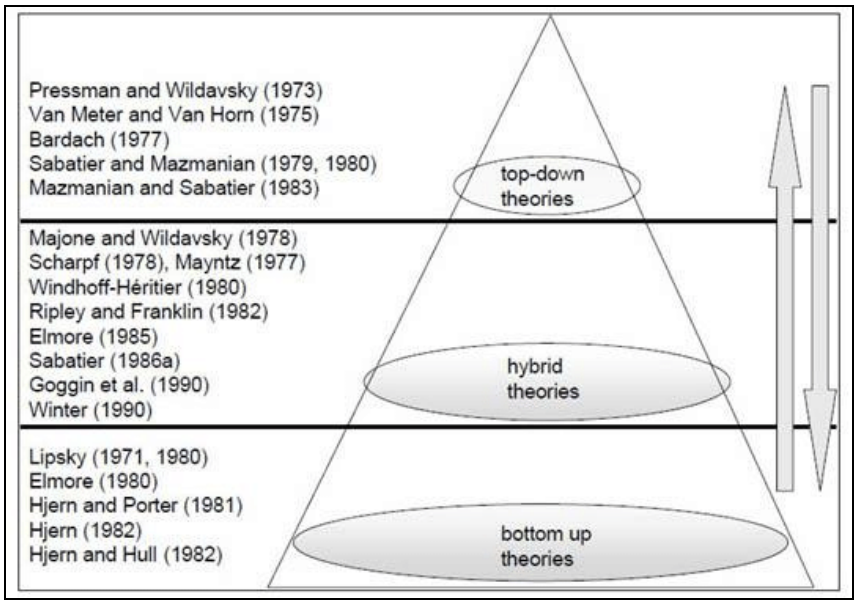

Figure 7 Top-Down, Bottom-Up, and Hybrid Theories
(**Source:** Puelzl and Trem, 2007)

5.0 Urban Design Policy Implementation Status in Malaysia

In Malaysia, urban design policies are well-developed in planning documents but often weak in practice due to overlapping jurisdictions, limited expertise, inconsistent enforcement, and political-economic pressures. The country faces the challenge of balancing design quality with development demands, making implementation complex. As Malaysia moves toward developed nation status, rapid urbanization and economic growth have often produced hasty, unplanned development that neglects quality and sustainability. Concerns over poor design outcomes and cultural insensitivity were first highlighted in 1996 during a Malaysian Senior Planner (Bashri, 2000), and by 1999, Zainuddin Muhammad, Director General of the Federal Town and Country Planning Department, warned that excessive focus on economic gains had undermined urban quality and public spaces (Bashri, 2000).

Efforts to address these challenges began with the National Urban Policy (1993) and the Guideline and Planning Standards for Urban Design and Image (2003), which promoted prosperous, safe, friendly, active, intelligent and beautiful cities through the "taqwa" governance model (FDTCP, 2003). However, the Dasar Perbandaran Kedua Semenanjung Malaysia dan Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan 2016–2025 (DPN2) did not give sufficient attention to urban design. More recently, the 81st National Council for Local Government (MNKT) Meeting in November 2023 endorsed Urban Renewal Implementation Guidelines (KPKT, 2023) to tackle dilapidated buildings and neglected urban areas, reaffirming government commitment under Department of Town and Country Planning Malaysia (PLANMalaysia) and Ministry of Housing and Local Government (KPKT). Urban design is also central to the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12)

2021–2025, which seeks to revitalize growth, improve well-being and promote sustainability, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (MOE, 2021). Robust urban design enhances not only aesthetics and functionality but also community well-being, resilience, and adaptability. Ongoing reforms reflect Malaysia's recognition of urban design as vital for sustainable development and as a foundation for achieving higher quality urban living in its progress toward developed nation status.

In summary, the need for urban design in Malaysia is more pressing than ever. It is central to creating cities that are liveable, sustainable and capable of fostering a high quality of life. Through thoughtful planning and design, cities can evolve in a way that preserves their character and its identity while meeting the growing demands of urbanization. Urban design is not just a luxury but a necessity for the future development of Malaysia's cities.

6.0 Issues and Challenges in Urban Design Policy Implementation in Malaysia

Policy implementation is complex, involving multiple agencies at different levels of government with competing interests and influence (Bardach, 1977; Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024). In urban design, success depends not only on policy content but also on how policies are translated into physical and social outcomes (Shahi, 2023; Anderson, 2023). Many governments, including Malaysia, have introduced urban design policies (UDP) to promote livable, sustainable, and accessible cities (Paterson, 2012). Yet implementation is often limited by weak institutions, scarce resources, poor inter-agency coordination, and inadequate stakeholder consultation (Tezera, 2019; Islam, 2020; Trinh et al., 2021; Shahi, 2023; Selepe, 2023).

In Malaysia, UDP implementation struggles with fragmented governance, where overlapping jurisdictions and responsibilities cause delays and inconsistencies. Urban design is often sidelined by economic or infrastructure priorities, reducing its influence on development decisions. Local authorities also face limited institutional capacity, lacking skilled staff, funding and technical expertise, while enforcement is weak since many guidelines are treated as advisory rather than mandatory (Shamsuddin, 2024). Stakeholder conflicts arise when developers prioritize profit while communities value inclusivity, cultural identity, and heritage preservation. Existing frameworks rarely provide clear mechanisms for reconciling these differences, while low public awareness and limited participation reduce broader support for urban design objectives. Rapid urbanization and changing socio-economic conditions also strain UDP, leaving policies outdated unless revised for climate resilience, sustainable mobility and digital transformation. These challenges reflect what Carmona and Tiesdell (2007) call the "wicked problem" of urban design, requiring simple and effective guidance. Policies are uneven across government tiers, leading to fragmentation (Paterson, 2012). In Malaysia, the gap between policy formulation and urban outcomes is clear. Shamsuddin (2024) notes that while urban design is

embedded in planning frameworks, implementation has produced little improvement. This confirms findings from implementation scholars that well-written policies are ineffective without proper execution (Tezera, 2019; Gaus et al., 2019; Chukwuka & Dibie, 2024). Concerns about the erosion of local identity highlight this gap. Initiatives such as the 2023 Malaysian Architectural Design Ideas Competition by the Board of Architects Malaysia seek to reinforce cultural identity, yet many developments continue to overlook environmental sensitivity, human scale, and heritage conservation (KLSP2040, 2018; Shamsuddin, 2024). The problem stems less from a lack of policy than from weak and inconsistent implementation.

In Kuala Lumpur, where Kuala Lumpur City Hall serves as the main implementing authority, the gap between policy formulation and execution is evident. Shamsuddin (2024) points out that this problem still exists. For example, PLAN Malaysia's Urban Image Design Planning Guidelines (2003) were stopped without any clear reason, showing poor continuity. Likewise, despite the clear goals set in Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020, its impact has been limited: only 6 of the 23 policies were fully implemented, 14 partially implemented, and 3 not implemented (KLCH, 2025) as shown in figure 7.

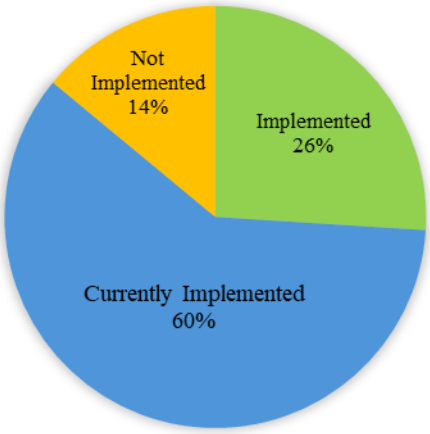

Figure 7 Urban Design Policies for PSKL 2020 (2004) Implementation Status
(**Source:** Kuala Lumpur City Hall, 2024)

This demonstrates that the central issue lies not in policy design but in implementation. As Khan and Khandaker (2016) argue, even the best-designed policy has little value if not executed effectively. Nikolić et al. (2021) echo this with the saying, "a plan with no implementation is equal to not having a plan at all."

7.0 Conclusion

Although Malaysia has developed comprehensive urban design policies, their implementation remains inconsistent and has yet to show positive results and impacts on urban development. The main challenges include fragmented institutional roles, limited resources, implementers' skills and abilities, weak enforcement, and low stakeholder participation. In Kuala Lumpur the biggest city in Malaysia, only a small portion of the urban design policies under the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020 have been realized, showing that the main gap lies not in policy design but in its implementation. Addressing these issues requires stronger institutional capacity, knowledgeable implementers, clearer enforcement and better collaboration among stakeholders. Strengthening implementation is crucial to ensure that urban design policies are translated into liveable, sustainable and culturally rooted urban environments.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration statement

The authors affirm that this manuscript is an original work that has not been published previously and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources of information have been appropriately acknowledged, and all data presented are accurate to the best of the authors' knowledge.

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