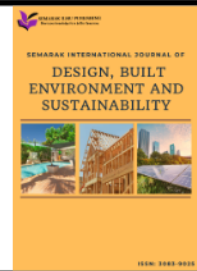




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Roles of Implementers in Successful Urban Design Policy Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Urban Design Policies (UDPs) are essential instruments for shaping the spatial form, functionality and identity of contemporary cities. In Malaysia, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, UDPs have been introduced to enhance liveability, sustainability and city competitiveness. Despite well formulated policies such as the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020 (KLSP2020) in year 2004 and the Urban Design Guidelines for Kuala Lumpur City Centre (UDGKLCC) in year 2014, implementation outcomes remain inconsistent. This study examines the roles of implementers as a critical success factor in Urban Design Policy implementation, focusing on how their characteristics, behavior, and institutional context influence policy outcomes. The findings indicate that the success of UDP implementation depends largely on the competence, motivation and coordination of implementers rather than policy design alone. Eleven implementer-related factors were identified as critical: awareness, knowledge, understanding, commitment, attitude, skills, leadership, competence, dedication, ownership and willingness to act. Weak coordination, limited understanding and insufficient technical capacity were found to be the main barriers contributing to uneven implementation across city zones. The study highlights that implementers are the pivotal link between policy intention and practical outcomes. Strengthening their technical capability, professional commitment and organizational support is essential to enhance the effectiveness of urban design governance. By empowering implementers, local authorities such as Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH) can promote policy consistency, ensure better design quality, and advance the long-term vision of a sustainable, inclusive, and livable Kuala Lumpur.

1. Introduction

Urban design refers to the process of planning and designing towns, cities, streets and public spaces to create a high-quality built environment [1][2]. It is a collaborative and multidisciplinary process, often described as the “art of place-making” [3][4]. Through this approach, architectural principles are applied at a broader urban scale, focusing on the formation of sites, neighbourhoods and city systems. As noted by Moughtin [5], the primary aim of urban design is to create spaces that are functional, visually appealing, and enjoyable to inhabit.

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In practice, urban design involves the coordination of buildings, public spaces, infrastructure, and landscapes to produce cohesive and well-functioning environments [3]. Nag and Ghosh [6] and Rahman [2] emphasized that essential elements such as comfort, identity, legibility, diversity and meaning collectively shape urban quality and user experience. Beyond aesthetics, good urban design enhances liveability by promoting economic vitality, encouraging social interaction, supporting sustainability and creating resilient and inclusive cities [7]. Madanipour [8] and Powell [9] highlighted that well-designed cities foster civic identity, strengthen social cohesion and improve quality of life, making urban design a vital component of urban governance [10][11].

Urban design has been systematically integrated into development plans by local authorities as a strategic approach to improve visual quality, enhance functionality and promote social well-being [3][12-14]. These plans emphasize pedestrian-friendly environments, heritage protection and sustainable public spaces [8][15-16]. Building on these principles, the Urban Design Policy (UDP) functions as a targeted instrument comprising principles, strategies and guidelines that shape the city's physical and spatial character [6][12-13]. Since Barnett's early works in the 1970s, UDP has evolved into a public policy tool that ensures urban growth supports liveability, sustainability and competitiveness [9-11][16].

Globally, the significance of UDP has expanded with globalization and increasing urban competitiveness [17]. Urban design is no longer viewed merely as a design exercise but as a strategic economic tool to attract investment, talent and innovation [18][9]. Entrepreneurial cities now adopt urban design to enhance their image and identity while promoting inclusive and sustainable growth [10][19]. Within this context, effective UDP implementation ensures that design principles are translated into tangible actions that shape vibrant, resilient and economically dynamic cities [10][16].

However, as highlighted by Shahi [20], Shamsuddin [16] and Chukwuka and Dibie [21] the success of any UDP depends largely on its implementation. Even well-conceived policies may remain theoretical without effective enforcement, strong institutional commitment or capable implementers [11][20]. Weak implementation mechanisms have led to uneven outcomes, particularly in developing countries where institutional capacity and inter-agency coordination remain limited [22-23]. While many studies have examined policy formulation and urban design frameworks, limited attention has been given to implementer-related factors that determine success. Understanding how knowledge, awareness, motivation and professional competence influence policy outcomes is crucial to improving policy effectiveness, institutional performance and overall urban development quality at the global level.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to examine the roles of implementers in successful urban design policy implementation. The method involved a systematic review of academic literature, policy documents and institutional reports to identify key factors influencing implementation performance. Sources were collected through databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on studies that discuss the relationship between policy actors, governance structures and urban design outcomes. The review process followed an interpretive analysis to synthesize theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence concerning implementer behaviour, motivation, competence, and institutional contexts. Key themes were identified through thematic coding, emphasizing how implementers' awareness, commitment and coordination affect policy outcomes in urban environments. The synthesized findings were then conceptualized into a framework illustrating the implementers' pivotal role in bridging policy formulation and execution.

This literature-based method is suitable for generating conceptual insights, especially where limited empirical research exists on implementer dynamics within UDP in Malaysia [25] [24].

3. Results and Findings

3.1 What is Urban Design?

Urban design is an established practice that has gained renewed importance in contemporary urban development [15]. It now stands as a major field in academia, public policy and professional practice [26]. Historically, it focused on city beautification [27] but its scope has expanded. Greed et al., [28] described urban design as the art of shaping cities, encompassing art, design, three-dimensional form and urban culture. Similarly, Nuwan et al. [4] defined it as the art of creating meaningful places within an urban context. It involves designing buildings, spaces between them and frameworks that support sustainable urban growth [2],[3] addressing both “soft” elements like greenery and water, and “hard” elements such as paving and street furniture [6][28].

Urban design, as noted by UDGKL [1] and Rahman [2] is a multidisciplinary and collaborative process shaping the physical environment of human life, often referred to as the “art of place-making” [3]. Moughtin [5] asserted that its goal is to create spaces that are structurally robust, aesthetically pleasing and functional. Nag and Ghosh [6] and Rahman [2] added that it seeks to promote comfort, identity, legibility, diversity and meaning the qualities that enhance urban liveability [2][16][29]. Krieger [30] and Abd Elrahman & Asaad [15] viewed urban designers as city shapers who add economic, social and environmental value to planning and implementation [2].

Urban design applies across various settings from city centres and neighbourhoods to rural and industrial areas [2]. Its focus extends beyond buildings to the spaces between them, which determine connectivity, functionality and overall urban quality [15][2]. Matan [27] observed that Jan Gehl considered public spaces the “life” of surrounding buildings, underscoring their role in sustaining urban vitality. Overall, urban design integrates the shaping of buildings, landscapes and spaces with frameworks that support sustainable and successful development [2-3][15]. It balances aesthetic, social and environmental concerns through both design and management [2-3]. As Kasprisin (2020), [31] explains, modern urban design merges visual form with social and environmental sensitivity, ensuring cities adapt to changing human and sustainability needs [28].

3.2 Urban Design as Public Policy

Policy implementation has long been a core element of governance. Historical evidence, as noted by Sharkansky [32] showed that aspects of policy execution existed even in ancient wartime decision-making. Over time, implementation evolved into a structured and interdisciplinary process forming the foundation of modern public administration [33]. The academic study of implementation began with the seminal work of Pressman and Wildavsky [34] who defined it as the process of translating policy decisions into concrete actions and outcomes. Their research revealed a persistent gap between policy formulation and execution, highlighting the difficulties in achieving intended goals. Following their contribution, the study of policy implementation evolved through three main stages which the first focused on empirical explanations for why policies often fail [33], the second introduced theoretical frameworks such as top-down, bottom-up and hybrid approaches [35][36] and the third emphasized complexity, systems thinking and adaptability in real-world contexts [23][37].

Policy implementation is broadly understood as the process of transforming policy decisions into practical actions based on directives from decision-makers [20-21][38-39]. Different scholars have

offered various definitions to explain how implementation operates and why it matters. Pressman and Wildavsky [34] described it as the process of turning policy goals into real actions. Van Meter and Van Horn [40] viewed it as a series of actions undertaken by individuals and organizations, both public and private to achieve policy goals. Nakamura and Smallwood [41] emphasized the range of activities carried out by stakeholders to realize authorized policy objectives [42], while Fixsen et al. [43] defined implementation as a coordinated set of planned activities within a structured system. O'Toole Jr. [44] distinguished between the process of implementation and the results it produces, noting that while distinct, the two are closely connected in practice. Stewart et al. added that implementation is a collective effort involving multiple people, organizations, and steps that depend on strong collaboration. Berman [45] defined implementation as the enforcement of an authoritative decision or policy choice [42]. Howlett and Howlett [61] added that implementation happens whenever an action is taken regardless of whether the process is structured or the policy objectives are fully achieved. Similarly, Hussin [46] described implementation as the process through which policy objectives are pursued and realized. Shahi [20] emphasized that studying implementation involves analyzing the activities of agencies tasked with carrying out policies. Pressman and Wildavsky [34] noted that implementation is complex and involves collaboration among multiple actors and institutions. Khan and Khandaker [22] explained that it is the execution of laws and policies through coordinated efforts of various organizations using defined procedures and techniques to achieve desired outcomes. Overall, these perspectives highlight that policy implementation is neither simple nor automatic. It is a dynamic and continuous process requiring structured planning, effective coordination and strong commitment from all actors to transform policy decisions into real and measurable results.

3.3 Factors of Urban Design Policy Implementation

Human or “people” factors are central to any policy implementation process [20-21][39]. The success of UDP implementation depends largely on the competence, motivation and coordination of implementers who translate policies into action. Anton and Bardach [47] described implementation as a “game” where individuals interact through negotiation, interpretation and informal strategies [42]. These dynamics often shape the quality and direction of policy execution and may lead to inefficiencies or conflicts if not properly managed. Hussin [46] emphasized the need to understand such complexities and to strengthen coordination and motivation among implementers.

Implementers must therefore possess more than technical knowledge; they need the ability to navigate real-world challenges, make informed decisions and work collaboratively across institutional boundaries. Orlandi and Rabie [23] argue that “people” are at the core of performance, aligning with the notion that implementer factors are decisive in determining policy outcomes. In public administration, implementers are responsible for transforming policy objectives into concrete actions that address public needs [21]. Hussin [46] highlighted that successful implementation requires implementers to have sufficient capacity, skills and understanding to match policy demands. Van Meter and Van Horn [40] similarly stated that the interaction between policy goals and implementer behaviour determines the overall success or failure of implementation [46]. Hussin [46] added that implementers often work within complex systems, requiring strong coordination across multiple agencies and stakeholders.

Policy implementation theories are generally categorized as *top-down* or *bottom-up* approaches. Bottom-up theorists emphasize the importance of local-level implementers such as technical officers and practitioners in shaping policy outcomes [23]. In contrast, top-down theorists focus on the extent to which implementers follow directives from higher authorities [23]. In practice, both perspectives

are essential. Opuala-Charles and Oshilike [48] note that policy success depends on the collaboration between governments, institutions and individuals in turning plans into action [21]. Hussin [46] also argued that successful implementation depends more on people and processes than on technology. et al. [49] further observed that implementers and processes are interdependent during implementation. Lipsky [36] identified frontline implementers as “street-level bureaucrats” and described them as real policy actors whose decisions directly shape policy outcomes [50].

Whether acting individually or as part of a team, implementers’ actions directly influence the effectiveness of policy delivery. Ali [42] Trinh et al. [51] Shahi [20] and Selepe [39] all emphasized that implementers play a critical role in translating policy from concept to practice. Pressman and Wildavsky [34] also warned that policy failure often results from weak implementation a condition they referred to as a “failure of implementation” [62]. Selepe [39] highlighted the need for more research on the early stages of policy implementation and on the role of professional and managerial staff. Implementers are expected to interpret, manage and deliver outcomes based on policy frameworks. However, they frequently encounter constraints such as limited clarity, inadequate training and insufficient institutional support. These limitations can significantly hinder policy performance. As Shahi [20] noted, implementation requires not only policy direction but also sustained commitment and practical action. Sa’at et al. [52] emphasized that top management support, appropriate training, and readiness for change are critical to achieving effective implementation. Ali [42] described implementation as a complex process where policy decisions are transformed into programs and services that improve societal conditions. Similarly, Selepe [52] argued that governments must assume responsibility not only for designing policies but also for ensuring their successful implementation through collaboration at all administrative levels. Opuala-Charles and Oshilike [48] reinforced that real policy impact occurs when individuals, organizations and governments work together in coordinated and consistent efforts [21].

3.4 Factors of Implementers in Urban Design Policy

The success of policy implementation depends on context-specific challenges and the critical factors encountered during execution [53]. Matland [54] observed that individual motivation and institutional settings often have a greater impact on outcomes than the formal design of policies, especially at lower administrative levels [46]. Implementer factors refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and commitment of those responsible for applying policy in practice. Key components include awareness [55], understanding [52], commitment [63], technical skills [21], leadership, coordination and dedication [23]. These human dimensions ensure that policies are not only understood conceptually but also implemented effectively and consistently.

Successful implementation also depends on strong communication, targeted training, consistent supervision and well-structured planning [21][52]. These measures help align stakeholders, maintain accountability and sustain motivation throughout the implementation process. However, slow progress in achieving tangible urban design outcomes, as noted by PSKL2040 [13] reflects persistent issues such as weak enforcement and limited technical capacity among authorities to apply urban design principles effectively. Similar implementation difficulties have been reported in other regions, where even well-formulated policies fail to produce expected results due to weak operational capacity [53]. This indicates a need for deeper exploration of the human and organizational dimensions influencing implementation success.

Paudel [64] identified several core factors influencing policy implementation, including commitment [20][39][52][55], leadership [20][39] and skills and [55][39][20][21]. Policy related values and beliefs also play an important role in influencing implementation outcomes [49]. These

findings align with classical implementation theorists such as Lipsky [36] Mazmanian and Sabatier [35] Pressman and Wildavsky [34] and Aniah [56] who collectively highlight that implementers face complex challenges in translating policy intentions into real world impact. As Pülzl and Treib [37] suggest, assessing implementation factors should consider the local context to ensure findings reflect real administrative and institutional conditions. Leadership is recognized as a crucial driving force in effective implementation. Tezera [53] described leadership as a “hidden force” that aligns diverse interests and mobilizes support for the policy process. Many scholars have agreed that effective implementation is fundamental to achieving sustainable development [10][20][53][57]. Although policies are often formulated at national levels, their success ultimately depends on how local implementers interpret and execute them [51][58].

Due to increasing concern over weak implementation performance, scholars have examined multiple factors contributing to policy success. Selepe [39] emphasized the significance of administrative and organizational elements identified by O’Toole et al. [59] such as structure, management, and institutional capacity [58]. Similarly, Lipsky [36] noted that the individual attitudes and behaviours of implementers often determine policy outcomes [58].

A review of studies revealed that most focused on implementer factors, identifying eleven as the most critical which are (1) awareness, (2) knowledge, (3) understanding, (4) commitment, (5) attitude, (6) skills and abilities, (7) leadership, (8) competence, (9) dedication, (10) sense of ownership and (11) willingness as shown in Table 1. These factors consistently influence policy effectiveness and the quality of implementation outcomes

Table 1

Matrix of Implementer Factors in Successful Policy Implementation Based on Previous Studies (1973–2024)

Num.	Authors	Implementer Factors										
		Awareness	Knowledge	Understanding	Commitment	Attitude	Skill and ability	Leadership	Competent	Dedication	Ownership	Willingness
	Pressman & Wildavsky (1973)					/						
1	Smith (1973)							/				
2	Van Meter & Van Horn (1975)			/			/	/				/
3	Edward (1980)	/	/	/			/			/		/
4	Mazmanian & Sabatier (1986)				/		/	/				/
5	Winter (1990)					/						
6	Hasenfeld & Brock (1991)						/					
7	Najam (1995)			/	/							/
8	Punter (2007)		/	/			/		/	/		
9	Ariffin & Zahari (2013)	/	/	/		/		/	/			
10	Sayuti (2015)		/		/							/
11	White (2015)		/	/			/		/			
12	Khan & Khandaker (2016)				/	/	/	/	/			/
13	White & Punter (2017)	/	/	/			/					
14	Fawad (2019)				/							
15	Marković et al. (2019)			/			/		/			
16	Tezera (2019)			/	/		/	/				

Num.	Authors	Implementer Factors										
		Awareness	Knowledge	Understanding	Commitment	Attitude	Skill and ability	Leadership	Competent	Dedication	Ownership	Willingness
17	Lowe et al. (2020)		/		/							
18	Yen (2020)		/	/			/					
19	Islam (2020)		/	/	/	/	/			/	/	
20	Ali (2020)	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/		/
21	Lesnikowski et al. (2020)						/	/				
22	Trinh, et al. (2021)	/	/	/	/	/	/		/	/		
23	Ng et al. (2021)		/				/	/				
24	Mok et al. (2021)	/	/									
25	Alias et al. (2021)		/	/		/	/	/		/	/	
26	Nikolić, et al. (2021)	/	/	/	/	/	/		/	/		
27	Sager & Gofen (2022)		/									
28	Shahi (2023)				/		/	/				
29	Sa'at, et al. (2023)		/	/	/	/				/	/	/
30	Anderson (2023)		/		/	/			/			/
31	Selepe (2023)	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/		
32	Chukwuka & Dibie (2024)	/	/		/		/		/	/		

Meanwhile figure 1 illustrates the relationship between eleven (11) implementer factors and the successful implementation of the UDP which ultimately leads to good urban design and an improved quality of life in urban areas. These factors represent the personal, professional and behavioural qualities that shape how effectively implementers perform their roles in achieving UDP objectives. The figure highlights that the success of UDP implementation depends largely on the implementers who translate policy into practice [1][20][16] [51]. These factors are fundamental in strengthening the capacity of organizations and government institutions to ensure that implementers are adequately equipped to translate policy objectives into practical urban design outcomes. By addressing these factors comprehensively, the implementation process can be enhanced to produce well-planned, liveable and sustainable urban environments that align with the broader vision of creating a high quality city for its residents [1][16][58]. Consistent with the views of Ali [42] Alias et al. [49] Sager and Gofen [60] Sa'at et al. [52] and Chukwuka and Dibie [21] implementers who execute policies on the ground play the most decisive role, as their understanding, motivation and professional competence directly determine the success of policy implementation.

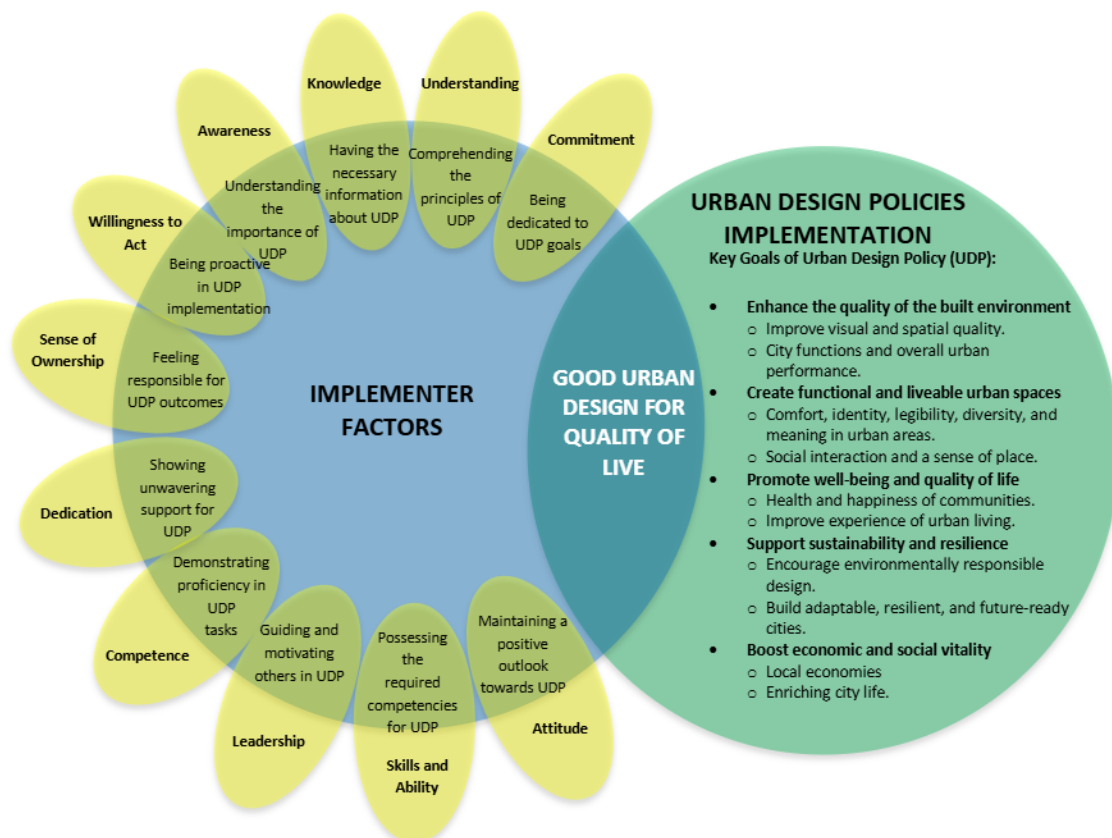


Fig. 1. Implementers' Factors for Successful of Urban Design Policies Implementation

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Urban design has evolved from a focus on aesthetic beautification to a strategic discipline that integrates social, environmental, and economic objectives in shaping urban spaces [15][27][28]. It is no longer limited to architectural form but now addresses the broader relationship between people, spaces and the environment [2][3]. Modern urban design, as highlighted by Kasprisin [31] and Shamsuddin [16] balances physical quality with liveability and sustainability, reflecting its growing role as a tool for inclusive and adaptive city-making.

The institutionalization of urban design as public policy demonstrates how design has become an instrument of governance and planning. As Pressman and Wildavsky [34] first identified, the success of any policy depends on how well it is implemented. Subsequent studies, including those by Mazmanian and Sabatier [35] and Lipsky [36] have shown that implementation is a dynamic and complex process involving multiple actors and organizations. It requires coordination, commitment and shared responsibility to transform policy intent into measurable results [65][23]. This evolution of implementation studies highlights that effective governance depends not only on strong policy frameworks but also on the people responsible for executing them [20][21][60].

In the context of UDP, human or implementer factors play a decisive role. Theories of top-down and bottom-up implementation both recognize that policies ultimately rely on those who carry them out [23]. Implementers act as intermediaries between policy goals and on-ground action and their understanding, skills, motivation and leadership shape how effectively those goals are achieved [40][42][46]. As Lipsky [36] described, they are the "street-level bureaucrats" whose decisions determine the public's experience of policy outcomes [50].

The literature shows that weak implementation often stems from limited institutional capacity, poor coordination, and lack of professional competence [51]. To address these challenges,

researchers have identified a range of human and organizational factors influencing success. Among these, commitment [63][20], leadership [39][53] and technical ability [21][55] consistently emerge as crucial. Similarly, the attitudes, values and sense of ownership among implementers shape how policies are interpreted and applied in practice [49]. These findings align with earlier theorists such as Pressman and Wildavsky [34] Lipsky [36] and Mazmanian and Sabatier [35] who emphasized that human behaviour and institutional context determine whether policy objectives can be achieved.

A synthesis of previous studies revealed eleven key implementer factors that are consistently linked to successful policy execution. These include awareness, knowledge, understanding, commitment, attitude, skills and abilities, leadership, competence, dedication, sense of ownership and willingness. These elements influence how policies are translated from conceptual frameworks into tangible outcomes, reinforcing that effective policy delivery depends on both institutional systems and individual capacities [39][58].

In conclusion, urban design as public policy requires not only strong plans and guidelines but also capable implementers who can bridge policy and practice. Implementation is where planning visions are tested and transformed into physical realities. The review of literature and conceptual frameworks underscores that implementer factors remain the most decisive element in achieving effective UDP implementation. Strengthening these human dimensions through capacity building, leadership development and institutional support will be critical to ensuring that urban design policies lead to sustainable, liveable and well-functioning cities.

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