

Beyond Entertainment:

Music and Healthcare in Urban Parks

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Abstract

This study is a recent review of the use of music for healthcare in urban parks in five districts of Bangkok, Thailand. It was found that music played a central role in many activities supportive of physical and mental health. This paper will discuss the role of music in supporting the health of Bangkok's residents through its use in a variety of public park programs. Some examples are group aerobics, yoga and various genres of dance. The research found that although these activities are well attended and beneficial to health, there is a lack of unified, supportive policies for them. Interviews were conducted on three levels: facility managers and coordinators, group instructors, and participants who uniformly expressed the importance of the role of government for these programs' sustainability and growth.

Keywords: *Music and Healthcare, Music and Recreation*

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Introduction

Music is an art form consisting of sequences and pattern of sounds. Throughout history music has been man's companion in his celebrations, free time and life's transitions. It can mirror or change one's emotions. More recently, it has been found to be a beneficial tool for the improvement of man's health. Healthcare is the prevention, treatment, and management of illness, and the preservation of mental and physical well-being through the services offered by the medical and allied health professions¹.

The role of music in healthcare is one of interaction and involvement comprised of melody, lyrics and rhythm, which can occupy the mind and lead it away from pain into peacefulness. Especially rhythms can motivate human movement in those that tend to be sedentary and provide an internal vacation from depressing thoughts, ruminations, and worries. Playing and creating music significantly increases the involvement factor, and thereby the therapeutic effects, over passive listening.

Music for Healthcare is the use of music to maintain and improve conditions of health. Nowadays, people are fully able to manage musical resources that are available to them to improve their health. The objectives of this research are to explore the current of music and healthcare activities in urban parks (Thonburi site), as well as to propose potential music and healthcare projects to the Bangkok administrative committee and Governors aimed at promoting the health of the urban community.

Music and healthcare activities

Music and healthcare activities can be found in six parks of the Thonburi area as indicated:



Arial view of the six parks in Thonburi ©2010 Google - ©2010 Imagery TerraMetrics

¹ The American Heritage® Medical Dictionary

- A. Thonburirom Park, Tung Kru District
- B. Somdej Phra Srinagarindra Boromarajajonani Park, Bang Khuntien District
- C. Tawee Wattanarom Park, Tawee Wattana District
- D. 72nd Year Celebration to His Majesty the King Park, Thonburi side of the Rat Burana District
- E. Rama 8 Royal Park, Bang Plud District
- F. Chalerm Prakiat Jungle Park, Tawee Wattana District

A. Thonburirom Park, Tung Kru District

Thonburirom is a very large park, situated in a suburban setting. It is off the Buddha Bhujra road in the Tung Kru District. It has three roads (Pracha Utit, Rama2, and Buddha Bhujato) connecting it to the community, which makes it very convenient for the surrounding population.

It is Bangkok's official policy to make the place into a "city park of health" for the residences of Thonburi. There is a "Thonburirom healthy sport area," which is a 300-meter long jogging path with 12 different exercise stations. Each station works a different muscle group of the body.

It was found that there are two main musical activities in this park. One is aerobics, and the other is Taiji dance. The local residents initiated these programs themselves so consequently, the budget for the instructors varied for each area. The aerobic dance activities gather many participants that can be divided into two types the permanent and the temporary. The permanent groups have a regular weekly schedule, i.e., every workday evening or every Saturday morning, whereas the temporary ones do not.

The permanent groups are led by a president and a committee that handles the administration of the budget, which supports the instructor's compensation. Additionally, they make the necessary arrangements for the required sound equipment and power connections. They work with the park staff to ensure that the location in the park is suitable and well maintained for their programs along with it being beautifully landscaped and conducive to welcoming their group.

Taiji dance is quite a contrast to aerobic dance. It is practiced by a small number of members and due to its Chinese tradition it has to be practiced every morning. It is held at the corner of Thonburirom Park. The instructor or trainer is usually a highly skilled senior member of the group that has turned professional.

B. The 72nd Year Celebration for His Majesty the King Park (Thonburi side), Rat Burana District

The 72nd Year Celebration for His Majesty the King Park is off the Rat Burana road, under the Rama 9 Bridge. This is a very unique and rare waterfront park for Bangkok as it is situated along the bank of the Chao Praya River. It is divided into two by the river that is, there is both a Phra Nakorn District and a Thonburi District side to the park.

Consequently, it has spectacular riverside scenery and is designed for relaxing and balancing the mind in this area that has a peaceful nature. It is an outstanding and very popular place with dual policy objectives of supporting both sports and relaxation.

In the evenings, a diverse group from a range of professions goes to exercise there. The park provides a range of recreational facilities along with the Rama 9 Bridge Youth Center and its many facilities and sport equipment available.

In this park, three different activities in terms of music for health were found. These were aerobics, sport dance, and Wann Taikong. Aerobics and sport dance are organized under the Rama 9 Bridge Youth Center in terms of trainers and expenses for equipment. People who are interested in these activities have to apply to the center for yearly membership. They can then use all of the equipment available and can attend all activities.

On the other hand, Wann Taikong is a smaller scale activity of the Chinese community. There is an instructor teaching this dance to members. Wann Taikong is considered a mixture of Taiji dance and yoga. The songs are interspersed with Chinese prose during portions of the dance. The Wann Taikong club has requested location support from Rama 9 Bridge Youth Center so that its members do not need to sign up for youth center membership.

C. Tawee Wattanarom Park, Tawee Wattana District

Tawee Wattanarom is a medium-sized, multi-purposed park off of the canal-sided Tawee Wattana road with a market fair in the same area. There is a marked park path for health that includes ten exercise equipment stations with a racetrack and playground. The sport fields, basketball court, and artwork spaces are situated amid large trees and flowering plants. The park has been beautifully choreographed and decorated with a sense for nature as directed by the “10 Nice Parks, 10 Clear Canals, and 10 Clean Roads project.” This park has been designed to be part of the grounds of a second Grand Palace.

This park is considered as the second big park on the Thonburi side. The main function of parks in Bangkok is to create an environment conducive to relaxation and to provide a space for various activities. However, there is no music for health activities found in Tawee Wanarom Park proper, as it is close to the Tawee Wattana Youth Center, which hosts many activities there. Its many members participate in aerobics, sport dance, modern dance and Thai dance.

D. Chalerm Prakiat Jungle Park, Tawee Wattana District

Chalerm Prakiat Jungle Park is situated off the intersection of Buddhamonthon No. 2 road with Pra Boromraj Chonanee. The park was created in cooperation by the Department of Highways with the Ministry of the Interior. Their goal was to beautify and convert the area under the highway into a usable community park.

The place has been used as multi-purpose area that hosts many sport activities, festivals, and celebrations.

In terms of music for health activities, it was found that this park hosted aerobics and baton dance. The aerobics are conducted by a club and its permanent membership on a fixed daily schedule. The president of the club administers the trainer's fee and equipment. Its budget is made up of membership fees and an allocation from the district office. The president is responsible for obtaining the location permit and the trainer to ensure its long-term viability. In contrast, the baton dance club is much smaller with no fixed schedule.

E. Rama 8 Royal Park, Bang Plud District

Rama 8 Royal Park is a Chao Phraya riverside park, under the Rama 8 Bridge. The park was recently founded for the installation of a statue of His Majesty the King Rama 8. This riverside area of greenery has been zoned for recreation and exercising. To date there has not been an official opening ceremony.

Taiji dance is the only music and health activity in the park hosted by a small community club. In the past, they utilized an activity field under the bridge, and with the development of the park they requested a user permit, as Taiji dance needs a morning space with fresh air. Its trainer is a volunteer member of the club supported by the membership, as there is none from the district.

F. Somdej Phra Srinagarindra Boromarajajonani Park, Bang Khuntien District

Somdej Phra Srinagarindra Boromarajajonani Park is a small park off Rama 2's Soi 69. It was created to serve the local residents. In front, the park has a pond with adjacent lawns for people to relax. The special feature of the park is its youth library for book lovers. Like some other parks mentioned, there is no music for health activity in the park proper, because of its proximity to a formal youth center where recreation activities are hosted. Residents who are interested in the activities have to apply for membership at the Bang Khuntien Youth Center before they can participate. This center offers aerobics, sport dance, and Thai dance.

The study shows that the activities related to music and healthcare found within six parks are: aerobics, Taiji, dance and yoga. However, only for a few of these programs parks received budgetary support from their district office while most others suffer from an emphasis on subsidizing sport fields. Currently, the sport fields have dedicated an annual budget specific to their needs, whereas the music and healthcare programs must come out of a very contentious general fund.

The number of the sport fields in each district is: 24 fields in Tung Kru, 22 fields in Ratburana, 21 fields in Bang Plud, 20 fields in Tawee Wattana, and 42 fields in Bang Khuntien. Additionally, some parks have no music in the park programs because of the existing youth centers at the same location or nearby that offer similar activities. Some of the activities at these centers that incorporate a musical element

are aerobics for health, Wann Taikong, dancing such as Thai traditional dance and international dance genres, such as Ballroom, Jazz, and Hip-hop. There are also Thai instrumental musical groups featuring the percussion and fiddle as well as international instrumental musical groups featuring the guitar and keyboard.

The survey of music and healthcare programs indicates that music and healthcare activities are supported by many local clubs and their members. They are furthermore assisted by the club's chairpersons who efficiently administer and coordinate all the required facilities such as amplifiers, speakers, stage and the budget that pays for the activity's specialist or instructor. The club's members themselves constitute most of these programs' participants and directly provide the operating budget along with ideas for further development.

Policies

Bangkok's Culture, Sports, and Tourism Department is responsible for the policy making related to music and healthcare. In an interview with Mr. Somsak Chantawattana, the Department Director he stated that as of yet, there is not a solid profile in place regarding the role of music for health in the parks. There is currently; however, a project known as "Music in the Park" which is primarily a relaxing cultural entertainment activity so that the residences of Bangkok can enjoy the (sharing of) musical activities and concerts in their parks.

Bangkok's Administration is attentive to finding ways to support its people and specifically the health of its youths by establishing youth centers in each district. At these centers, the Sports Department has been instilled with the authority to establish recreational activities and policies according to the following numbered strategies for the 2009 - 2012 time frames:

- Strategy number 4 of Bangkok's Administration plan is to pursue and continue to develop the highest possible quality of life while maintaining Bangkok's unique cultural identity.
- Strategy number 4.2 delegates the responsibility for developing the range of sport activities to the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism.
- Strategy number 4.6 specifying the strategy for the maintenance and development of Bangkok's charismatic cultural identity is again under the jurisdiction of the Culture, Sports, and Tourism Department that forged the "Music in the Park" programs

Additionally, the executive directors of the districts, operating executives of the youth centers, and the staff of the Community Development and Welfare Department, have all been interviewed about the park's music policy. Mr. Sapon Potisop, the Director of Bang Khuntien District, Mr. Songchai Payomyam, the Vice Director of Taweewattana District, and Mrs. Kanungnij Trachuwanich, the Vice Director of Bang Plad District expressed the same conclusion in that there is currently no unified policy guiding the

use of music in the district's parks or sport fields. They showed particular interest in how a written policy could be translated into real programs for the community.

Furthermore, they state this is because each district office functions under the administrative umbrella of the Bangkok administration that does not have a policy governing the beneficial use of music in the community. Consequently, the main Bangkok administration has no solid plan for music activities, while the yearly financial plan to promote sports and recreation is determined by each district locally.

Moreover, Miss Patamanan Thanapornpradit, the operations executive of two youth centers and community officer with Mrs. Supojanee Bannaraj, the community officer of the Tung Kru District reported during the interviews that there is no tangible plan for supporting music for health in Bangkok's urban parks. They attribute this deficit to the lack of discretionary funds in the current budget.

In addition, they noted that people in the community created their own activity clubs based on mutual interests. Primarily these would be sports related groups that mirror the preferences in the area. For example, grass-root groups of aerobic dance, football, running, and Taiji dance were mentioned.

Furthermore, the participating club members would themselves furnish activity related supportive equipment if needed. The amount of money participants would contribute was negotiated at the group level with no involvement from the district directors.

It was clearly expressed that the sport and recreation policy had been developed specifically to address the focus of its youth centers, since the Bangkok administration places an emphasis on developing the abilities of youths in sports. Consequently, there is much support and efforts applied for the promotion of the youth center activities.

Budget

The core problem regarding budget is that the top management level does not have additional discretionary funds and the district funds are already slated for existing sports programs at the youth centers. So although there are available sports fields and the community has expressed strong interest from the middle aged and the early retirement groups, there is no top down allocations available for payment of instructors and leaders/instructors as well as for portable sound systems.

Conclusion

There are five main obstacles or problems that have arisen in response to the Music in the Park campaign as follows below:

1. There is a lack of sufficient governmental staff to support additional activities. Even the management and coordination of volunteer leaders/instructors is lacking.
2. There are severe budget problems, which mean that Bangkok does not have sufficient funds to promote and support its existing sport and recreation activities. Therefore, a solid permanent plan cannot be drafted to include additional music related activities. This in turn places additional financial burden on the volunteer programs and the participant community.
3. The facilities in the activity are still lacking. That is, the district offices cannot provide the volunteer instructors/leaders with an accessible power source, sound system, small raised presentation platforms or a clean flat area to host large groups such as aerobics
4. There are restrictions on the access to some parks and sport field locations. That is, most parks are only open from 05.00 to 21.00.
5. There are also unnecessary management restrictions. The districts' local offices have no authority to host a "Music in the Park" event since that is under control of the Executive Director of Bangkok. Furthermore, volunteer community activities are restricted by a permit system and some sports fields have time of day restrictions as well. Some cannot host activities during the day due to an adjacent school restriction for preserving quiet study time. Then others have no lighting for nighttime activities.

Discussion

All the district executives and administrators of the parks and recreation sectors agree that the government should provide additional budget to promote music and exercise activities. These efforts should not only apply to the youth centers, but also to the public sports fields where there are accessible central spaces available.

Since these latter places are scattered throughout the residential areas, it is quite convenient for the nearby residents. If the government had the supportive policies and provides sufficient budget to match the public's demand, it will be beneficial for the health of people. It is also noted that the government should improve and develop the public spaces to better meet the needs of musical activities. One key factor would be readily available power outlets for sound systems as well as providing spacing and sound level guidelines to avoid sound pollution or crosstalk from adjacent activities.

Due to the desire of the citizens for their government to increase the support and the promotion of musical programs, the governmental staff should conduct a survey in the activity areas so that they gain the community based input to learn more about the problems and desires of the community. This will result in improved future programs. The sport and recreation policy should incorporate periodic community input forums that result in a cooperative management and development model. This would lead to greater satisfaction of community members through a higher level of involvement in lieu of the existing top-down model. The Executive Director of Bangkok should standardize its support for music in health programs across all its districts.

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