TRANSFORMATION OF MALAYSIAN CITIES: FROM COLONIAL CITIES TO THE PRODUCTS OF NEOLIBERAL GLOBALISATION

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In the last two decades, major cities in Malaysia have witnessed a spate of urban redevelopment including commercial and retail complexes, and residential estates. The current urban transformations taking place in Malaysian cities are mainly market-driven and characterised by fast-track development with a strong priority on the road infrastructure. This is a typical example of an intensive property-led development that is becoming a central driver of the national economy.

> This article provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of urban development in Malaysia. Here, the major aim is to understand the Malaysian cities transitions in the trajectory of its colonial past, national identity, multi-cultural community, culture and religion. Focusing on the South East Asian urbanism, this article determines how internal and external forces and global trends such as neoliberalism and property led development effect on the transformation of urban landscapes and expansions in Malaysia.

The outcomes of this paper will indicate how much property led development and globalisation have affected the traditional and tropical climate responsive urban environment in Malaysia. It will also identify sustainable design and planning measures that should be implemented in the cities of Malaysia to combat the ill-effects of globalisation.

ASIAN URBANISM

As urban studies have taken a "southern turn," with an increasing number of works on the Global South cities, the rising contrast between built form and living spaces is critical. Seth Schindler argues that many cities in the global South have accumulated more capital and labor than at any time in their respective histories, yet they remain intractably disconnected. In addition, the metabolic configurations of the global south cities are discontinuous, dynamic and contested. Finally, it is important to emphasize that the materiality and political economy are always already co-constituted in southern cities, so neither can be reduced to structure or context (Schindler, 2017).

> In Asia, the urban become "an important site in which national developmental politics render itself visible, in which the national state attempts to render populations legible and governable", as well as being "a site where ruling powers try to legitimize their power but also accommodate some of the criticisms against it" (Doucette and Park, 2018, p. 401). In this sense, "Asian cities are increasingly imagined as global frontiers of urban studies in the twenty-first century" (Bunnell, 2017, p. 9). Shin believes that "Asian states had been committing to the economic development for decades while maintaining authoritarian, non-democratic governance systems to quell opposition voices that would hinder economic pursuit" (Shin, 2019, p. 6). Pow suggests that such an authoritarian nature of urban governance accompanying the success of urban development among leading Asian economies is what makes the Asian models sought after by the urban elites of the Global South (Pow, 2014, p. 300).

Focusing on the Southeast Asian context, urbanization and rapid population growth are two significant, inevitable consequences of economic development (Ooi, 2005). The recent urban transformations in the Southeast Asian region is marked by rapid demolition in favour of modernisation, infrastructure construction and high-rise development. Ambitious rebuilding programs and upgrading of out-dated infrastructure often conflict with the retention of the unique sense of place (Yuen 2013).

> To answer the key research questions and avoiding the trap of "Asian exceptionalism", here, we will follow the Doreen Massey's viewpoint, who leads us to critically thinking of "a multiplicity of narratives" across Asia (Massey, 1999, p. 281). This study concentrates mainly on the use of qualitative research methods (such as literature review, content analysis, field surveys, and observations). In order to identify the evolution of architectural typologies and the chronology of urban development, this research concentrates on the analysis of case study areas. This case study approach is partially based on Yin (2003) including the definition of the problem and main objectives, data collection and qualitative data analysis. The case study areas in this research include the Kuala Lumpur (KL) Metropolitan Region, Melaka and Penang (the UNESCO Heritage Towns), Ipoh and Perak, Johor and Iskandar, Sabah, Sarawak and the six states, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Kuala Perlis, Kedah, Terengganu and Kelantan.

COLONIAL PAST, INDEPENDENCE, ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

The South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Sikkim and Nepal) had British rule much earlier than Malaysia. Each Malay (the former name of today's Malaysia) state had a British resident, and the British had a profound influence on the economy and policies; however, the executive, legislative and judicial powers lay with the State Sultans and Malay Civil Institutions (Dallal, Yoginder, and Morten, 2020).

> As the result of a fusion of at least three significant civilizations and two colonial systems, Peletz (2002) emphasised the importance of understanding the depth and breadth of the 'embeddedness' of Malaysian Islam within the many civilizations and colonialisms that existed before and after Islam came to the shores of the Malay world (Peletz, 2002).

The Malaysian Islam had been integrated within the Dutch and British colonial systems as well as Indian, Chinese and European major civilisations (that existed before and after Islam came to the shores of the Malay world (Aziz and Shamsul, 2004, p. 341).
It is important to note here that some scholars pointed out that the term 'Malay' was employed more broadly by European observers after the 16th century, which reflects the way people identified themselves in those centuries (Reid, 2001; Sutherland, 2001).

> Throughout the 19th and half 20th century, the British had a significant influence on the development of urban form and structure. The majority of urban planning policies and regulations derived directly from the British planning systems. Even today's planning system in Malaysia is based on the British planning system. Until the mid-20th century, the Chinese — as the

predominant ethnic group in urban areas — determined the architectural patterns of KL by introducing the famous two-three storey shophouses. However, after the Malaysian Declaration of Independence of 31 August 1957, the political agenda was to bring the Malay population to the city and its vicinity which sparked the development of edge cities and the new residential township (Kozlowski, Mehan, Nawratek, 2020).

On the eve of independence, in the late 1950s, Kuala Lumpur was still predominantly Chinese; however, sincethe 1960s, through Federal Government policies and interventions, this status drastically changed. Today, the demographics in KL indicate that Malay/ Bumiputera constitute 45.9%, the Chinese 43.2%, Indians 10.3% and others 1.6%. The percentage of the Malay population in satellite cities of the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR) built after independence is considerably higher. For example, the Malay population of Shah Alam is 65%, and in the new administrative capital of Putrajaya, Malays constitute an overwhelming 97% of the total population (World Population Review, 2018).

In the late 1980s, Malaysia experienced the unpredicted rise of a powerful and traditional Islamic movement that followed the implementation of programs designed to address 'Malay' economic disadvantage (Milner, 2008, p. 15). Milner believed that expressions such as 'Malay proper', 'authentic Malay culture', 'authentic Malays', 'ordinary Malays', and 'pure Malay' are also often used in the accounts of researchers in a way that can seem to allude to some core or typical 'Malay' community (Milner, 2008, p. 7). Milner added that specific forces operated to promote unity, especially when 'Malays' confront outsiders. He uses the example of the Malays' of Singapore in the immediate post World War II period, which was said to feel "considerable in-group solidarity" as one "discrete section" of the island's multi-ethnic assemblage (Djamour, 1959, p. 22; Milner, 2008, p. 8). However, in recent years, religion has, to some extent, replaced ethnicity in defining identity and interest in what has become a complex and contested policy (Harding, 2012; Nawratek and Mehan, 2020). As a result of the Islamic revival movement that commenced in the late 1970s, this unified urban social environment gradually started to change. The Islamic revival movement, which began in the 1970s, has given the Malay population a new sense of national identity (Ahmad, 2017).

The Malaysian Constitution became the single most important modern institutional tool that moulded and conditioned Malaysian Islam, thus defining its socio-political space in Malaysian government and politics (Aziz and Shamsul, 2004, p. 351). The Malaysian religion can be considered as a state matter that is under the supervision of the Federal Constitution. However, the Islamisation process in Malaysia with a large minority population (approximately 35%) of non-Muslims has moved faster over the last 40 years (Olivier, 2016, p. 267). The Islamic policies of successive administrations from that of Tunku Abdul Rahman (a Malaysian politician who became Malaya's first Prime Minister after independence in 1957) to Mahathir Bin Mohamad (the Prime Minister between 1981 – 2003 and 2018-2020) have helped to elevate Islam's public profile to new heights. Moreover, the modernisation that the British had left was later accelerated under the premiership of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who introduced the principles of political Islam in Malaysian society (Liow, 2004, p. 200).

Today's Malaysian cities portray an image of a large diverse urban community with the following components: the traditional Muslims mainly comprising Malays the Chinese Malaysians, the Indian Malaysians, Indigenous population (the Orang Asli), foreign workers and expats. All ethnic groups coexist peacefully with each other but do not constitute a fully integrated society. The communities have different dressing codes and lifestyles, however, can be spotted next to each other in many parts of the city, including public spaces, shopping, business and entertainment centres. The Chinese Malaysians and non-Muslim Malaysian Indians are no doubt more influenced by globalised fashions, trends and patterns (Kozlowski, Mehan, Nawratek, 2020, p. 10; Nawratek and Mehan, 2020).

URBAN MALAYSIA

Until the mid-20th century, the development and evolution of urban settlements in Malaysia were always before by several factors including, location, trade, topography and climate as well as socio-cultural, economic and political determinants. The form of urban settlements was closely interrelated to local traditions, culture and climate (Chen 2007; Kassim, Nawawi, Abdul Majid, 2017).

In Peninsular Malaysia, as a consequence of economic factors, many traditional Malay kampungs evolved into a town and later a city. The growth and development of cities from kampungs were organic and not based on any particular plan. Melaka, the oldest urban centre in Malaysia, was established as the capital of the Sultanate in the 15th century and later its urban form was very much influenced by the Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial building traditions. Kota Bharu and Kuala Terengganu on the east coast and Alor Setar and Johor Bharu on the west coast developed as 'royal towns' which are representative of the Malay urban tradition. The centre of the town was the Istana 2 (Sultans Palace) comprising several buildings. The other town centre was situated around the main Mosque which acted as a cultural and religious centre. Georgetown, which was established as a trading port of the East India Company on the Penang Island at the end of 18th century was developed on a simple gridiron street pattern. Major cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh developed from small tin mining settlements (Chen 2007; Abdul Latip et al. 2009).

Kuala Lumpur which had its beginning as a tin mining settlement has been influenced in its trajectory of growth by various political, religious and economic determinations which were built mainly by Chinese and other Asian migrant workers.

In Sabah and Sarawak, the traditional settlement types were very linked to the features of the natural terrain. Many settlements expanded along the rivers as water fishing villages. Sabah and Sarawak were initially parts of the Brunei sultanate, which was also culturally related to the states of Malaya. Hence, Islam was invariably the State religion, and the ruler was also the Head of Islam. In Penang, Malacca, Sabah and Sarawak, however, Islam is not the state religion, and the Yang di- Pertuan Agong (King at the federal level) serves as the Head of Islam (Harding, 2012).

The transformation of these early settlements into cities such as Kuching and Miri were a result of growing trade, economic development and the discovery of oil fields (Chen 2007).

Until the mid-20th century, the built environment in Malaysia was dominated by Chinese shophouses, traditional timber Malay houses and British colonial architecture. The basic design of a traditional Malay house has evolved over centuries to meet the local tropical climate and social needs and aspirations. Until the 1950s a large portion of buildings in Malaysian cities was responsive to the requirements of the tropical climate.

An evolution of Kuala Lumpur from a tin mining settlement to a capital of Malaysia in the 1960s is shown in Figure 1. An evolution of Kota Kinabalu from a trading post to a modern metropolis and state capital is shown in Figure 2.

CONTEMPORARY URBANISM — NEOLIBERAL PARADIGMS

For the past two decades, the economic development of the Southeast Asian Region has experienced significant growth. It is expected to continue this pace for the next decade. However, since the 1990s the region has been strongly influenced by globalisation and neoliberalism (OECD 2020)

It is important to note that neoliberalism emerged strongly in the late 1970s era characterised by stagnation and economic recession. It has strongly influenced urban policies, especially in large global cities. Instead of preserving and enhancing public spaces for the end-users, urban local authorities prefer to create semi-privatised and revenue-producing enclaves and promote gentrification to boost the image of the city to the outside world (Purcell 2011).

Urban infrastructure in Malaysian cities has been traditionally managed and coordinated by the federal, state and local governments. That situation drastically changed in the 1990s when Malaysian witnessed a spree of privatization including water supply, solid waste disposal, energy supply and telecommunications. This neoliberal trend also affected the social infrastructure including the health and education sectors.

Since the 1990s neoliberalism, globalisation and property-led development took the leading role in shaping the growth, urbanization paradigms and spatial development of the Malaysian cities. This resulted in property-led development which has become one of the main drivers of the economy which gradually privatized the necessary urban services.

In the 1990s, Malaysia's federal government commenced on the development of Putrajaya, located 25 km south of Kuala Lumpur within the new Multimedia Super Corridor that stretches a further 40 km south to the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Kozlowski, 2014).

In the last two decades, major cities in Malaysia have witnessed a radical transformation of the urban environment and the gradual destruction of the traditional urban fabric. A review of contemporary urban landscapes in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area revealed that a substantial amount of modern buildings lacks creative tropical design and do not add visual interest to the streetscape. The majority of building setbacks are utilised mainly for car parking and pedestrian circulation and there are few plazas and pedestrian resting areas. Most of the major streets act as corridors for vehicle movement and are devoid of canopy tree planting and pedestrian-friendly environments. The new residential developments in Iskandar Puteri in Johor and the new the Marina City in Miri, Sarawak portray globalised neoliberal exclusive enclaves that have a little resemblance of Malaysian culture and traditions (JRDV 2015).

Examples of neoliberal globalised enclaves are shown in Figure 3. In contrast the typical urban dystopia with exposed infrastructure and decaying traditional urban fabric is shown in Figure 4.

The local plans driven by the 1976 Town and Country Planning Act are orthodox in their approach, focusing not on the character of buildings and public areas but on heights, plot ratios, setbacks and car parking requirements (Kozlowski, Ujang and Maulan, 2017). However, in recent years the federal, state governments and local authorities have stepped up initiatives to slow down the destruction of the traditional urban fabric as well as to initiate the design and construction of new climate responsive tropical buildings and building complexes. The establishment of organisations such as Think City and Urbanice Malaysia to address small-scale urban regeneration and create better cities is a step forward in challenging the fast-track property led development trends.

The Green Building Index (GBI) of Malaysia was introduced in 2009 and is addressing residential, commercial, and institutional buildings as well as hotels, resorts, urban centres and towns. The aim of GBI is to promote tropical sustainable design and to reduce negative environmental impacts associated with energy and water efficiency, waste reduction and sustainable management (Shari, 2015). Examples of catalyst green architectural projects addressing the GBI index are shown in Figure 5.

In the Ninth Malaysian Plan, the National Heritage Act 2005 was enacted to give protection and preserve many tangible and intangible cultural heritage and has also been promoted for the tourism industry. The Act provides for the conservation and preservation of, natural heritage, tangible and intangible, cultural heritage, and underwater cultural heritage (Ghafar, 2010). A major contribution to historic conservation was achieved by placing Old Georgetown and Old Town Melaka on the World UNESCO Heritage list in 2009. One of the outcomes deriving from the World Urban Forum held in Kuala Lumpur in February 2018 was a commitment from the Federal Government to transform existing vacant lots in Kuala Lumpur (used mainly for car parking) into green pocket parks and public places (Free Malaysia Today, 2018). Examples of urban heritage conservation in UNESCO listed parts of Melaka and Georgetown, Penang are shown in Figure 6.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The fast track rapid transformation of the Malaysian built environment driven by the global economy and political motivations should be challenged by re-emphasising on cultural, social, environmental and climate-responsive issues. The entire urban planning culture should be reviewed with the orthodox prescriptive planning requirements replaced by performance-based urban planning supported by form-based design codes. This research acknowledges the importance of community involvement (including all three main ethnic groups) in achieving sustainable urban outcomes, therefore, it advocates guiding sustainable community education programs. It also promotes the introduction of local elections where mayors of major cities are directly elected by the community.

It is imperative to promote smart growth supported by a vision for all the major metropolitan areas in Malaysia. Such vision should inform all the local plans and planning strategies conducted by local authorities. The vision has toenforce walkable and sustainable urban communities, climate responsive and compact built form, strong sense of place and identity, efficient and sustainable public transit and quality urban infrastructure. A new community-oriented Kuala Lumpur 2040 Structure Plan recently initiated by Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (Kuala Lumpur City Hall) and, the Kota Kinabalu Green Action Plan (KKGAP) prepared by the Sabah State Government, are appropriate steps in achieving a more sustainable future urban environment (DBKL 2020, Asia Development Bank 2019).

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Fig. 1a

Fig. 1b

Figure 1: The evolution of Kuala Lumpur from a tin mining settlement (a) to a medium size colonial city (b) to a growing capital of the new Malaysian state in the 1960s (c).
Sources: http://www.expatgo.com/my/2016/12/01/kl-years-photos-city-1800s/, https://www.expatgo.com/my/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Dataran-Merdeka-site-circa-1930-DUO.png, https://www.pinterest.com/pin/5446547672087039 8/

Fig. 2a

Fig. 2b

Figure 2: Evolution of Jesselton from a trading post in Sabah at the beginning of the 20th century (a) to the modern city of Kota Kinabalu today (b) Sources: https://pekhabar.com/h-i-d-s-nama-ibu-kota-negeri-sabah-ditukar-daripada-jesselton-kepada-kota-kinabalu/, Source: M. Kozlowski

Fig. 3a

Fig. 3b

Fig. 3c

Figure 3: Enclaves of neoliberal products- Shorefront Condominium, Penang (a), Symphony Hills, Cyberjaya, KLMR (b) and Marina City, Miri (c). Source: M. Kozlowski

Fig. 4a

Fig. 4b

Figure 4: Residual land under infrastructure in central Kuala Lumpur (a) and decaying traditional urban fabric of Kota Kinabalu in contrast with modern buildings behind (b). Source M. Kozlowski

Figure 6 a & b:

Urban conservation areas- Historic Riverwalk in Melaka and Georgetown, Penang. Source: M. Kozlowski