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 globalization 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 globalization.

**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” (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). Pov 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 (Pov, 2014, p. 300).

Focusing on the Southeast Asian context, urbanization and rapid population growth are two significant, inevitable consequences of economic development (Peletz, 2000). 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 unique sense of place (Yuen 2013).

**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, 2002). 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 Malay Muslim 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 Shamus, 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
Bin Mohamad) and the declared policy of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who introduced the principles of political Islam in Malaysian society (Law, 2020, p. 267).

Today’s demographics in KL indicate that Malay/Bumiputera constitutes 43.5%, the Chinese 43.2%, and the Indian 13.8% of the city’s population (Kozlowski, Mehan, Nawratek, 2020). However, in recent years, religion has, to some extent, replaced ethnicity in defining the Malay population to the city and its vicinity which have witnessed a radical transformation of the urban environment. The transformation of these early settlements into cities such as Kuching and Miri were a result of growing trade, Malay nobility, and the development of oil fields (Chen, 2007).

In the late 1970s, the built environment in Malaysia was dominated by Chinese shophouses, traditional timber Malay houses and British colonial architecture. The area’s influence 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 Malay society 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 6. An evolution of Kota Kinabalu from a trading port to a modern metropolis and state capital is shown in Figure 2.

**CONTEMPORARY URBANISM – NEOLIBERAL PARADIGMS**

For Further Reading, the economic development of the Southeast Asian Region has experienced significant growth as expected over the past decade. However, since the 1990s the region has been strongly influenced by globalisation and neoliberalism (OECD, 2006).

It is important to note that neoliberalism emerged strongly in the late 1970s as characterised by stagnation and economic recession. It has strengthened urban policies, especially in the cities. The growth of cities and the extension of public spaces and the end-users, urban retailers, prefer to change the traditional urban pattern and create more income-generating, private and public spaces (Chen, 2007).

The local plans driven by the 1976 Town and Country Planning Act are orthodox in their approach, focusing not on the movement of the urban core or typical ‘Malay’ community (Milner, 2008), but on heights, plot ratios, setbacks and car parking requirements (Kozlowski, Ujang and Maulan, 2019). However, in recent years the federal, state governments and local authorities have stepped up heritage conservation in UNESCO listed parts of Penang, Melaka and Georgetown, Penang are shown in Figure 6. Examples of neoliberal globalised enclaves are shown in Figure 3. In contrast the typical urban plan of the Malay community has become more and more dependent on the European tradition. A further 40 km south to the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Kozlowski, 2014).

In the recent period of urbanisation and modernisation, Malaysia has witnessed a radical transformation of the urban environment. A review of contemporary urban landscapes in the Greater Kuala Lumpur area revealed that a substantial number of buildings lacks creative tropical design and do not add visual interest to the cityscape. In fact, building setbacks are utilised mainly for car parking and pedestrian circulation and there are few plazas and pedestrian areas that could act as corridors for vehicle movement and are devoid of any visual interest in the urban environment. The new residential developments in Iskandar Puteri in Johor and the new Marina City in Penang are a type of 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 plan of the Malay community has become more and more dependent on the European tradition. A further 40 km south to the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Kozlowski, 2014).

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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 to ensure walkable and sustainable urban communities, climate responsive and compact built form, high place value, identity, efficient and sustainable public transit and quality urban infrastructure. A new vision-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.

REFERENCES


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

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

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