

A conceptual approach to urban rejuvenation: a design intervention exercise in the historic silver triangle of Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

The adaptive reuse of buildings and urban neighbourhoods are common in developed countries that have a long history of urbanization. This emerging trend of urban regeneration, which promotes tourism, is becoming an urgent agenda for many colonial cities in developing countries. The aim of this paper is to highlight an idea generated from our urban design studio that is based on the synoptic method so as rational strategies could be realized and transformed into design intervention. The crux of the design revolves around the idea of a return to historicism which could be summed up into the following 4 narratives of: - “redimere” vs. the voiceless genius loci; stabilitas loci vs. dynamics of change; reinterpretation of dialectics vs. IT as a faceless tool; and imago mundi vs. the language of money. The project aims at transforming the once active neighbourhood of Kuala Lumpur to become a vibrant mixed used colony of artisan, residential and other activities that are deemed appropriate for the vicinity. Primarily, the task is to project the area into a cultural enclave where unused shop houses, factories and warehouses are converted into galleries and lofts for artists and eventually establish the city as an art/cultural centre of the region.

Keywords: rejuvenation, morphology, metaphor, narrative, genius loci, intervention, historicism, development, heritage, built form.

1 Introduction

Urban rejuvenation is commonly an accepted norm in ensuring a sustainable future of historic cities in the developed countries particularly for its role in



promoting urban tourism development (see Ashworth and Turnbidge [1], Prentice [2], Ashworth and Larkham [3], Morris [4], Herbert [5]). The case seems to be different in Malaysia where rapid urban developments have witnessed the decline in maintaining the overall quality of the built environment of the historic cities. Modern developments have transformed historic districts into fragmented building blocks that disregard the unique townscape of the historic centres. Sites of dilapidated buildings have been the target for new buildings and often are mediocre in design and failed to respond to the sense of place and the surrounding context. Only recently due to pressures from non-governmental agencies and society at large regarding the need to preserve the charm and character of historic districts have been an important agenda in new urban intervention projects. Nevertheless, due to the lack of legislative framework, new urban interventions are susceptible to further the degradation of the built form particularly buildings that are not protected by the Antiquities Act. Except for the new administrative capital city of Putrajaya, all other cities in Malaysia have no urban design guidance. The existing local plans for districts in the cities are inadequate to control new development or intervention in historic districts. The existing planning policies and development intensities that are based on plot-ratios are inadequate to controls development especially in maintaining the historic character of the place. Furthermore due to the repeal of the rent control act in many historical districts have exacerbated the situation due to the fact that the majority of the historical enclaves are strategically within the central business districts.

In order to protect our historic centres of becoming a complex switchboard of plug-in zones (Boyer [6]), the relevant government agencies must have a long term commitment and policies to preserving and maintaining the cities' cultural and historic identities, and at the same time able to accommodate the inevitable transition, growth and new uses. A comprehensive approach is urgently needed in handling new intervention projects in historic centres. As in the case of this paper, we believe that by adopting Rossi's idea that the "soul of the city" [7] resides in the history of the place and once the soul is given form, it becomes the sign of a place. As mentions by Durrell [8], "...you begin to realize that the important determinant of any culture is after all the spirit of place". Therefore, memory becomes the guide to the structure of the city and it is our task to critically reinterpret this sedimentary base of meaning where rejuvenation is the intervening tool for sustaining the history of the place.

In the broad field of historic preservation and adaptive reuse of buildings, there are many terms used interchangeably to describe urban rejuvenation. Nonetheless, the meaning is far more complicated than the synonyms used and lately, it has opened up for new avenues for urban interventions (Schittich [9]). Community participation is one of the important approaches to generate new/converted urban spaces and structures that satisfy the needs that benefits end users. Urban rejuvenation projects are not necessarily generated from the undeniable consideration to preserve historical continuity by establishing a balance symbiosis of the built heritage, culture, economy and technology. However, all of the commonly used "re" words – restore, rehabilitate recycle,



remodel and so forth fall within the realm of the “change” category and some of the approaches have been reduced in meaning. Ashworth [10] introduces the terms “eradication” and “museumification” to denote the changes experienced in the European manipulation processes of built heritage.

The paper begins with an introduction to the project followed by a brief account of the study area highlighting key issues for urban intervention and elaborating the generated urban narratives. In any design problems, it is generally true that a number of alternative solutions appear possible, are not always explicit and sometimes no conclusion is entirely objective. It is not possible to delineate the contextual analysis in detail and it is hoped that by a brief deliberation of design issues of the context would provide adequate information to support the narratives.

2 The project

The rejuvenation of one of the historic district in the city centre of Kuala Lumpur was an academic exercise to expose fifth year students of architecture at the Universiti Teknologi MARA with the appropriate techniques in solving urban design problems. The general idea of the project is that the interpretation of history cannot be discarded totally as it can generate innovative schemes that might be responsive to the context. By reviewing selected readings diachronically and synchronically, will enable students to enter into the dialogue as an auto critique of the city. These relationships start with the urban as the everyday and the lived, from which we must construct our utopias so as to clarify the possible/impossible, non fixed ideas and projects which are representational of the ever changing conjunctures and structures of the city. Understanding is not however closed or exhausted by analysis alone; there is always an opening for intuition.

Students are emphasized to conceptualize the city as a dynamic phenomenon, stressing dialectical movements, complexity, conflicts and contradictions. Concepts should be eminently applied openly and non-teleological dialectics should also be inherent in their thinking process for the fact that transformation and transposition thinking takes place in cities are evidently related with the wider context of the world.

From a number of schemes generated by students, the approach that emphasized a return to the *genius* of place seems to be the evocative solution for the urban context. In the urban design process, many alternative solutions have been realized. Based on Darwin’s “survival of the fittest”, many of the ideas were rejected leaving behind a collage of ideas as urban narratives to be translated into workable solutions in the design scheme.

2.1 Design process

The crux of this project was to expose students to the anatomy of judgment that was based on a synoptic method of urban/architectural analysis of criticism where operations, instruments and task play an integral part. In reviewing the



students' works, the investigation of the three levels of evaluative criteria are taken into considerations i.e. the descriptive, the interpretative and the judging. In the process of evaluating the projects, questions such as how do we experience? How do we think? How do we respond? - will progressively evolved. In addition, communication analysis such as the study of ideologies, values, aesthetics, historical and contemporary expressive systems, ornament, form, reference, typological classifications are also considered. In a way, these criteria are reflected in the students' design process: to nurture and expand the creative mind required for judgment.

Although, we consider the use of urban morphology as the preferred method of analysis which investigates the dynamic of both the physical and spatial components of urban form, it requires further reinterpretation of the approach that includes modification and transformation of both the newly created as well as the context at where they are built. In the past, significant criticisms have been leveled against this study approach pointing out that it was of limited use as it only describes and explains historical phenomena but could not prescribe future design of the place. This might be true during its inception stage but in the last few decades or so, this approach has found a firm ground in urban design research and practice. (see Krier [11], Rossi [12], Vidler [13], Rowe and Koetter [14], Colquhoun [15]). The appropriate application from the study of urban morphology would be able to help in resolving contemporary urban design problems, especially in situations where there is a desire to rejuvenate a sense of place, both at the city and local urban scale. It is essential to note that the recognition of this approach does not provide an easy escape into historicism but will eventually provide architects and urban designers with a wider scope for operations in the creative reinterpretation and derivation of urban morphology.

2.2 Project objectives

Many have not realized that our lives are inundated with hierarchies of conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act. These are fundamentally metaphorical in nature and when translated through our primary interpretive faculty, vision will generate representative drawings of the subject in mind. Therefore, these concepts that govern our thought and feeling are not just matters of the intellectual structure that we perceive, how we relate to people, and orientate ourselves in the environment. Our conceptual system thus plays an important role in defining everyday realities. If it is true to suggest that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical then the ways we think, experience and do things everyday are very much a matter of metaphor.

Metaphor is not just a matter of language or mere words (although it shares a common syntax with architecture) but in fact, the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. When metaphors are translated into architectural drawings then these become the conventional art of representing the ideas into workable solutions in terms of form, structure, space and so forth. We have been imbued with this mechanical operation of manual drawings for so long and that it is time to confront it. This practice from the conventional to the electronic media has taken place for quite sometime now and has become a



prerequisite in the production of architectural drawings not only in architectural offices but also in schools of architecture.

Therefore, the ultimate aim of the project is for students to generate ways in which the existing built environment can be rejuvenated with their own innovative design. Since built heritage within the historic centre of the city tends to get weaker, it is the innovative design of the physical and spatial components that can enhance the brand identity of place by “(i) adding or creating distinct urban landscape, (ii) synchronizing spatially all the different social/cultural/economic groups; and (iii) generating new social solidarities among inhabitants related to their common and/or individual economic future” (Gospodini [16]). Students’ projects have the choice to encapsulate these phenomena as the underlying basis for their design.



Figure 1: Site context.

3 Context

The proposed site of the project is located within the historic centre of Kuala Lumpur (Fig. 1). In the 1890's, multiracial communities settled within the vicinity of the area. Market Square (Fig. 2), east of the Klang River, became the commercial hub for the whole town. The Chinese communities settled around this Square and also towards the south into the present-day Chinatown. To the north, across Java Street (now Tun Perak Street), were the communities of the Malays. The Indian *Chettians* and later the Indian Muslims traders set up businesses here. West of the river, the *Padang* (now Merdeka Square) was the focal point of the British administration (Fig.3). Kuala Lumpur continued to grow under the British until 1957. It gained the city status in 1972 and two years later became a Federal Territory.



Figure 2: Medan Pasar (Market Square) in 1920's (Source: National Archive Malaysia).

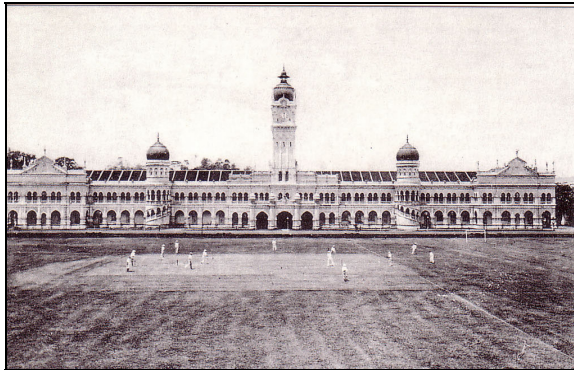


Figure 3: Sultan Abdul Samad Building facing the padang (parade ground). (Source: National Archive Malaysia).



Figure 4: Arial view of the site.

Even though many parts of the study area are filled with numerous office blocks, the typical shophouses still dominates the urban fabric. Over the years, it has played a central role in the life of the city in providing both workplace and home place and, in the present day, continues to house modern lives and work. Unfortunately, many of the buildings are in derelict conditions and tenantless. Due to the lack of design guidance and inadequate statutory backing for preservation have resulted in many of the historic buildings to be replaced by unsympathetic development. The existing urban fabric is a living testimony of the process in which urban development has encroached into the historic centre replacing not only the physical urban form but also the socio-cultural dimensions of the city (Fig. 4).



Figure 5: Concept plan.

4 Urban narratives

Perhaps, one approach to counter the prospect of our built environment becoming archaeological museums of so many dismembered architectural artifacts produced by the elementary, institutional and mechanistic typologies of the past, it is important to be constantly reminded of the full potential of understanding the history of the place. As Eric Owen Moss describes, “if one can understand the order of things past, then presumably one can account for the present, and predict the future” [17]. The following narratives were generated based on the above understanding to substantiate the urban rejuvenation proposals (Fig. 5).

4.1 Redimere vs. the voiceless genius loci

Jackson indicates that “localities have an attraction which gives us a certain indefinable sense of well-being and which we want to return to, time and again” [18]. To reinstate the loss sense of place, a reinterpretation of existing context into a concretize dimension is urgently needed and that tool used in the design was based on the phenomenological approach that clarifies itself as a method that urges a return to things. This concept underlies the proposed schemes of the urban intervention was also in spirit with L. Kahn’s statement that “the genius denotes what a thing is or what it wants to be” [19].

4.2 *Stabilitas loci* vs. dynamics of change

The character of a place is a function of time and it changes dynamically with it. The design task is to merge these two elements and hope this union will stimulate each other.

Stabilitas locus is the preeminent spirit or essence of a place that has transcendental qualities: immobile, substantially tangible, frozen in time, and also has the potentials in displaying immense historical significances of the built heritage of the urban context. By translating these elements in the design, the scheme usurped existing *genius locus* and to blend the concoction with the inevitable dynamic changes of the 21st Century, be it man-made innovations or the invisible qualities of information technology. These in turn creates the qualitative (foci) versus the quantitative (progress), or in other words, to bequeath the proposed site with the capacity of receiving different contents within certain limits. By doing so, it is hoped that the pace of urbanization is in tandem with the existing capacity and capability of the place.

As Kenneth Frampton idealizes *On Reading Heidegger*, “For where place is essentially qualitative and in and of itself concrete and static, production tends to stress quantity and to be in and of itself dynamic and abstract” [20].

4.3 Reinterpretation of dialectics vs. IT as a faceless tool

Having to reformulate the dialectical constituents of the place, there would be a possibility to misinterpret the context. However, the challenge does provide a few loopholes to be exploited.

Firstly, is how the integration of globalization into a historical context can paved the way for information technology to be a commanding tool in urban rejuvenation? This faceless tool reacts in tandem with the needs of the ‘timeless man’, of a globalized Malaysia, the collective ideal of the Modern World.

Secondly, we are able to predict future experiences derived from the existing fragmentary relationships between man and the environment, as such, man has identified built forms as a direct manifestation of existence. From this, it is imperative for us to offer the idea of renewal of art as a mean to rediscover Silver Triangle’s deepest essence, hence the manipulation of artistic concepts into event spaces that can be experienced by the masses: - psycho-physically and spiritually. This is not a new concept of which has been experienced from the



transformation of SoHo and downtown New York into a hub of cultural activities that creates a sense of place identity. Since this idea works, and as abstract as a piece of art can be, it can also transcend human barriers and has the ability to conform itself with the place of origin.

Mere objectification of art is however cautioned against the value it represents. Therefore, it is inherent for us to appraise the existing qualitative as opposed to the quantitative, in order to fabricate a vision of 'somewhere' which people can determine as their territorial space. To assimilate these existing qualitative, inside and outside, with the quantitative it represent, and by doing so, a reinterpretation of dialectics as a sustaining foci can have the capacity of morphing over time.

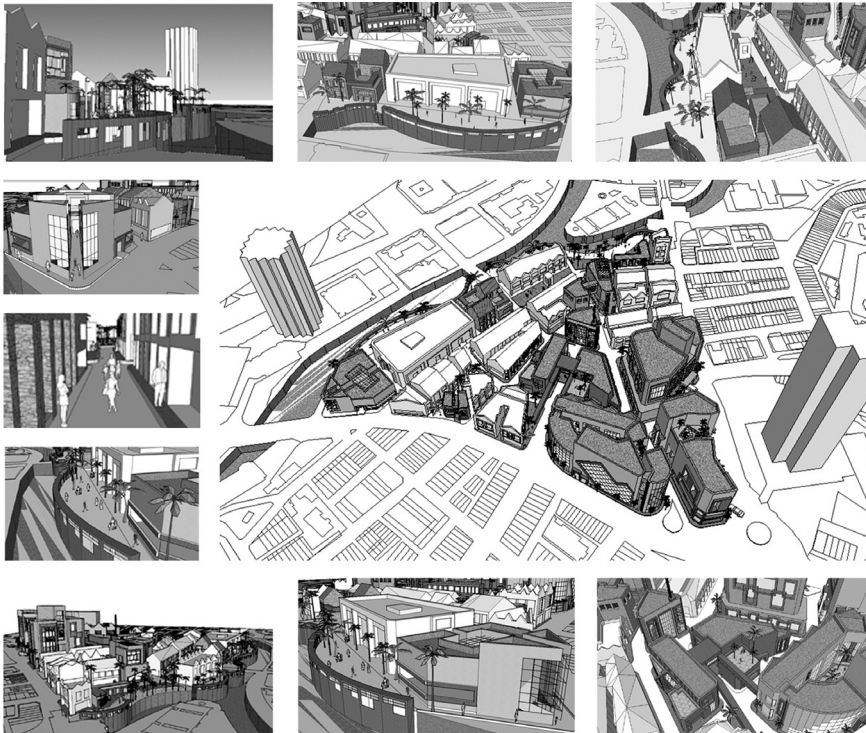


Figure 6: The proposed scheme.

4.4 Imago mundi vs. language of money

It is inevitable that money talks. The language of money possesses many status quo that can drive a traditionalist into embracing the capitalist realm. Hence, man total acceptances towards new and infused technological breakthroughs are indefinite. Our task is to coalesce the functional and visual quality of the place,

which are inherent in 'imago-mundi' so as to display the power of art and money in an environment rich in built heritage.

The Central Market acts as one of the dominant foci and activity generator of the place. By transposing it into the overall development creates a new convivial focus that will expand the activities to a larger area and establish itself as the node within the historic neighbourhood. Within this environment, the introduction of commercialized programs and spaces are revealed into a larger context, from the internal spaces of the Central Market to the outside capitalist ambience of the city. The proposed scheme includes (Fig. 6):

4.4.1 The artists' capitalist neighbourhood

The sense of place with the projected architectural features of restored buildings can be a catalyst for artists to live, exhibit and promote their works. The setting of the artists' colony must incorporate elements that can generate creativity to produce 'memento-mori' works of distinctions. It also has the potential to become the hub for continuous artistic/cultural activities that promote local and international events.

4.4.2 The incorporated 'plaza'

The need for a plaza of this nature is synonymous with living in a city. The need to reinforce commercial and financial activities will complement and further enhance the business vitality of the place. In addition, the idea of creating a plaza is to establish a visual link of the site to the Maybank Tower that is located on the eastern part of the site. Eventually, this will increase the permeability of the place that will further enhance business opportunities not only in the study area but also to adjacent vicinities.

4.4.3 Medan Pasar-the living museum

A historical centre with a twist, with its collection of restored buildings clustered together to form a physical living museum. The Pasar Square will be a platform to showcase made in Malaysia cultural products and inevitably the place for artists' exhibitionist streak. It could culminate into a mini- Tiananmen Square of Kuala Lumpur.

4.4.4 Streets as a mishmash of open spaces and activities

Streets act as collective horizontal spaces that can be stretched to the maximum potentials to induce activities. It is not sufficient for the existing density to activate the place and the alternative mean is to create livable, rentable and functional outdoor spaces. Existing indoor activities can be extended outdoors within specific areas and hour. This proposal embraces and celebrates the streets by reinventing innovative events and space programs that are commercially viable within the context.

5 Conclusion

The proposals have generated metaphorical images about the architecture and the city with eminently conflicting dialectics: constraints and possibilities; meeting



and solitude; gathering and separation; the trivial and surprisingly improvisation. The dialectics of architecture cannot be limited to a single school of thought but a spectrum of approaches that can enlighten the creative mind. Similarly, the city also cannot be limited to the opposition centre-periphery, although it implied and contained them. To look at the architecture and the city is to look at the world (thought as a relationship to the world), globality as totality, the universe, space-time, energies and information, but without valuing one rather another. The project considers the city as the model that has generated the urban derivatives. The definition of derivative is not any single item that is a by-product of the urban context, but rather components that one way or another has affected the generation of the built environment. One can hope that it will turn out well but the architecture and the city can become the centre of domination, dependence, exploitation, reformation and so forth.

By zeroing into the fragments as complete entities in themselves, students would be able to appreciate the hidden dimensions of the city and its artifacts. The study is not meant to expose students to abstract theories of architecture or the city but only to excite them in looking at things in a different way. The task is to look for functioning particularities rather than determining rules.

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