Deciphering urban cultural heritage, community and the city

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Abstract

Cities must have prerequisite elements that attract people to appreciate their context. Usually, historic cities have the advantage over newly established urban centres because of their archaeological vestiges and collective memories of the past could still be projected as valuable public commodities. The primary concern of this paper is to highlight culture as a significant attribute in the development of urban form, and as a product of the collective and individual experience of the various social groups. It is culture that triggered the emergence of the socio-economic, technological and political structure of colonialism, which shaped the various social groups, which in turn shaped their built environment. By investigating the built forms of the colonial city of George Town through urban morphology and building typology, the objective is to unveil the characteristic patterns, the ambience and image portrayed, and finally the prevailing architectural styles within each particular historic setting. These will then be compared at various junctures to the existing context of the city in order to identify elements that have contributed in preserving a stable and a unified built environment.

Keywords: shophouses, historical and cultural enclave, vernacular, traditional, Kampong, Kongsi, morphology, typology, verandah, colonial.

1 Introduction

The traditional city can be considered as an amalgamation of architecture over time that is composed of semi-layered accumulation of history, buildings, streets, open spaces, city block, etc. The city, whether planned or unplanned, has a direct relationship to urban morphology and the sense of place. Usually, planned cities
are concerned with either a predetermined component, or with the visual appearance of unplanned disorder and unplanned urban centres, where growth is accommodated in a practical and coherent manner rather than in a principled manner (Slater and Schultz [1]). These qualities are evident in almost all major cities. However, the characteristic of urban form can no longer be applied to the modern city.

A major confrontation to many traditional urbanisms is structured around the idea of opposition between placelessness of the modern vehicular city and the meaningful places of old urban centres. Sexton [2] highlighted that “Automobile… is a manifestation of the devolution of community from a shared realm with shared purpose to an amalgamation of closely bunched, independent mini-estates”. Instead of the immense financial, technological and political energies that are developing campus-like mega malls, transit stations, skyscrapers and etc, the city of today according to Boyer [3] “seems to stimulate a complex switchboard of plug-in zones and edge cities connected through an elaborate network of highways, telephones, computer banks, fibre-optic cable lines, and television and radio outlets”. A similar condition is experienced in Malaysia today. The introduction of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) has propelled market-place urbanism to consecrate the frontier. Land, which once seems to be far from the city centre, is now encroaching nearer to it. The fine-grained qualities of individual lots have to make way for huge campus-like development and so forth. The process of human needs inherent in the environment that indicates form determinants have been assumed to be essentially rational forces that can be measured in architecture (Ungers [4]; Rossi [5]) and urban geography (Conzen [6]; Whitehand [7]) seems to be not valid anymore and is only occasionally reciprocal. Aldo Rossi’s conception of the city as a sedimentary base of meaning critical to the further creation of accumulations through time and space, which is constituted by principles such as sameness, repetition, geometry, grid, rhythm, symmetry, harmony and the likes, hold no meaning in the newly form urban structure of the capital–driven urbanism.

2 The Asian city

The lack of an authentic theory of indigenous urban form have led scholars and policy makers to deny the validity and the contributions of vernacular culture in the development of the contemporary city. Most of these studies and recommendations often begin and conclude with alien construct with the assumption that Malaysian cities were the off springs of colonialism and later capitalism. Few might wonder if the underlying activities in the public realm might have been originated from the indigenous culture itself.

This is no surprise since many openly deny indigenous or vernacular built forms and substitute them with the architecture of the International Style or other equivalent typologies. Contemporary urbanism have been embedded with alien meanings, specifically the belief in a single, fixed and knowable underlying reality or popularly described as the “bottom-line” where self-interest reigns, the
level to which social phenomena can and should be reduced (O’Connor [8]). The modern city as seen from their perspective, reduced man to their natural self-interest. As a result, the contemporary Asian cities, customs, habits and even culture disappear to leave man as the natural quintessential urbanite. The metaphor often governs urban research not only in the Malaysian context but also in many countries of the Third World.

In respond to the issues mentioned above, it becomes our task to identify elements of urban form that can be considered as indigenous to the locality. Perhaps, one approach to counter the prospect of our cities becoming dismembered architectural artefacts produced by the elementary, institutional and mechanistic typologies of the West, is to be constantly reminded of the full potential of understanding the history of architectural form. By observing the evolution of architectural form through the cultural context, we might learn to create a more responsive and meaningful built environment and that the most effective tool for this analysis is that of typology. The emphasis here is not the search outside the legitimation of the technological sciences but the notion that within our built environment itself “reside a unique and a particular mode of production and explanation” (Vidler [9]). This idea, described by Vidler as the third typology or urban morphology (Gosling and Maitland [10]) focuses its attention in a “return to the use of traditional systems and paradigms. With a rediscovered understanding of these systems it might be quickly possible to propose new cities or, more believably, interventions within old cities”(Vidler [11]).

A few scholars (Lim [12] and Hoselitz [13]) have emphasized some doubts as to whether the cities in the Malay Peninsular ever experienced “primary urbanization” where the indigenous culture remains the matrix for urban centres that developed from it. And in this sense, these cities are considered orthogenetic, meaning able to carry forward into a systematic and reflective dimension of the old culture. This may be due to the fact that the indigenous culture does not have a tradition of the high-style order to be referred to by the colonizers and immigrants and that can be adopted and transformed into the newly established cities. In many cases, it was natural for colonizers and immigrants to create the built environment to resemble the urban landscape of their homeland. Eventually, the indigenous cultural landscapes were relegated to a non-urban image due to the displacement or juxtaposition of a higher tradition of urban culture. Nevertheless, there exist some degree of assimilation of indigenous built culture in the cities particularly in the vernacular shop houses that are a common feature in this part of the world.

The inclination of this study is purely academic and stresses the importance of local inflicted culture over foreign ideas. Therefore, this study required us to adapt a concept of culture that is sensitive to the causes of cultural change and mutation as the collective experience of the society at large. Furthermore, experiencing the city from the cultural perspective provides a new sense of direction to re-examine the validity of the universal concept of globalisation on the development of local urban form. It is a truism that the one world vision or universalisation was the result of the linear concept of time, while being
innovative and progressive towards an advancement of mankind and at the same
time has led to the subtle destruction of traditional cultures that had produced
great civilization of the past. This threat has triggered many developing countries
in search of a critical regional identity in the design of their built environments.
To a certain extent, it has become a paradoxical quest for allied environmental
designers of these countries in trying to become modern and return to the source
of traditional norms; at the same time trying also to revive an old dormant
civilization and take part in present universal civilization (Ricour [14]).

3 George Town, Penang. The first colonial bridgehead

The success of a place depends entirely on the activities, form and image of the
built form. Above all, the place must be stimulating for people, and the buildings
and the public realm must be comfortable and safe. This requires an appreciation
of the dynamics of the locality and provision of a brief historiographical account
of the City would enable us to understand the morphology of the place. Despite
its long history of foreign intervention, the historic city of Malacca, which was
the centre of Portuguese power in this part of the region, never really became a
bridgehead for the interior development of the Malay Peninsular. The Portuguese
set their eyes on China, the Dutch looked to the East Indies and British interests
stretched from the Indian Subcontinent to the Far East. To Britain, Malacca was
but a point of defence and a bargaining pawn- important but dispensable.

The colony of Penang located on the northeastern corner of West Malaysia
(Fig. 1) had its historical inception for different reasons, although initially it did
not function as a bridgehead. Penang, or originally called the Prince of Wales
Island, was established by Captain Sir Francis Light in 1786. The last quarter of
the 18-century was a period of European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia,
with military confrontations involving the British, the Dutch and the French. The
acquisition of Penang from the Sultan of Kedah was motivated primarily by
naval strategy. At the same time it was also regarded as a key post and the
headquarters of the East India Company’s vast trading areas in South Asia and
the Far East. Whatever the reasons for its acquisition, the commercial
significance of Penang outstripped its military function from the outset. The
naval dockyards never became a reality, but the growth of trade and population was such that the town soon overshadowed other urban centres including Malacca. Its influence spread over the mainland to a far greater extent than that of any coastal settlement on the Peninsular. As Clodd [15] highlights, “Asiatic and Europeans alike flocked to the island” and the free-port policy had a far-reaching effect of encouraging the growth of the entrepot trade which was to turn Penang into the most vibrant bridgehead for British expansion into the Malay Peninsular.

The commercial growth of Penang and the important role played by the British trading companies were set against a favourable background. By the 1780’s, Britain had reached the “take-off” for economic growth. The demand for raw materials was increasing, and so was trade with China. The loss of the American colonies lent greater urgency to the search for new markets in the East. At the same time, affairs of other European trading companies went through changing fortunes. The French and the Dutch were badly affected by war, and by 1769, the French Company had gone bankrupt. When the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C) also floundered in 1792, the coast of the Peninsular was literally clear for the rising British Empire in the East. Penang reaped the fruits of these developments and strengthened its bridgehead function as a colonial port.

The increasing dominance of the immigrants over the indigenous population and the division of labour were indicators of the characteristics of colonial settlements. The Chinese worked as carpenters, masons, smiths, traders, shopkeepers and planters; the Indians were shopkeepers or labourers, while the Malays were largely farmers. The Chinese in the early days in Penang was symbolic of their enterprise and persistence in seeking out fresh avenue of trade. This characterized their penetration of the Malay Peninsular following the spread of British influence inland. This colonial-immigrant complex, which was to become the driving force in the economic and colonial urban development of the mainland, established its first major foothold on the island of Penang.

![Figure 2: George Town: urban growth.](image-url)
The development of the settlement itself was not rapid as expected (Fig. 2). The township, which grew from out of the swampy land near the port, was haphazard and irregular. A network of roads was laid down by Light that radiated from Fort Cornwallis toward the interior. The settlers shared the initial fifteen blocks laid down by Light in a “mosaic of ethnic quarters…” (McGee [16]). The streets vary from 30 to 40 foot wide, facing building lots that were deep and narrow. The majority of the building lots in Penang are generally 15 feet wide by 40 to 100 feet deep to allow for maximum number of property ownerships along the street fronts. The telescopic nature of the plan was able to generate a series of small internal courtyards and light/air wells within the shophouses. Once Francis Light had laid out the basic plan for the town, he had neither the time nor the inclination for further urban planning, thus leaving the urban form to naturally evolve accordingly as a mercantile centre: organic and unplanned.

4 The shophouse city

The development of George Town’s urban form conveys a hidden history of the people, their works, and the ongoing daily experiences of the people. It is the repositories of different cultures that have been translated into built forms and the most prominent of the building types are the vernacular shophouses. This building type dominates the historic core of George Town creating groups of buildings that form neighbourhoods (Fig. 3). Each neighbourhood in historic George Town possesses different area identity that had been moulded from the activities and collective memory connected to the place. Boyer [17] stresses, “Collective memory…is a current of continuous thought…collective memories are supported by a group framed in space and time. They are relative to that specific community, not a universal history shared by many disparate groups”. These distinctive neighbourhoods are made up of buildings and spaces that had evolved and built on and had used the structures of the past. What is evident today is actually the collective memory that has been transformed as built artefacts in all its complexity, overlaid with components of contemporary living. Since all of the early colonial cities in Malaysia were not considered as holistic designed entities, few major designed elements that remained provided the guiding and organizing framework for future urban expansion. It is possible to identify two types of order that generated the built form of these cities: a high style order derived from a small group (colonizers), and a vernacular order representing the indigenous urban form. The two orders became the dominant components of the colonial cities, co-existing, interacting and mutually reinforcing each other to produce a diversified and distinctive arrangement of urban enclaves.

Even though many parts of George Town are filled with numerous buildings in the style of British colonial architecture, the typical shophouses still dominates the cityscape. Over the years, it has played a central role in the life of the city providing both workplace and home place and, in the present day, continues to house modern lives and work. The shophouses can be considered as hybrid
architecture, which evolved out of the culture of a colonial port city, the climate, and the diverse people who migrated and lived in the city. Initially, the buildings used available materials from the lush jungle of the tropical forest. After the fire of 1826, many of the shophouses were rebuilt with brick and locally produced roof tiles. They were heavily built and the architectural styles reflected an Anglo-Indian traditions with profusions of Chinese and indigenous elements. There were cantilevered porches, which created irregular setbacks and inconsistency in the street front.

![Figure 3: George Town: urban neighbourhoods.](image)

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![Figure 4: Typical cross-section of a vernacular shophouse street.](image)

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When Sir Stamford Raffles saw the eclectic expressions of the covered walkways of Penang and Jakarta, he directed the building committee of the newly founded island of Singapore to regulate that “All houses constructed of brick or tile should have a uniform type front, each having a verandah of a certain depth, open at all times as a continuous and covered passage on each side of the street.” (Kohl [18]). The directive, in fact, initiated the building bye-laws for all the towns of the Straits Settlements of Malaya. In Penang, an 1887
ordinance followed Raffles’ directive and the verandahways became the dominant features of all the shophouses not only on the island, but also in other parts of the country. The new ordinance provided flexibility in expanding additional spaces over the verandahway. The continuous walkways quickly became the domain of active street lives (Fig. 4). Goods were even traded along the five-foot way that varied from five to ten feet on both sides of the street front.

The influx of immigrants into Penang in the late 19 and early 20 century, witnessed the burgeoning of shophouses and an increased in population density in George Town. The dense jungle and the hilly terrain limited urban development outside the centre. Cultivated land at the fringes of George Town was reserved for spice, fruits and vegetable farms. Numerous mansions of Europeans and Chinese “towkays” could be spotted at the backdrop of these areas. The majority of the population remained in the various neighbourhood enclaves in the city centre. To meet the increase in housing, landowners built taller shophouses with ingenious ways of adapting to the tropical climate. The facades were embellished with decorative motives and stucco figures. Timber shutters were used in openings for ventilation and Chinese or even Italian tiles could be seen on floors of wealthy merchants (Fig. 5). The height of the pilaster at the verandahway was also increased to fit into the scale of a wider road. Structural timbers spanned from brick wall to brick wall leaving the facades free for maximum ventilation. Openings were placed at the verandahway to promote continuous walkway.

Figure 5: Façade of a vernacular shophouse.

The vernacular shophouses as a type were assimilated through the process of change and adaptation from various cultures. The immigrant Chinese with a long urban tradition began constructing attached dwellings soon after their arrival. They also introduced the courtyard plan, the rounded gable ends and the fan-shaped ventilation wells. From the Malay culture, came the carved timber panels and fretworks. The traditional Malay house itself became a source of inspiration for the newly arrived immigrants to response to local climatic conditions particularly in transforming the idea of the porch with arcades of China to create the verandahway. From the Indians came the sturdy construction techniques and
finally, the Europeans introduced the Palladian building model for the immigrants to imitate with fancy French windows and decorative plasterwork.

5 The historic and cultural enclave

In our investigation, this enclave has been identified as a case study due to its uniqueness of having a variety of typologies of the built form of various ethnicities (Fig 6). Even though the vernacular shophouses were products of assimilation from various cultures, there exist distinctive differences in the spatial configuration in the communal realm of the society (Fig 7). Three prevailing types dominate this historic area: the rows of vernacular shophouses with intermittent colonial bungalows, the mosque, and the clan houses. Since the colonial bungalow experienced a process of change and adaptation similar to that of the shophouse, of which has been discussed in-depth, our discussion will only focus on the mosque and the clan houses (Fig.8).

Figure 6: Varieties in spatial/physical urban components.

Figure 7: Location of mosque and clan kongsis in the historical and cultural enclave. (Source: Pulau Pinang Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 5, 1990.)
5.1 The mosque

The Acheen Street Mosque was built in 1802 by an Acehnese of Arab descent. It is the oldest mosque in Penang and was a centre for the Malay community. As a building type, the mosque incorporated the regional style with the pyramidal roof form without any drastic change in the meaning embedded in the architectural form. The plan is almost square and the overall layout seems obscured for the fact that it orientates on an east-west axis towards Mecca. It has no liturgical centre compared to the church and the minaret acts as a symbol of unity and a marker for visual orientation of the area. From historical description (Reid [19]), the unit of defence in the Malay world was not the walled city but the individual compound the kampong, and this can be discerned within this neighbourhood. The layout of the vicinity tried to introduce the ambience of a kampong and in this culture; spatial order was not manifested in the built form. What is being organized are social relationship and community network. Experientially there is no order, but once the social order of the culture is understood, what appeared to be irregular and chaotic becomes comprehensible and hence orderly.

Figure 8: Axonometric view of the historical and cultural enclave. (Source: Pulau Pinang Municipal Council.)

There is no definite demarcation of public or private exterior spaces that surrounds the mosque. The preference for community is partly due to the homogenous culture and the close-knit social/family relationships. Although the demarcation of house lots are primarily territorial units with distinctive boundaries, their functions however may be diffuse. The mosque and the surrounding dwellings exemplify a typical layout of a normal urban village. It is a basic unit of a community and is not an expression of a physical or geographical locality but more of a human relationship, common livelihood and aspirations. Most of the time the kampong is defined by the relationship of the inhabitants to the mosque. As in this case, the mosque becomes the unifying element and plays a central role in community life.
5.2 Clan houses

The majority of clan houses in this enclave are essentially clan temples for ancestral worships. There are eight clan houses and temples within this vicinity and the most prominent is the Khoo Kongsi located in Cannon Square off Armenian Street. The mosque and the clan houses add to the richness of the visual quality of the place and break the rather monotonous row streetscapes of the shophouses. The clan houses precedence dates back to China where the society were composed of many clans characterized by a common ancestral linkage through the paternal line. This gave rise to a common family name and emblem for the clan. Clan houses are integrated components in Chinese societies for other than performing ancestral rites, they promote business and welfare opportunities for the clansmen. These places also act like a repository of experiences and pride of the clan. Most times the premises of the clan houses are devoid of life except for a few local residents and tourists, occasionally some of the places organize traditional lion dances and martial art classes for the community.

Most of the clan houses are located within the walls of the vernacular shophouses separating them from the bustle of everyday street life. These shophouses face the internal courtyards and other labyrinth spaces integrate with the clan houses in the setting of ancestral worshiping ritual carried out several times a year on auspicious occasions. The kongsis of the Khoo and the Tan clans are the most intricate clan houses in this enclave. This was possible due to the association’s efficient management in the accumulation of properties handed down from past generations. The layout of the clan houses stressed the importance of gradual progression of space from the public to the private realm, which is the prayer hall inside the main building of the kongsi.

6 Conclusion

The process of urbanization in Malaysia is perhaps similar to other cities in this region with respect to the disappearance of the fine-grained urban fabric of the vernacular shophouses. Large campus-like developments have taken over these places with indoor events that ignore the dynamics of street level activities. The emerging brand conscious societies have contributed in integrating the artificial world of consumerism as manifested in contemporary urban form that had relegated natural human and cultural values to a non-priority level. Today, we value superficial order more than the natural growth of the vernacular built form. It is a fact that the activities generated from the vernacular urban context have generated a wide array of activities that are responsive to local culture and society. Therefore, it is pertinent to conserve the vernacular neighbourhoods for they are living testimonies of our heritage in maintaining a balanced and a peaceful multi-cultural society. As Appleyard [20] mentions, “The past...is evidence that a society has existed. Wipe it away and a culture begins to feel, like a man without memory, shallow and superficial.”
References
