Morphology of Padang: A case study of Dataran Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur

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ABSTRACT
The study explores the morphology of Padang as an open space in town or city centre in Malaysia. Firstly, it reviews the reasons of its establishment in historical cities of Malaysia. Additionally, the review reveals the spatial relationship of Padang with surrounding land uses and circulation system of the towns and cities. Secondly, it reviews the morphological parameters specified by Conzen (1960) which combined the town plan, pattern of building forms and pattern of urban land use. And, thirdly, the parameters are applied to study the morphology of Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur. The results reveal that Dataran Merdeka is a huge open space in the city centre linked or integrated to several distinctive institutional, commercial and public buildings of various architectural styles. It is a social and free place for people to interact and feel joy with variety of activities including premier events, for example, exercising nation’s rights of assembly for democracy. This study implies that the padang is a place with identity and its meanings are rooted in mind of people as a place for enjoyment and to gain comfort.

Keywords: padang, morphology, Kuala Lumpur, public place

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Public places like squares, streets, garden and pocket space are open spaces that part of a city fabric and its character. They are often considered as green nucleus or breathing space of the city. Apart from these roles, open space in a city also becomes a breathing space for the urbanites to have their recreational activities and social interactions. According to Child (2004), a public place is not only a place of joyful celebration but at the same time it can be a ground for heartbroken communion, civic discussion and a place to exercise the right of assembly and free speech which is essential to participatory democracy and the good life. Greater appreciation on public place has been expanded by Lynch (1960) whereby the landscape features are elements that afforded pleasure, safety and care urban users. For example, matured trees and play field provide spaces for people to play and rest. Sound of bird and winds afford sense of fascination that trigger people to make recurred visit to the public place. In short, there is a symbiotic relationship between the biological complexity of the landscape and the social and functional relevance of human needs.

In the fabric of land uses of historical cities in Malaysia, there are a place which known locally as padang, a traditional and emerging public place type but have not yet received much attention in urban planning analysis. Literally, padang in Malay means a large turfed field with an area bigger than a football pitch. The development of padang begun as esplanade in British India and extended to South East Asia (Hoyt, 1993; Lim and Wong, 2000; Nordin, 2004). Wright and Cartwright (1989) described the padang as huge ground or a grassy plain situated in the heart of a colonial town. Meanwhile, Hoyt (1993) depicted the padang as an expanse of green known as a large closely trimmed lawn alien to pre-colonial, equatorial Malaya. It was also regarded as a green nucleus of a town (Chen, 1998; Anbalagan, 1999). From its early existence, it is a place for public to play and rest for free, a place to interact with family and peers, and a place to play games.

In recent years the pressure for development has taken its toll on the limited open spaces in the city centre of historical cities. Many of these spaces have gradually disappeared, including the padang in many cities in Malaysia. The most dramatic case for a historical padang, Padang Pahlawan, in Bandar...
Hilir in Melaka. It was the ground for the first proclamation of independence in 1957 but was demolished for a commercial development. Padang Maziah in Kuala Trengganu, Padang Merdeka in Alor Setar and Padang Kalumpang in Kota Bharu are examples of open spaces in front of Malay Sultanate Palace which have been converted into vehicle parking spaces. There are many upgrading projects for open space especially the padang followed the concept of a European plaza or roof top garden where paved, pavilion and concrete stage is included at the central end of padang. Similar case goes to Dataran Merdeka where no one among the early pioneers of this part of the city of Kuala Lumpur would have imagined that their much admired padang would one day be completely dug up and an enormous underground car park and commercial outlets built under it. Indeed, the completion of a massive concrete platform during the 1990’s backed by a gigantic digital monitor, bulky concrete performance stage and flanked by what is reputed to be the world’s tallest flag-pole has totally changed the character of this historical site (Chandran, 2004).

In light to this circumstances greater understanding of the physical properties, the components and social values possessed by padang contributing to the quality urban area is needed. By having this, it is hoped that the professionals can play a more influential role in the preservation of the historical padang. Therefore, this paper reviews the morphology development of one of the earliest padang in Kuala Lumpur, the Dataran Merdeka. Using Conzen (1960) parameters of urban space morphology, study covers the historical development, layout and components of the padang. The study also focuses on other historical public places available in Kuala Lumpur. The review is only a part of determining process in order to explore how the padang contribute to place making of Kuala Lumpur.

2.0 THE EARLY PUBLIC PLACES IN KUALA LUMPUR

As the villages grew into a town in the 1870’s, it took a shape around a square. This space, known later as Old Market Square, is now Lebuh Pasar Besar and sits next to Jalan Hang Kasturi. It was a place used by Yap Ah Loy, the first Chinese leader in Kuala Lumpur, and his clans to have their public forums. On it side was the Gombak river bank, and on the higher ground parallel with the river was the main thoroughfare, known for many years as the High Street, now known as Jalan Tun HS Lee. The shorter lane ran down from the High Street to the river. They may originally have been corrugated timber paths by which loads were carried to and from the embarkation points on the river. The square was simply surrounded by trade settlement to serve the outlying mines. By the 1890’s a new wet market had been built on a different site alongside Rodger Street (now Jalan Hang Kasturi) and the old Market Square was cleared to make it into an open space (Gullick, 1994). Even the square is no longer there, the area remains busy as it become the nodes for residents to congregate and conduct business inside the new market.

As the padang became the centre of social life for the European community, here in the same course in the 1890’s, few other public places were built in Kuala Lumpur. All were created to cater the needs of the British and the growing numbers of residents in Kuala Lumpur which acted as administrative and one of the largest commercial hub. In 1888, Alfred Venning, the European official whom originally a planter in Ceylon, began to lay out a botanic garden adjacent to this padang. The garden is called as the Lake Garden, the finest amenity bequeathed by the pioneers to the modern residents, the European and the local merchants and local rulers with a more Westernised dignitary. Venning developed almost 200 acres of the forest into a park with a chain of small lakes named as Sydney Lake (Gullick, 2000). In the garden suburbs, the residents were permitted to build stables for the ponies which pulled their carriages. The four rulers of Federated Malay States were once accommodated in pavilions built in the Lake Garden. There was also a conference hall. The close of the meeting among the rulers was celebrated by procession of barges in the Lake Gardens. In the Lake Garden, a large official residence was built for the senior federal administrator. Its first occupant was Frank Swettenham (Gullick, 1994).

Soon after the creation of the padang and the Lake garden, there were growing demand for another space for sporting activities such as horse racing, golf and cricket and football pitches to supplement both open spaces. This in turn, led to formation of a Selangor Turf Club and move to a more spacious racecourse (Gullick, 2000). Kuala Lumpur race meeting was like a big family party from the period of 1880 to 1957. The natives stood at the edge of the racing ground while Malay royalty and head of the Chinese clans sat near the European at the stage of the club. Golf at this period had a less universal
appeal but still it there was a demand for the erection of a turf club in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore the first course introduced by the British on the Petaling Hill (the present site of Victoria Institution). It was a nine holes links with a very narrow fairway with plenty of weeds and small ravine and a Chinese graveyard as obstacles. There used to be a successful club and golf matches were held (Gullick, 2000).

Around these open spaces an attractive area roads and hillocks area were laid in time, the streets were planted with flowers, trees and palms. In 1889, due to rather epidemic disease, a small hospital with an out-patient department was built on top of the hill known as Bluff Hill. It small size and services barely sufficed for the needs of the town population. Few years before the opening of the Bluff Hill, Charles Letessier of the Christian Brothers society founded his mission around 1883 on the Weld Hill or known as Bukit Nanas (Gullick, 2000). His priority apart from building a church was to open a refuge for women and girls on the hillock area. His first St. John’s church was a wooden building with an attap roof and was replaced by brick and stone church in 1886 after burnt by a big fire. As the Federal government grew, a sprawling collection of bungalows for bureaucrats was then built on Federal Hill in the 1913 (Gullick, 2000).

3.0 DATARAN MERDEKA, KUALA LUMPUR

Dataran Merdeka is among the earliest open spaces introduced by the British in Malaya. Formerly known as the Padang Club, it lies in the heart of an old government administration district, and parallel with the Gombak River and sited opposite to hillock area of Bukit Aman (Bluff Hill), the location for National Police Department headquarters. The padang was originally created as military ground for the police and army throughout the British colony (Shiang, 2002; Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, 2005). Eventually it became the centre for sports and recreation for the British and the elites group, often complemented by a clubhouse. Cricket and football were played on regular basis and the padang evolved as the social and recreational centre while serving its civic duty as the administration hub.

The creation of this padang is not made simply of leftover space between buildings and parking lots. It is rather strong organizing places about which buildings and other parts of the city of Kuala Lumpur take form, involving the process which is similar to many squares in all around the world. It is such a simple yet a unique public place and well preserved since its creation by the British way back in the 1884. There were aloft ceremonies and parade held on this padang. Hot air balloons ride, formal ceremonies, such as police or military parades and Queen Victoria diamond jubilee in 1897 and first Merdeka Parade in 1957 (Amree, 2007) were among the premier events. During the Diamond Jubilee, notables of all communities served on organizing committees for collecting subscriptions and arranging processions, illuminations, fireworks, decorations and sports (Gullick, 1994). Subcommittees dealt with bullock carts parade, the carriage parade, the water fete, the flower, fruit and vegetables show, the Malay fete and the children fete. Simultaneously, under the influence of enthusiastic European sportsmen, it became a playing field for cricket and other team games and was made into level sward.

4.0 THE COMPONENTS OF DATARAN MERDEKA

A padang is resemble to square or the plaza in Europe, it becomes one of the important elements of city design in Malaysia. It is possibly become the most important way in designing a good setting for public and commercial buildings in cities (Moughtin, 2003). Great square or plaza compose several components in order to become a successful public place. Likewise. Dataran Merdeka has walls and floor to provide the sense of an enclosure and welcoming. It can be visually, socially, psychologically and physically accessible.

Morphological study on the development of this padang indicates that the early components include the Chinese and Malay settlements and a market place situated at Jalan Raja, Jalan Hang Kasturi, Jalan Tun Perak and Jalan Petaling (previously known as Jalan Rodger and Market Street). The buildings were of timber, bamboo and nipah wall with attap roofing (Gullick, 1994). The padang itself was a vegetables farm belong to the Chinese settlers before it was bought by the British for defensive and recreational
purposes (Gullick, 2000; Ramsayer1991; Amree, 2007). The latter studies indicated a period of the British where the transformation of this area into an administrative district, verified an additional components such as shophouses, markets, commercial buildings and place of worship erected (Wan Hashimah and Shuhana, 2005). Most buildings in the area standing closely side by side along the Gombak and Klang Rivers. The street was narrow and constructed in organic or radial layout. These buildings still stand as they used to be in most of the old part of the streets. The streets which are parallel to the Gombak River were constructed without a proper schema but suffice to give people various experiences in term of visual quality and urban form, hence offering a clear image for the town (Shuhana, 2002). The components are streets, rivers, hill and buildings.

4.1 The Streets

Dataran Merdeka is bounded by the Jalan Raja and Jalan Raja Laut at the north. Both are new widened streets encompassing the new commercial and public building like Bank Pertanian and Kuala Lumpur City Hall. Jalan Raja which encircled the padang and Lebuh Pasar at the east part are narrower for they were constructed the earliest than any other areas in Kuala Lumpur. Both streets placed numbers of distinctive historical public buildings built during the British colonial era, from 1880’s to 1930’s (Chen, 1998). The padang thus close to one of the main city’s commercial district at Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman and Jalan Masjid India. These two narrow streets are consistently become the busiest commercial district of Kuala Lumpur because of their apparent function, various goods offered and strategically located near to the public transportation hub. Multi-culturalism of Malaysian is best presented in both streets which open seven days a week. Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin (previously known as Victory Avenue) located at the south exit of the padang. The street is even more nostalgic and full with historic events where this street normally becomes the starting point of every parade held in the olden days. Along the street are three Kuala Lumpur remarkable landmarks, namely Kompleks Dayabumi, the Railway Station and Offices and Sulaiman Building.

4.2 The Rivers

The Gombak river and Klang river which located at the far end played a bigger role during the early formation of the padang. Both rivers were by no means an ideal route for boat carrying men and goods between other towns to Kuala Lumpur. The bend of Klang River which obstructed the flow of water each time there were heavy rain had been straightened by the authority in the 1920’s (Gullick, 2000).

4.3 The Hill

It was Bloomfield Douglas, the British Resident in the 1880 who chose this greenery hill to locate his residence and offices. He chose high ground, northwest of padang in order to command a strategic view of the town. Police headquarters and simple government building were built adjacent to his residence (Ramsayer, 1991). The hill was named Bluff Hill before it changed into Bukit Aman. Bluff Road ran along this ridge. On flatlands, at the west part of the padang, police barrack were constructed where the Chartered Bank, presently changed into a museum, stands. Undoubtedly, the Bukit Aman is one of the an evidence of the formation of the early Kuala Lumpur. However, the greenery and sturdy image of the hill gradually vanishing right after the development of Kuching Highway separating the hill and the padang and erection of tall buildings adjacent to it. Indeed, it is surprising how this major topographic feature fail to be remained as it serve a bigger role toward the ecological balance of the city beside as a green backdrop in accentuating the padang as a ground for important national events and parades.

4.4 The Buildings

The padang becomes the centre of social life for the European community and is surrounded by many distinctive buildings which symbolizes the landmark of Kuala Lumpur. It flat wide green turf which can be seen from a distance become a backdrop and a floor for these historical buildings. The building features include a coherent architectural style, size and buildings materials. Moreover, it has been more than a decade it serves as a dominant ground in depicting one of the most prestigious handsome building as well as important symbol of Kuala Lumpur, the Neo-saracenic style, Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad. It
is a style that combined some features of Indian Muslim architecture with Gothic and other European elements (Gullick, 1994). This building was completed in 1897 and located at the eastern part of the padang. Here, in the same course 1890’s, were built the Mock Theodore style, Selangor club at the west, the Gothic architectural building St. Mary’s church at the north end, the museum (previously Chartered Bank building) at the south end. All of these buildings were the works of British architects.


After almost 130 years, Dataran Merdeka has witnessed many events and changes. As can be seen in Figure 1, the area of padang diminished allowing space for the construction of several buildings and a road. Occasionally it continued to be the centre of administrative district. However, the most dramatic changes occurred in the mid 1980’s where it was completely dug up to accommodate underground car park and commercial centres comprised of restaurants and business outlets known as Putra Plaza. It was then roofed over and turned with many other landscape features on its top such as stage show, and gazebo, and pedestrian walkways built around it. The underground plaza had, however, stopped operating after a big flood hit Kuala Lumpur in 2003 (Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia, 2007). Now the padang is used as a marking point to indicate the distance from any places in Malaysia to Kuala Lumpur city centre (Amree, 2007). It has become even more easily spotted since the reputedly the world’s tallest flag pole was placed at the edge of it lawn.

Today, the padang is still the place for meeting, recreational and festivities. Parades and special ceremonies such as independence celebration and private and public gatherings are continuously taken place on it. The flexible use of the padang for important civic functions also has, in particular, led to the utilization of adjacent roads as part of the open spaces as a parade ground (Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, 2005). In short, padang was a centre for social life and a place to promenade and place where the people communicate and unite.

![Figure 1: The growth of Dataran Merdeka from 1887 to 2007.](image)

6.0 THE ARCHITECTURAL MEANINGS OF PADANG

From the descriptive analysis, it can be summarized that the Dataran Merdeka and it surrounding area may convey various architectural categories of meanings as follows:

6.1 As civic ground

The padang was designed as public commons that is intended for publicly used and often situated within a set of public buildings with such a size and scale that people may only interact as a group of individuals in a corner of it own territory, or a mass audience responding to a formal or less formal events or performances.
6.2 **As a square**
This is most agreeable definition of padang if to compare it with squares in cities of other countries where its placement is considered as an outdoor place enclosed by a diverse town fabric and buildings which provide a sense of enclosure. The padang is of a size and shape that allow members of the public to interact as a social group that one can see and recognize each other across the length of the space.

6.3 **As a central field**
It is a portion of the ground that is compositionally centered in a room of an open field similar to a lawn which is used for sport activities but with a huge and tall flag pole that act as a central marker. Sometimes during weekdays the padang is not physically occupied with people but just an empty space without activities. Frequently, it is only used by people to pass through.

6.4 **As a district**
Each components surrounds the padang is architecturally and urbanistically associated with formal compositional relationships in example the street that run along the padang, these two may form a district. Or perhaps in a more social scale where a set of uses at a different particular time where special ceremonies is held on the padang. At a time, it is a district with multiple quarters of various land uses with the old public buildings as an inner ring while the fabric of shophouses placed in the commercial areas act as an inner ring of the district. The padang is in its medium large section of green area in the city centre with two dimensional extent, is always identifiable from the inside, and also used for exterior reference if visible from the outside.

6.5 **As a landmark**
Being dominance in its green characteristic and broad expanded flat open space, the padang is believed to operate as a point of reference where from a distance, it can be observed from many angles and distances.

6.6 **As a node**
It is a focus point that allowing people to ingress and agress at ease from many points of entrance especially from commercial areas like Jalan Masjid India and Central Market.

7.0 **SUMMARY**
Indeed, the stories of Dataran Merdeka have unearthed it significant contributions to the vibrant social cultural formation and development of Kuala Lumpur city centre. After many transformations it is consistently the strongest element of all, a huge green open space in the heart of the most busiest district in Kuala Lumpur, reinforced by a distinctive institutional, commercial and public buildings of various architectural styles, joyful and colourful activities and premier events and once a centre of exercising nation’s rights of assembly for democracy and good life. It is hoped that this review might renders new evidence for landscape architects and planners to address for all heritage conservation works, whether it be of a building, monument or site should be based upon and preceded by sufficient historical research, site analysis and documentation to identify and safeguard fully the heritage values to be conserved.

**References:**


