The changing roles of public spaces in Malaysia
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Abstract
This research examines the role of padang, a public space, in Malaysian historic city based on three development stages: traditional, transitional and contemporary. A review was carried out to identify the early establishment and development of public space and their influence in the built environment. For this purpose, content analysis and site observation were performed on two prominent public spaces: Padang Kota Lama in Penang and Dataran Pahlawan in Melaka. The analysis indicated that roles were underpinned by the process of different era of development and administration. In addition, a number of underlying dimensions of roles emerged including recreation, economic, social and culture. The study revealed that both padang have been modified by certain levels of disruption, resulted in the disappearance of unique townscape qualities. The study concludes that while contemporary changes are beneficial in many ways, it is not altogether wise to abandon the indigenous features and activities which make padang a distinctive and highly regarded place. This study also implies that the padang and it surrounding areas convey various architectural categories of meanings which lead to the image formation of historic cities.

Keywords: Public place, Historical city, Padang, Place meaning

INTRODUCTION
Dynamic public spaces are essential component for the urbanites to have their recreational activities and social interactions. Streets, squares and parks of a city are open public spaces that form a city fabric and its character. Such spaces are often considered as green nucleus, void or breathing space of the city beside gives form to the ebb and flow of human exchange. Greater appreciation on public place has been expanded whereby the physical and social functions are elements that afforded pleasure, safety and care urban users (Lynch, 1960; Carmona et al., 2003). In other perspective, public space is the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds with a symbiotic relationship between the complexities of the urban structures (Carr et al., 1992). What is more public space is not only a place of joyful social 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 (Child, 2004).

Series of public spaces may bring various architectural meanings which are the essential structure for city image. They are basic components of a town. Lynch (1960) confirmed that a clear image through a coherent and clear spatial relation of structures and other objects enables one to move about easily and quickly. Not only this, it may serve as a broad frame of reference, an organizer of activity or belief or knowledge. This mean that based on the form and condition of the public space and it surrounding structure, one may also know the evolution engaged with the place. The larger green spaces, parks and parkways, riverbanks and waterfronts give to a city distinct character and coherence that allows the urban resident to have a feeling for the whole. Such public space may be viewed as the city’s skeleton. They are the underlying structure from which neighborhoods, institutional complexes and business centers depended on (Heckscher and Robinson, 1977).

As development in the city increases, the needs of space to cater the large crowd and vehicles have also increased. In turn, the increment forced the city authority to provide infrastructure for the new
buildings and modes of transportation. As a result, many public spaces were sacrificed for realizing these needs. Nevertheless many of public spaces within the cities did not receive right attention in urban planning analysis. In Malaysia, Padang Maziah in Kuala Trengganu, Padang Merdeka in Alor Setar and Padang Kalumpang in Kota Bharu are examples of open spaces of historic cities which have been converted into vehicle parking spaces. Likewise, there are many upgrading projects for open space especially with regard to huge open space like padang followed the concept of a European plaza or roof top garden where paved, pavilion and concrete stage are included. Similar case goes to Dataran Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur where no one among the early pioneers of this part of the country 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). Apart from these, what happened to Dataran Pahlawan is said to be the most dramatic case for a historical public space where the first proclamation of independence held in 1957. It had been demolished for a commercial purpose.

In light to this circumstances greater understanding of the roles and social values possessed by public place concentrating on the public space contributing to the quality urban area is needed. This research also supports the concern in searching the special attributes and properties which may influence the image of city in Malaysia. By having this, it is hoped that urban planners, architects and landscape architects can play a more influential role in the preservation of the historical public space. Therefore, this paper reviews the roles of two of the earliest and historic public spaces in Malaysia, the Padang Kota Lama, Penang and Dataran Pahlawan, Melaka. Both sites were chosen because of their long history as well as drastic social, economic and environmental changes attracting many controversies for its preservation.

PUBLIC SPACES DURING THE TRADITIONAL PERIOD

The history of public space during this period is difficult to chart. The concept of public space in the traditional villages, towns and cities of the Malay land originated as the stage for sultans and chiefs of the indigenous communities. The public spaces often consisted of a huge ground located in front of palace, market place and religious buildings (Kostof, 1993). The royal courts or maidan, locally known as medan, located in front of the sultan’s palace were in fact the hub of the Malay society. This is due to royal places were the most important and dominant landscape elements of traditional settlements, being the largest residential unit and the focal centre. At the royal court, the scribe who was in service of the king would write little of the actual events (Kostof, 1992). The most common one was usually wide, turfed and surrounded by huge shady trees. The indigenous population considered this space as a central point and described the larger account as an open space of the field, locally known as padang (Muhammad Salleh, et.al, 1992; Home, 1997). The palace normally had two large gardens located at the sides of the building. The front of the palace was open space, with a line of palm planted along the fence. A group of bamboo with slits cut in it, was planted at the main entrance gate of the palace. During this period, symbolism played an important role in the choice of plants for such garden. The form of the Malay palace grounds reflected cultural, environmental and religious needs (Jamil, 2002). Padang Maziah in Kuala Trengganu, Padang Kalumpang in Kota Bharu and Padang Pekan in Pahang were among the public spaces with these characters.

In early Islamic sultanate period, the communal treasury had its pavilion in the turfed square situated between a palace and mosque. The front of mosque compound was normally a large
courtyard entered through one or more gates. Official weights and measures were kept at the mosque, teachers held classes, judges heard cases and the town crier read proclamations. The mosque was commonly placed over the forum (syura) which ceased thereby to exist as an open space. The medan was not politically charged. Small medan were nothing more than urban vestibules to monumental public buildings and market place. They acted as a distributing node serving the masses moving in and out of the major buildings to and from the neighboring paths, and they accommodated the large monumental structures within the compact bulk of the bulk of the old city (Home, 1997; Kostof, 1993).

Daily public activities including commercial and recreational activities normally took place around the port and nearby commercial centre with market area - medan and the padang. The commercial and trading activities of the market places were conducted in the morning and recreational were held in the evening. At the padang the public came to watch buffalo fights, play sepak raga (a traditional Malay game) and get involve in other informal and formal activities such as sultan’s coronation and birthday celebrations that were purposely organized for the public (Fazamimah, 2007; Wan Zakri, 2008). In such instances, the true civic centre of the town is the padang (Kostof, 1993). Whilst the true collectivity held at the courtyard or medan was in the assembled crowds of the Friday noon prayer in the main mosque.

Well defined sense of public spaces of the early traditional Islamic cities in Malaysia was discovered in at least two cities, Kuala Trengganu and Kota Bharu. In the context of Kuala Trengganu traditional town, the sultan had considered the palace, mosque, marketplace and the other public buildings as his centre of administration. The Istana Maziah, located behind Bukit Puteri was built to replace Istana Mansur Shah and Istana Hijau. The palace had easy access to the mosque, market and residential areas. The Padang Rakyat or public open space which was located near the palace was used for royal ceremonies such as royal weddings and the installation of sultan, public gatherings, festivities and other occasion (Fazamimah, 2007). Meanwhile, in Kota Bharu, the padang was located opposite to Istana Balai Besar and a mosque (Figure 1). Similarly, it was used by the sultan and community for religious, royal and societal activities. The traditional past time activities such as bull fighting, wau (kite flying) and gasing (top spinning) were popular with the local Malays as their leisure pursuits (Fazamimah, 2007).

Figure 1: Padang Kalumpang or Padang Merdeka in front of Istana Balai Besar Kota Bharu is the representative of the successful public places in the late 19th century.
It is this space that gave the Islamic traditional cities their special character. In the past, the planning and design of buildings and public realm were subject to discussion and consultation (syura) among the high ranking decision makers and the public as how to fulfill everyone’s needs. The same Islamic predilection carried on many other cities like Alor Setar and Pekan where several open spaces did serve in lieu of the conventional administrative centre, and the market and the mosque. However, gradual changes in social, political and economic environments influenced the structure of the built environment and the form and function of the cityscape of the traditional period. These changes emerged during the rise of colonization, evidenced by the gradual development and abandonment of structures especially the palaces that become the hub of Islamic administration. The arrival of British town planning concept rendered many of traditional design criteria obsolete too.

**COLONIAL PUBLIC SPACES**

For over two centuries from the late eighteen century until Malaysia proclaimed its independence, British planted new settler colonies in Malay land in accordance with a centrally devised scheme. Over this period a standard model of colonial town planning gradually emerged. The Green Belt or the physical separation of town and country was found as a source of British planning concepts. Public squares and plots that reserved for public purposes were among two major components of the British model of colonial town planning. However, there was no model book of physical planning standards as the differing sizes of streets, squares and plots in the various colonies show. Both components had greatly contribute to the health and pleasure of the inhabitants; it rendered the surrounding properties beautiful and give a magnificent appearance to a town (Home, 1997). These simple spaces became the primary settings for public life, focused on daily commerce in the cities. Main colonial administrative district was complemented by a single common green normally encircled by streets and institutional buildings. It was known as esplanade or locally called as *padang*, a traditional and emerging public place type.

In the nineteenth century, influenced by British developments, many cities imported the parks or botanical gardens both to celebrate the growing wealth and leisure of the British residents and the upper classes populace. Many public parks and botanical gardens were established within this period (Ismawi, 1993). These gardens were generally well maintained with manicured lawns, providing a surreal look amidst the surrounding dense tropical jungle. Two examples of botanical gardens are Kebun Bungah in Penang and The Lake Garden in Taiping (Figure 2). Apart from these, the British introduced the hill station as the third element in the urban public space system of the colonial. As the squares, gardens and parks were cultural response to the indigenous city, the hill station was a social response to the colonial settlement on the ‘plain’. To the colonialist the significance of the hill station was that it functioned not simply as a ‘resort’ but also provided the feeling of being at home (King, 1976).

Soon after the creation of the square, garden and hill station, 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 Sport Club, Ipoh Club and Melaka Club (Gullick, 2000). Cricket tournament, tennis and race horse meeting was like a big family party at that time (1880-1957). The native stood at the edge of the racing ground while Malay royalty and head of the Chinese 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. The first course introduced by the British was 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 ravines and a Chinese graveyard as obstacles. There used to be a successful club and golf matches were held (Gullick, 2000).

Figure 2: Taiping Lake Garden and Kebun Bungah in Penang rendered the surrounding properties beautiful and give a magnificent appearance to a settlement.

Within a century of town development, the square or padang might then be occupied by market buildings and was sometimes dominated by the house of the proprietor. This was the case in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Ipoh. The use of the square in colonial town settlement reflects the influence of London, and indeed the square has been called ‘London’s principal contribution to town planning’. The justification for this square was mainly sanitary, with good ventilation then being regarded as the key to good health (Home, 1997). In the early days, the squares were usually reserved for private use as promenades and gardens, but in the more egalitarian colonies they fulfilled a multitude of public purposes (Home, 1997). In 1930’s Queen Elizabeth was entertained at a ball in a specially erected pavilion near Ipoh Padang. The militia drilled there in times of trouble. This list of activities and functions did not exhaust the possibilities of the public square. It could be for parade to impress the local population with the coercive power of the colonial rulers. With the rise of the organized sports in the nineteenth century, it could accommodate equestrian activities and games of cricket (Home, 1997). It is also surrounded by monuments represented the pinnacle of British colonial, their civic pride and the commemoration of end of World War I (Lim and Wong, 2000). In the latter period, besides being a multi purpose ground for the British, the padang had played a greater role in attracting the citizens to participate in struggling for the country’s freedom (Zakiah, 1996). Later, after Malaysia gained its independence, arrived the modern movement with its emphasis on recreational setting for the population of newly developed residential area (Jamil, 2002).

THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACES

In the late 1960’s many towns witnessed socio economic changes which impacted the urban structure. Urbanization in many cities of Malaysia resulted not only in the conversion of built form but the loss of urban character and open spaces for recreation and healthy living ground. Padang and medan began to deteriorate lead by a loss of traditional cityscape. The indigenous physical appearance of the traditional and colonial cities started to decay mainly to accommodate commercial buildings and road widening projects. For most of the public spaces, padang seems to be most affected. The development had marked the beginning of their decline and elimination of
their physical and social functions. Padang Maziah in Kuala Trengganu, Padang Kalumpang in Kota Bharu and Dataran Pahlawan in Melaka are examples of the historical public spaces that had been succumbed for vehicles parking area and commercial development.

The story of the public space is yet far from over although a number have been radically altered to inject them with vitality more attuned to modern sensibilities. The old marketplace and traditional and colonial public space like part of Padang Kalumpang in Kota Bharu, Botanical Garden in Penang and the Lake Garden in Kuala Lumpur continue to be used beside its provision as an avenue for the community’s integration. At the same time, an impressive array of new public spaces has seen the light of day in many cities. One of the most ambitious programs was undertaken by the Malaysian government in 1996 where The National Landscape Department was set up. The department was entrusted with the responsibilities of landscaping and greening the whole country (National Landscape Department, 2005). New squares and parks were seen as an opportunity to develop new places, revitalize shabbier districts, as well as to upgrade the traditional and colonial public spaces. Series of public spaces in Putrajaya are striking in their compromising modernity with hard surfaces and steely constructivist open spaces like Boulevard of Putrajaya and Dataran Putra (Figure 3). However, the success of these spaces are far to be measured and compared to the old traditional public spaces which are physically and culturally different.

![Figure 3: Dataran Putra and The Pavillion](image)

Most radically, perhaps another recent peculiar ritual of social interaction have eased into a set of privatized public spaces including the atrium, theme parks, shopping malls and those ‘festival marketplace’ made popular in many Malaysian cities. These changes emerged with the tourism and economic plan introduced in the late 1980’s (Goh et al, 1990; A. Ghafar, 1998). As a result, a new conception of public space was initiated. Today, besides having the largest theme park, Malaysia has malls by the dozen of international standards, commodities and sizes. But to entice a public for who retail entertainment and socializing is just one of a host possible leisure activities, even small operators have followed suit (Kostof, 1993).

**PADANG AS A PUBLIC SPACE OF MALAYSIAN CITIES**

The following are description of padang in two historic cities in Malaysia, each outlines its development, physical characteristics, roles and social functions through out the history. The
existing condition and nature and scale of changes of each *padang* are described in the last section of each site selected.

**The Esplanade or Padang Kota Lama, Georgetown, Penang**

The Esplanade, known as Padang Kota Lama, is an important venue for the most Penang’s important events (Figure 4). It was called as Esplanade in 1880 (Moore, 2004). It is the first area developed by the British together with Fort Cornwallis in 1786 (Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, 2005; Gin, 2002). The Esplanade can be regarded as growth centre from which the town developed and expanded. The area is bounded by the four major roads, the Esplanade Road, the Fort Road, the Duke Street, the Light Street, and two large buildings, the Green Hall and King Edward place.

The Esplanade was the site of military encampments and quarters of the Indian sepoys and British officers of the garrison and also the house of the Superintendent (Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, 2005; Gin, 2002). Following the Napoleon Wars, the threats to security of the harbour was lessened and the Esplanade was no longer used as military drills and it increasingly functioned as a public recreational ground (Gin, 2002). It acquired its present role as a recreational ground in the 1880’s after the Town Hall was built and the Esplanade was created (Moore, 2004). It also became meeting places for the purposes of conducting business and trade which were the mainstay of a colonial port. In order to facilitate communications, the esplanade is surrounded with streets and roads linking the various section of the town. During Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays nights, the esplanade was thronged with rickshaws and carriages due to the Filipino band night’s performances (Wright, 1989).

![Figure 4: The Padang or the Esplanade, an open ground used originally for military exercise, and at the other end the City Hall of Georgetown, Penang (193).](image)

Monuments, statues and buildings like pavilions, institutional, administrative and sports club once stood on and next to the Esplanade. A row of imposing buildings was constructed towards the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century that subsequently became the city hall. The city hall, reconstituted in 1857, was the first purpose-built building for the Penang Municipal Council. The town band performs from the Municipal bandstand. The Penang Municipal Council is the first such authority in Malaysia (Wright, 1989; Gin, 2002). Across the Esplanade and fronting the sea is a promenade walkway. On this walkway stands the Cenotaph, a monument in honour of those who fell in the European war (Gin, 2002).
**Padang Bandar Hilir, Melaka**

Padang Bandar Hilir was located on the eastern side of the Melaka Club, built in 1912 (Hoyt, 1993) while according to Sandhu and Wheatly (1983), in their extensive research on Melaka, the *padang* was built in 1937 and completed in 1939 (Figure 5). It was built after a quiet, unspectacular and moderately prosperous period. The *padang* was actually situated on reclaimed land of the Melaka Straits. When approaching the Bandar Hilir in the olden days, one often impressed by the quaint and picturesque appearance of the *padang*, the St Paul Hill and sets of historical buildings. Near to this *padang* are the old Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank building, the Anglican Church, the police training centre and Melaka Sport Club. Within the bounds of the padang there were also Chinese dwellings of which were of bricks with *attap* roof (Sandhu and Wheatly, 1983). The *padang* then was used for military drills and it increasingly functioned as a public recreational ground after the relocation of the police barrack in. This *padang* become the setting for ceremonies and rituals that legitimized British rule. On its green turf English games like tennis, cricket and football were encouraged as way of draining off energies that might otherwise have found less desirable outlets.

The Padang Pahlawan is indeed a historic site and seems to be the most significant among any others. It was the setting for the first proclamation for the future independence of Malaya in 1956 (Hoyt, 1993; Zalina and Jumaatun, 2001; Sager, 2004). Melaka was the first stop in Tunku Abdul Rahman nationwide tour in 1956 in order garnering people’s support in the quest for the country’s independence. It was near to this *padang*, at Meng Seng Hall that Tunku Abdul Rahman collected money and jewellery from the people of Melaka to pay for the Merdeka (independence) delegation’s trip to London. The significance of choosing Melaka and Padang Pahlawan was that it was the first state to be colonized in 1511 by the Potuguese (Sager, 2004). In a symbolic change not long after that, the Melaka Club has changed into Declaration of Memorial Independent.

There was excavation works conducted by the Museum and Antiquity Department on this *padang* in the 2001 and ‘Save the padang’ campaign in upholding the *padang* as one of the most important archeological and historical site in Melaka. Unfortunately the urban authority had not listened to the people’s cries at that time. The imperative historic *padang*, was then has been transformed radically into another commercial centre and car parks (Figure 6). Another notorious development which include entertainment centres, cineplexes, exhibitions space, International Club and area for cultural and sports events. The International Club equipped with a swimming pool, a gymnasium, a Jacuzzi, a sauna, an internet café, a cricket ground and a karaoke lounge. It is important to note that during the dredging operation, quite a large collection of archeological remain were unearthed from the *padang*. 
Whilst the old town centre with the open space started to lose its vitality, the distinct visual physical characteristic of the Melaka city was also being threatened as the traditional vernacular urban form being replaced by modern buildings. Although it was still accessible, albeit with more difficulty, activities that normally took place on it felt discouraged and soccer that was played by nearby residents was prohibited. In other words, the beautification project had altered people’s psychological approach toward the open space.

DISCUSSIONS

Sequence of the traditional, colonial and contemporary public spaces like padang, medan, parks and hill station were places with culturally constituted behavioral environment. They functioned as integral part of the social world and urban system of the community. Their existences also revealed the presence of healthy living style and scenic ambience of the past. As a social place they admirably demonstrate the mutual interaction between man’s behavior and his culturally modified built environment. They are civic places composed of open lawn, greenery and historical buildings affording diverse social, sports and cultural activities and events. In short, they enliven the city
And, the residents are attached to them as their place to play, to meet and to enjoy. They are part of the urban fabric and identity.

In many Malaysian cities, *padang* are being continuously replaced by new and incompatible developments such as large shopping complexes and parking spaces. This process is not always in harmony with needs of the urban residents and their cultural attributes. This loss has diverse and often irreplaceable effects on society yet little attention is being paid to the social and cultural loss.

The two *padang* studied carry distinctive identity as they share similar social and morphological features that are mixture of past European and local influences. The British colonial influence was manifested in various architectural styles each of which shaped and built by the circumstances of being located within an administrative district. Recreation, cultural and social events which are the predominant activities held in each *padang* in the city composed by multi ethnic residents. Each resembles to square or the plaza in Europe and has become one of the important elements of city design in Malaysia. It was possibly become the most important way in designing a good setting for public and commercial buildings in cities (Moughtin, 2003). It can be visually, socially, psychologically and physically accessible. It is believed that its placement and surrounding areas also have influenced people’s behavioral responses. The residents see the padang as civic and ceremonial ground, a square, a district, a landmark, a node and a central field. Even though many physical and social attributes of the Esplanade in Penang still survive, however, the new building layout has changed activity patterns of both the residents and visitors to the Padang Pahlawan in Melaka. Furthermore, various alterations and changes on the *padang* which directed to the changes in the layout and physical features of the *padang*. From a recreational ground and place for public contemplation, the *padang* have been transformed into privatized premises.

In summary, *padang* and *medan* are both traditional and emerging public spaces existed ever since before the colonialisation period. Therefore, these public spaces are fundamental to Malaysian society where the history of nation sovereignty is transmitted. Their importance is equal to square or plaza in European and South American countries. In accordance to a Colombian historian, Mendoza (Paramo, 2004) referred the Colombian plaza to their nation which becomes the indication of the people’s belief and desires. According to Mendoza, one can make the tradition of race disappear by destroying the plaza with other kind of development. Similar case goes for our historical public spaces where their existences are synonymous to the nation culture and city’s image. Thus this study suggests that character of a place is a continuous field, the disturbance of one element in some way affecting all others. Incompatible development and design within historical area in a city may disrupt the whole urban fabric. The changes and the loss of memorable public spaces which marked a city character has directed to the weakening of place identity and at the same time affected the people’s life. This scenario should not be prolonged as both scenarios will result to the loss of place meaning. In response to these concerns the need for preserving a stable framework of familiar and valued places within the historical city should become important concerns in town planning and urban design practices.

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