OPEN SPACE DEVELOPMENT IN KUALA LUMPUR CITY: 
The Early Settlements and The Current Scenario

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the typologies of public open space in Kuala Lumpur based on two development stages: colonial and traditional, and contemporary. A review was carried out to identify the early establishment and development of public open spaces and the roles played throughout time. For this purpose, document analysis and site observation were performed on prominent public open spaces in Kuala Lumpur. The analysis indicated that roles and functions 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 numerous public open spaces have been modified by certain levels of change, however only few changes resulted to 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 Kuala Lumpur an appealing city that cater the needs of it dwellers. This study also implies that the public open spaces and it surrounding areas convey sense of place lead to the image formation of Kuala Lumpur as Malaysian capital city.

INTRODUCTION

Public open spaces (POS) in cities hold the historical secrets of the social and cultural development. Through time, the POS have evolved to cater for the changing social and cultural patterns in Kuala Lumpur. The changes are affected by the social, political, cultural and population patterns in Kuala Lumpur since the establishment of the town at the confluence of two rivers. This paper begins by outlying the historical overview of the development of Kuala Lumpur from information gathered through literature reviews. In the early days, POS has developed to cater for the social and cultural needs of the people and have assumed different roles through time. This paper discusses the early formation and development of series of open spaces available in Kuala Lumpur city.

HISTORY OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN KUALA LUMPUR

Kuala Lumpur began as a little town and started to take shape around 1875. Starting from this period, it grew in both physical size and population. Kuala Lumpur shifted from a swampy and jungle area to dominant township trading, governance and services. Between the trading and physical development, an open space development began to take shape. Open spaces development of Kuala Lumpur started in the late 1880's where the British residents started to look at Kuala Lumpur as more than just a place to work but also a place that functions to hold recreational and ceremonial activities (Reference?). Accordingly, development slowly focused on providing the needed infrastructure to cater for the colonial and traders' needs besides establishing its importance as centre of culture. A continuous network of open spaces was envisaged by the planning department and British resident's office that lead to the image making and the good life of the public.
THE EARLY PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN KUALA LUMPUR

The early public spaces in Kuala Lumpur have evolved due to the needs as discussed earlier in this paper. The public open spaces are identified through interpretations from various literatures and have been categorized into several typologies. These typologies are according to the physical and function of the public open spaces (Noor Hanita, 2005). The earliest open spaces as identified from the review are square, streets, fields (padang), gardens, sports ground and hills.

The Square

It has been noted that Yap Ah Loy, a Chinese kapitan was the founder of Kuala Lumpur. The Kapitan and Chinese miners was the earliest residence at the area of the confluence of the Gombak and Klang Rivers that gave the place the name Kuala Lumpur or the muddy confluence. In the 1870’s the small villages grew and took shape around a market square that was used by Yap Ah Loy and his clans as a public forum. In the market square there were stalls for which petty traders that paid rent to Yap Ah Loy. 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. Figure 1 shows the location of the market square and Figure 2 illustrates its condition circa 1890s.

![Figure 1: Map showing the location of the old market square](Source: The National Archive of Malaysia)

![Figure 2: The Forum Area of Yap ah Loy recorded in the 1890’s](Source: The National Archive of Malaysia)

The square was simply surrounded by trade settlement to serve the outlying mines. The were two main quarters composed of Malay and Chinese quarters separated by a rough track known as Java Street (now Jalan Tun Perak). In the Malay village there was a mosque known as Masjid Jamek with an open space deployed as burial ground on the triangle of land that lay between the Gombak and Klang Rivers. By the 1890s a new wet market had been built on a different site alongside Rodger Street (now Jalan Hang Kasturi). When Yap Ah Loy died in 1885, his residence was removed and the old Market Square was cleared to make it into an open space (Gullick, 1994). Today, the square no longer existed, however, the area remains busy as it become the nodes for residents to congregate and conduct business. This space known later as Old Market Square, is now Lebuh Pasar Besar and sits next to Jalan Hang Kasturi (refer Figure 3 and 4). The square started as a forum and changed its function to a market square, and today function as a node eventhough the POS has been reduced into a different form; a street.
The old market square or better known as Central Market nowadays become a popular haunt for local as well as tourists to find Malaysian hand crafts and art works.

Figure 3: The old market square or better known as Central Market nowadays become a popular haunt for local as well as tourists to find Malaysian hand crafts and art works.

Figure 4: Open space in front of the old market which had been transformed into parking area.

The Streets

Streets can be traced to the well-defined path laid in the early years of 1880’s when tin was discovered in Kuala Lumpur town. The streets were narrow and constructed merely in an organic or radial in layout. The streets which are parallel to the Gombak River were constructed without a proper scheme 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). By the end of 19th century, the population in Kuala Lumpur rose by a third in one year and in 1875, the streets in the city centre seemed wide and well arranged. However in truth they were still narrow lanes that in some instance range from 12 to 16 feet wide, wide enough for a bullock cart that was used to move goods, rubbish, drinking water and people. Among the early streets laid in the city centre were Jalan Ampang, Jalan Pudu and Jalan Petaling (Figure 3 and 4). These streets became the tracks which ran to the mining area located at the tributary of Gombak and Klang River.

Weld during his visit to Kuala Lumpur in 1886, noted in his official report that the streets at that time were surrounded by picturesque houses and shops that were brightly painted and ornamented with gilding (Gullick, 1955). Under growing pressure of population, most of single storey shop were being replaced by what came to be known as ‘shophouses’, typically of two but sometimes (after 1900) of three storey. Most shophouses were standing closely side by side along the Gombak and Klang Rivers. To make best use of limited urban space, the individual
plots had a narrow street frontage but with greater depth and at the front of the building was a set back allocated for pedestrian walkway known as kaki lima for its minimum width was 5 feet. However, the pedestrian did not usually have the opportunity to use the area as the shopkeeper's goods, such as sacks of rice and other retail stuffs tended to overflow into this space. At the same time, at the back boundary of shophouses were space of a lane, parallel with the street front which was used by bullock carts collecting nightsoil and on occasion, by the fire brigade.

Kuala Lumpur was proclaimed as the administrative centre for Malaya in the late 1890's. By that time economy were much stable for the improvement of the general appearance of the town. Vacant land at street junctions was planted with shrubs and flowering trees edged at the outer streets of Kuala Lumpur. High Street was the most popular street as it development took place around the important area. The street was reported to be the longest and most handsome street in Kuala Lumpur. In 1890, travelers who wish to continue their journey to Klang could follow this street and about the same time, a small police station was built near the southern end of the street. High Street which is known now as Jalan Bandar had formed an oasis for Kuala Lumpur which has spread in every direction including Petaling Street and Pudu Road. In that period, festive streets started its operation especially in a street like Jalan Petaling which was conquered by one ethnic. The local festivals also yielded some striking contrasts, for example during Chinese New Year, Jalan Petaling were often lined by stalls, carriages and gharries, accompanying by Chinese band playing in the first floor of every shophouses (Gullick, 2000).

The streets have evolved from merely functioning as a connector for the means of transportation to a place that caters for activities due to the needs of the residents of the city. It basically catered for businesses and extended to housing functions for the socio-cultural activities. Traffic improvements were carried out in most of the important streets in Kuala Lumpur after the independence in 1957. The cultural activities of the Chinese continued and expanded along these main streets. Now Jalan Petaling is known as Chinatown and Figure 7 and 8 illustrate daily activities held there.

The Field (Padang)

Among the earliest open spaces introduced by the British in Malaya was the field or padang, an open space which was closely turfed and rectangular in shape. Padang Merdeka or formerly known as the Padang Club lies in the heart of an old government administration district, and the Gombak River and sited opposite to hillock area of Bukit Aman the National Police Department
headquarters. It is such a unique place and well preserved since its creation by the British way back in the 1884. There were various ceremonies and parades 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 as organizing committees for collecting subscriptions and arranging processions, illuminations, firework's, 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 and called 'the padang' or the police parade ground or the Padang Kelab Selangor . The padang was also used as a marking point to indicate the distance from any places in Malaysia to Kuala Lumpur city centre (Amree, 2007).

Morphological study on the development of this padang indicate that the early components include the Chinese and Malay settlement 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) (Nor Zalina, 2008). 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; Ramsayer, 1991; 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 shop houses, markets, commercial buildings and place of worship erected (Wan Hashimah and Shuhana, 2005). Figure 9 shows the layout of the field and the surrounding buildings in the year 1937 and Figure 10 illustrates the current condition of the padang.

Figure 9: Aerial view showing the Selangor Club (foreground), the Padang, the Secretariat and other government buildings (centre), Jamek Mosque (centre left), and the Central Market (centre) with Chinatown behind, circa 1937 (Source: The National Archive of Malaysia ).
Figure 10: Dataran Merdeka becomes a gem amidst the hustle and bustle of city activities. It provides city dwellers and visitors alike with a sense of enclosure.

Garden

The Kuala Lumpur Lake Garden was initiated in 1888 based on the idea of A.R. Venning, the Chairman of the Sanitary Board of Kuala Lumpur, to create a place for healthy activity, recreation and relaxation for the public. With a modest allocation approved by the governor from public funds, the area was rehabilitated and planted with ornamental palms and shrubs. The scheme also had the support of Cheow Ah Yeok, a wealthy benefactor who was an enthusiastic gardener and contributed a hundred chempaka (*Michelia* spp.) and orange trees (*Citrus* spp.) to the first year’s planting (Gullick, 2000; Sretheeran et al. viewed on 2/8/09). The garden which is now known as Tasik Perdana was the finest amenity bequeathed by the pioneers to the modern residents, the European and the local merchants and local rulers with a more Westernized dignitary. Venning developed almost 200 acres of the forest into a park (Figure 11) with a chain of small lakes named as Sydney Lake (Gullick, 2000) a lake that was named after the resident’s wife (Figure 12). 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). The Lake Garden then reserved as a public park that offers locals and visitors a wide range of facilities such as playgrounds, jogging tracks, exercise stations and rowing boats while other attractions within the park include a bird park, a butterfly park, and flower gardens (Figure 13 and 14).

Figure 11: View looking toward the bridge and lake side of the Lake Garden, circa 1890's. (Source: Moore, 2006).

Figure 12: View of lake which named after the British residents’ name, circa 1890's (Source: Moore, 2006).
Sports ground

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 golf and race course and followed by the establishment of the sport and recreational club such as Selangor Turf Club and spread with other clubs like Golf Club and Hunt Club (Gullick, 2000). As a result of Chinese and British collaboration on the establishment of race course, a new brick grandstand was built to seat 250 persons at time in 1892 (Gullick, 1955). According to Gullick (1994) 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 reached Kuala Lumpur at about the same time as horse racing, namely around 1890 (Gullick, 1955). However 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 on the Petaling Hill, the present site of Victoria Institution (Figure 15). 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 numbers of successful club and golf matches were held (Gullick, 2000).

The Hill

In Kuala Lumpur, 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 Merdeka and next to the Lake Garden 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 (Figure 17). Bluff Road ran along this ridge. On flatlands, at the west part of the padang, police barrack were constructed where the Chartered Bank or presently changed into a Museum building stands. 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). Bluff Hill and Weld Hill were of the essential hills that evidence the formation of the early Kuala Lumpur. Indeed, it serves a bigger role toward the ecological balance of the city besides as a green backdrop in accentuating the city centre. 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 area. 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 besides as a green backdrop in accentuating the padang as a ground for important national events and parades (Figure 18).

Figure 17: View police head quarters on Bluff Hill taken from across the Klang River (Source: The National Archive of Malaysia)

Figure 18: View of Bluff Hill or Bukit Aman with tall building of Police Head Quarters located on its top.
The literature reviews have discussed the POS as a historical subject. Nevertheless the contemporary POS may have been preserved or developed to meet the changing needs of the community. This study attempts to analyze the function of the POS in history and in the current scenario. Table 1 describes the comparative analysis for the functions of POS.

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<tr>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Functions in history</th>
<th>Contemporary function</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Square</td>
<td>Place for public forum&lt;br&gt;Trading area&lt;br&gt;Meeting place among Chinese clan</td>
<td>Nodes for public&lt;br&gt;Trading area&lt;br&gt;Parking spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Track which ran to mining area/ transportation route&lt;br&gt;Festivities area&lt;br&gt;Trading area</td>
<td>Transportation route&lt;br&gt;Festivities area&lt;br&gt;Trading area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Padang</td>
<td>Place for celebrations and ceremonies&lt;br&gt;Recreational ground among the elite groups&lt;br&gt;Military training ground&lt;br&gt;Part of administrative district</td>
<td>Place for special celebrations and ceremonies&lt;br&gt;Recreational ground during special occasion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garden</td>
<td>Recreational ground among the Chinese traders and British officers&lt;br&gt;British settlement and administrative area&lt;br&gt;Botanical garden&lt;br&gt;Meeting ground i.e formal and informal ceremonies</td>
<td>Place for celebrations and ceremonies&lt;br&gt;Public recreational ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports ground</td>
<td>Sporting and recreational ground&lt;br&gt;Social place among Chinese merchant and British</td>
<td>Public recreational ground&lt;br&gt;Parking spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillock area</td>
<td>Defensive ground&lt;br&gt;Administrative centre&lt;br&gt;British resident’s house&lt;br&gt;British servant quarters and bureaucrats&lt;br&gt;Forest reserve</td>
<td>Recreational ground&lt;br&gt;High cost settlement area&lt;br&gt;Building development</td>
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Series of open spaces presented here were indeed consistently the strongest element which of the olden days of Kuala Lumpur. They were planned, designed and managed for multiple purposes including ecological, defense, recreational, aesthetic or other purposes compatible with the planning concept of that period. Series of open spaces of the early Kuala Lumpur can be classified as: square, streets, garden, recreational ground and hillock area. From the analysis it can be concluded that these open spaces and it surrounding area may convey various architectural and social categories of meanings, all were designed as public commons that are intended for publically used. These groups of open spaces can be considered as an outdoor places enclosed by a diverse town fabrics and buildings which provide a sense of place.

CONCLUSION
In the years following British colonialisation, Independence and now had witnessed Kuala Lumpur grew from a city of administration and mining activities into retailing, finance and services. Those developments beside brought changes to economic sector, at the same time changed the solid and void of the urban grain, in the context of this study the typology and function of open spaces.
Taken as a whole, this study has showed multiplicity of aspects to be taken into account when referring to the open space development in Kuala Lumpur. Far from being matter of typology of open spaces alone, the roles and functions stems from the changing social, economic and cultural components. Along this research the overview on the development of POS revealed that through time there have been major changes to the functions and utilization of the areas. POS that mainly function to cater for the social and cultural needs shifted the focus to recreational functions. The spaces that started with influence of business and political factors have evolved to cater for recreational purposes. Nevertheless it can be deduced that the present POS in Kuala Lumpur are still maintained as a manifestation of social and cultural needs of the society even though the focus are mainly recreational and congregational spaces for events and celebrations. Taken together with the open space typologies and functions provided, it is hoped that they can be used as helpful information and guidelines to a better and sustainable urban living which maintaining the quality of life of city’s residents become the central focus in future planning and development.

REFERENCES


