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Place Meaning of the Historic Square as Tourism Attraction and Community Leisure Space

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Abstract

Squares serve as an integral civic space in cities where historic events and socializing activities take place. They are an attraction for locals and tourists alike. However, some historic squares go through physical transformations to meet the demands of urban growth. This paper compares the place meaning that locals and tourists ascribe to Dataran Pahlawan, a historic urban square in Melaka that was redeveloped. Based on the results that reveal the shift in meanings among these different visitors, this paper recommends that efforts need to be taken to instil conservation awareness on the values of historic squares to cities to accommodate the needs of locals and tourists.

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Keywords: Place meaning; square; urban heritage; tourism

1. Introduction

Historic squares in cities are valuable pieces of urban heritage. From the earliest civilizations, squares function as a public space for people to gather and engage in city events. As an external extension of the interior city spaces, squares contribute to the quality of life for people as a civic ground that offers a different setting to that of parks,

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buildings and community halls. The robust outdoor quality of squares enables people to utilize them for momentous occasions, such as historical events, public expressions and celebrations. As layers of these activities accumulate over the years, squares gain more meanings that make them a significant place with strong social and cultural values rather than merely an open space. Historic squares consequently become an urban heritage for locals and a tourism attraction for visitors to revisit a site that was once a place where a historic event had occurred. In spite of this, urban growth is inevitable, and in time, different parts of the city need to go through revitalization. The aim of this study is to examine the place meaning that locals and tourists ascribe towards DataranPahlawan, a historic square in Melaka, Malaysia, that has been redeveloped. The objective of this paper is, first, to identify the typology of users that visit the square and the activities that they do. Secondly, this paper compares the place meanings of the square as ascribed by locals and tourists. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the findings towards the conservation of historic square as an important public space and urban heritage.

2. Literature review

Historically, town squares have served as a place for the mass to gather and as an open space for the city. They are a type of civic places that allow people to socialize and interact with each other in the public (Carmona, Heath, Oc, & Tiesdell, 2003; Childs, 2004; Cooper-Marcus, C. & Francis, 1998; Lynch, 1981; Tibbalds, 1992). Squares with historical and cultural significance often become tourist landmarks in urban tourism, such as the Tiananmen Square in Beijing, the Jemaa el-Fna in Marrakesh, the Trafalgar Square in London, the Nagsh-e-Jahan in Isfahan and others. In Malaysia, DataranMerdeka is one of the prominent historic squares that have similarly become an urban tourism landmark in Kuala Lumpur. In the Islamic city, the *maidan* (square) can be found to be located in the middle of residential, commercial and mosque areas (Kostof, 1992). Early development of Greek cities have also revealed evidence of town squares that functioned as an aesthetic social space for people to interact (Carmona et al., 2003).

Studies on urban squares within the last 10 years acknowledge the multifunctional role of squares as an urban public space. Balsas (2007) found that squares function as a vital node in the context of the city. The 'organic mix of activities' visible at urban squares make them an essential public space that symbolize the local and national culture of a place. In order for squares to be a successful public space, they must be liveable and sociable, and able to provide a setting that can offer a variety of experience, sensory and activities for people (Balsas, 2007; Montgomery, 1998; Whyte, 1980). The roles of squares that have evolved as part of historical events make them 'hearts' of cities, where recreational activities and celebrations often took place (Assari, Mahesh, & Assari, 2012; Harun & Said, 2008). For example, the Nagsh-e-Jahan square in Isfahan, a UNESCO's World Heritage Site, is significant because it presents traces of the social and cultural life in Persia in the Safavid era (UNESCO, 2014). The conservation of the square contributes to the revitalization and connections between the old city quarter with the new city quarter (Assari et al., 2012; Vadiati & Kashkooli, 2011). Other studies highlighted the social roles of squares as a venue for informal activities such as for bazaars or temporary markets. The Jemaa el-Fna Square is a prominent example of a square that functions as a marketplace that on its daily basis showcase the rich local culture of Marrakesh (UNESCO, 2012). In the Asian context, squares also function as a temporary market space and has the potential to become a venue for informal events to operate (Rukayah & Bharoto, 2012; Zakariya & Harun, 2013). Rukayah and Bharoto(2012) found that in Indonesia, market activities occurred in urban open spaces as early as the end of the 16th century. The open space, called *alun-alun*, is strategic because it offered great visibility to merchants. Contextual adjacencies also played an important factor in the activities of the square, where the existence of government buildings, mosques and other commercial and institutional buildings reinforce the square's functions. The strategic location of urban squares also expands their roles as nodes for the city, where they have potentials to serve as transportation hubs considering that squares are often surrounding by major axes of main streets (Khalifa & Fayoumi, 2012).

While numerous literatures recognize the functions of squares to cities, however, several historic squares are currently susceptible to pressure from new developments and changes in urban lifestyles. The lack of appreciation and awareness that people have towards the value of historic squares pose a challenge to the efforts of conservation (Assari et al., 2012). As cities go through the process of urban expansions and revitalization, 'empty' lands are often seen as opportunities where new buildings can be built. Shin (2010)found that this type 'property-led urban development' causes the destruction of historic sites and stress on urban conservation and heritage tourism. As a

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