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Place rootedness suggesting the loss and survival of historical public spaces

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Abstract

Place meaning was created by people throughout their gradual experience of the place. Some will have deep and meaningful while some are pale and meaningless. Place meaning has an intertwined relationship with place attachment, where both involve diverse and distinct physical properties and social attributes. This study aims to decode place rootedness as a salient dimension in the theory of place attachment. It seeks to search for a meaning of historical public space in two historical cities in Malaysia. Two historical public spaces with different fate and state are chosen as case study area. Seventy five residents were interviewed on their perceptual responses toward the survival of Padang Kota Lama and the loss of Padang Pahlawan. Results show that both groups discuss the sense of rootedness toward the public space in a very positive term. They evaluate its distinct characteristics in term of long engagement, historical events, and place for social interaction and important moment they had during childhood days. A persistent and deeply-felt concern expressed by all participants of Padang Pahlawan is their regret that it could not be enjoyed and preserved as it should be. The finding from the survey also reveals that sense of rootedness is highly conceded with the sense of pride and fear of losing the historical public space which is developed through its high historical values and uniqueness. The study concludes that both public spaces constitute an important aspect of residents' place identity and belongingness, which enable them to simultaneously remain connected to it.

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1. Introduction

Broad changes and ultimate effect of mass development on urban form taken place in the 1960s and 1970s have extended greater respect to the research on the uniqueness of places, their history and continuity of local pattern and typologies. Awareness about the threat of globalization forces on local identity and regional diversity has been arising too. This kind of awareness has successfully directed to the introduction and formation of policies and charters on preserving historic urban areas and growing studies acknowledging and overcoming the urban change^{1,2,3}. At the same time, the rapid change on urban form and gradual loss of more open spaces in urban area have offered new insights in landscape and urban planning studies^{4,5}. These studies have resulted in a growing public support for preserving open spaces based on scarcity of open spaces in urban area. In expanding upon the preservation efforts and gaining cultural support, stakeholders, planners, and landscape architects awareness and supports are considered necessary.

In recent years, there has been a strong interest revealed in reading and assessing the historical-cultural characteristic of places. The study identifies preservation as fundamental for maintaining and nurturing social identity, both in the local and wider population⁶ witnessing how urban design studies evolve into a dominant platform for making places for people^{7,8,9,10}. This paper sets to discover the significance of multiple dimensions of place rootedness which underlies dimension in place attachment theory. Place rootedness here refers to a very strong and focused bond that in its essence means being completely at home-that is unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular location. This study stresses the need for a more democratic and enriching environment. It contents that all parties involved in urban development should have the humility to learn from the past by respecting the surrounding context and their root. It seeks to understand the significance of historical public place amongst people. Preliminary studies on ten historic public places in Malaysian cities revealed that there were continued changes and demolition occurred which finally succumbed to the loss of its historic characters and special attributes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Local concern on the gradual loss of public space in historic city of Malaysia

The pressure for development and inability to preserve the urban heritage have taken their toll on the sustenance of public spaces of historical cities in Malaysia. In these circumstances, the public spaces in historical part of the city invariably result in changes and demolition of many public spaces in Kuala Lumpur^{11,12}. Even though there was considerable degree of awareness about the role of urban conservation with the growing popularity of 'cultural tourism' planning concept, the overzealous effort to promote urban heritage has been exploited over aspiring sensation for tourist attractions. Local practice has shown that how the handling of the monitoring mandate in accordance with the existing legal protections does not have the desired result in maintaining the public space of historical parts in many Malaysian cities^{13,14}. This can be seen from the list of historic areas in Malaysia that since the Act on Antiquity was enacted in 1976 till this day, only less than ten historical sites have been gazetted so far¹⁵. In such cases, economic priorities have become the main target in development while heritage conservation is generally seen as a privilege rather than necessity¹⁶.

The problem get worse by the failure in appreciating and maintaining the esplanade or locally known as *padang*, which is of historical and cultural significances in many Malaysian cities. Being an open space in the core area of many historical cities has made it a desirable space for tourism, commercial and structural development¹⁷. The *padang* and its surrounding physical properties are fundamental to urban characteristic and local society¹⁸. It is a huge green lawn in the middle of the local city centre which adds to the livability of neighbourhood and communities. It embodies the properties and attributes that make an area attractive as a place to live, work and visit. After the independence in 1957, the *padang* has continually been used as an essentially weekend retreat and recreation for public^{17,18}. However in the late 1990s, with the increasing pressure on scarce land and with the growing popularity of cultural tourism, many cities are taking advantage of this prospect by realizing the uniqueness of historical buildings and capitulating the *padang*. The transformations have witnessed how huge green lawns encircled with huge shady trees became sites of new buildings and parking zones. These have the accumulated effect

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