

Urban Regeneration to Transform Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region

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ABSTRACT

As a result of climate change and globalisation, there is growing concern to regenerate decayed parts of the cities. Urban regeneration includes existing post-industrial areas, abandoned waterfronts, historic conservation and recycle and reuse of older building stock. In Malaysia, urban regeneration in the form of historic conservation, recycle and reuse of old building stock is still at its infancy although efforts have been made by major cities to retain their historical and traditional urban precincts. The Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR) is one of the fastest growing conurbations in Southeast Asia. This paper discusses the notion of urban regeneration and promotes it as a leading tool for transformation of Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR). The research methodology is based on identification of the problem and main objective. The major findings of the research revealed that the promotion and encouragement of urban regeneration of the traditional building stock is a better alternative to fast-track redevelopment. The introduction of urban regeneration programme will also involve stakeholders and the community and as such contribute to reinventing the already diminishing tropical urban environment and creating a unique sense of place and identity.

Keywords: Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region, tropical urban environment, urban regeneration

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INTRODUCTION

Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region

The Greater Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR) is the fastest growing region in Malaysia and in the last decade has witnessed a spate of new residential, institutional and commercial development.

Much of this development has been market driven and guided by economic and political reasons. Such rapid property led development often neglects local conditions, natural settings, local tropical climate and as a result, has a detrimental impact on the surrounding public space. The current statutory local plans focus mainly on controlling development, addressing issues such height, bulk and orientation of buildings rather than promoting a sense of place and identity (Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur 2012, Perbadanan Putrajaya 1995).

The transformation of Kuala Lumpur into a modern city must be understood in the context of the Malaysian government's desire to position its capital as a global city. The first settlement of Kuala Lumpur as a trading post for tin was in 1857 at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers as a tin-mining settlement. In the early stages of the city development, the rivers served as an important transportation route. In the early 20th century, urban areas started to expand away from the rivers' confluence, and their importance as major movement corridors gradually diminished (Abdul Latip, Heath, & Liew, 2009; Isa & Kaur, 2015; Shamsuddin, Latip, & Sulaiman, 2013; Yuen, 2011).

The negative side-effects of fast-track urban redevelopment and their impact on the identity and sense of place of tropical urban regions is a hotly debated topic by scholars and practitioners. The KL city administrative area has a population of 1.7 million and the population of KLMR (with a land mass of 2700 sq.km) is 6.5 million. It includes

10 local authorities with major centres such as Shah Alam (capital of Selangor), Putrajaya (new federal administrative capital), Petaling Jaya, Ampang, Subang Jaya, Kajang, Selayang, Sepang, and Klang. Also, the region is managed by the two state governments, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya are declared federal territories under the jurisdiction of respective local authorities Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur and Perbadanan Putrajaya (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya City Councils) (DBKL, 2012, International Urban Development Association 2015).

Kuala Lumpur emerged as a capital of the newly independent Federation of Malayan States in 1957. The city's population at independence was 316,000. Since the late 1950s, large parts of the traditional urban fabric featuring traditional Chinese mansions, shop-houses, and Malay kampong houses have been demolished to pave the way for new international modernist development. As a result of this aggressive fast-track development, a substantial portion of Kuala Lumpur's history has been erased. The contemporary KLMR is marked by a network of highways, modern buildings, megamalls and building complexes lacking tropical design features, and the traditional Malaysian tropical interaction with landscape can be traced only to a few streets and within the real urban kampongs (urban villages). The two rivers, Gombak and Klang, which were the main geographical features and transport routes of the early Kuala Lumpur settlement,

have been buried under infrastructure facilities and reduced to two concrete drains (King, 2008).

METHODS

The major objective of this paper is to discuss the notion of urban regeneration in its physical, social and economic context and further determine its potential application in reinventing the decayed and redundant parts of the case study area which is the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region. The case study would allow for a better understanding of KLMR's physical, social and economic phenomenon. This paper commences with a summary of a past research projects which include the evaluation of public spaces in the KLMR against a set of performance design criteria. The major findings of past research are the basis of this study. Qualitative research methodology includes conducting extensive literature review of urban regeneration and revitalisation, its basic characteristics and its application around the world and in Malaysia. In addition, a review of current policies and practice of urban regeneration in Malaysia and KLMR is conducted. The study uses secondary data sources, such as planning documents and policies, and information obtained from related academic studies and journals.

Past Research Project: Summary and Major Findings

The urban design research team for this study is based at the Faculty of Architecture

and Design, University Putra Malaysia. The team has conducted research on developing tropical design guidelines for public spaces in the KLMR and appraised existing public spaces. It found the following phases:

- Identification of urban typologies (street typology, public spaces)
- Compilation of performance design criteria (PDC) for tropical urban environment (literature review and planning documents)
- Analysis – Evaluation of selected major street and public spaces and larger building complexes against list of PDC
- Development of design and planning guidelines for public spaces.

Each street, open space, and building complex were assessed against the list of Performance Design Criteria (PDC) for tropical urban environments. The PDC was derived from professional urban planning and design literature and planning documents targeting urban areas at the tropical and subtropical regions.

The analysis of the selected streets, public spaces and new building complexes in the KLMR identified that the streets in the remaining older parts of the city retained some form of identity. The character and market streets such as Petaling Street and Jalan Hang Kasturi reflect local customs and traditions. The market streets are characterised by outdoor trading activities, some of them operating 24/7. The study revealed that external facades of the new building complexes are deprived

of tropical and traditional architectural themes representing conventional universal modernist mixed-use structures that could fit in any mega-city urban environment. An architectural tour of the new building complexes clearly reveals a much stronger emphasis placed on the internal environment. Older buildings such as traditional Chinese Shop-houses performed better against the evaluative criteria than many modern buildings (Kozłowski, Ujang, & Maulan, 2015).

Past researches point to the need to promote urban regeneration of the traditional urban stock as an alternative to fast-track redevelopment. Urban regeneration is identified as a recommended policy for tropical urban and architectural design for the entire KLMR region. Regenerating the old urban fabric will no doubt contribute to retaining a tropical sense of place and identity that has already been lost in many parts of the metropolitan region.

The Terms Urban Regeneration/ Revitalisation

According to the Australian Oxford Dictionary, revitalise means 'to imbue with new life and vitality. Revitalisation is a response to obsolescence or diminished utility which reflects the reduction in the useful life of capital right. Attempts to revitalise decayed parts of the city must address and remedy obsolescence of buildings as well as the entire economic life of the building stock (Carmona, Heath, Taner, & Tiesdell, 2010; Tiesdell, Taner Oc, & Heath, 1996). The authors further

argue that the obsolescence of urban areas is reflected in the mismatch between the services offered by the fabric and current needs. As a result, the major role of revitalisation is to reconcile this mismatch. In revitalising historic precincts, (Tiesdell et al., 1996) assert that the physical fabric may be adapted to contemporary requirements through various modes of renewal which include refurbishment, conservation, or by demolition and redevelopment. Revitalisation can also arise from changes in the occupation with new uses replacing the former. Although a physical revitalisation creates an improved urban environment and physical public realm, a comprehensive economic revitalisation is also required, and users of the buildings are the major financial contributors to the maintenance of the improved physical public realm. The authors also stress the importance of social revitalisation as the vitality of the area is of crucial importance in maintaining a healthy balanced and vibrant urban environment.

As implied above, revitalisation should be considered in its physical, economic and social dimensions. A successful urban environment should have a combination of sound physical, economic and social strategies. Contemporary urban revitalisation is more understood as recycling and reuse of existing building and abandoned spaces and the conservation of historic precincts.

In the United Kingdom, the term regeneration has often been used as the preferred general term for revitalising blighted urban areas (Peiser, 2007). According to the author, retail and housing

revitalisations are the basic components of property-led regeneration which have been the most favoured strategy both in the USA and the UK. In the USA the private sector, including small local developers, has taken leading roles in revitalisation projects. In the UK, the Central Government plays a strong role in local redevelopment financing and policy (Peiser, 2007). According to Tallon (2010), dimensions of urban regeneration include economic, social, cultural, physical, governance and environmental factors. Urban regeneration policy makers and practitioners have been confronted by issues, such as sustainability, public sector budgetary constraints, demands for community involvement and rapid urbanisation in developing countries (Leary & McCarthy, 2013). In the past decades, urban regeneration has been strongly influenced by globalisation and neoliberalism (McCarthy, 2013).

The urban regeneration programmes and policies during the New Labour government administration (1997-2010) have transformed inner cities of major British cities including London, Glasgow, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Cardiff (Carmona & Wunderlich, 2012). The new town planning act (Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) and the introduction of Local Development Frameworks as a new planning tool, helped in addressing sustainability issues as well as in promoting urban consolidation and further regeneration of the old urban fabric.

Nevertheless, a majority of the transformations in the United Kingdom have triggered gentrification of the old building stock displacing low-income families and small businesses. Traditional working inner-city districts have been converted into upper-middle-class enclaves. A cursory review of urban regeneration projects in North America and Europe revealed that the process had also been accompanied by increased property prices, gentrification of the old building stock and the replacement of the low-income population by upper-middle-class residents (Cocks, Sykes, & Couch, 2013; Gold, 2013).

Urban Regeneration in Malaysia

In Southeast Asia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia grew their economies from very primitive infrastructure (Marshall, 2003). Until recently, urban transformation in the region was marked by rapid demolition for modernisation, infrastructure construction, and high-rise development. Ambitious rebuilding programmes and upgrading of out-dated infrastructure often conflict with retaining a unique sense of place (Yuen, 2013). Demolition of traditional streetscapes removes the communities' ability to connect to its past (Vines, 2005). However, in recent years, many cities in Southeast Asia are now confronting challenges related to the preservation and regeneration of their traditional urban fabric (Yuen, 2013).

In Malaysia after the mid-1970s, accelerated urbanisation was due in large part to the rapid expansion of the

industrial sector (Macleod & McGee, 1996). One significant trend in the process of urbanization in Malaysia in the period 1960-1990 is the increasing dominance of Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region vis-à-vis other cities. Based on this useful definition, the population of the KL conurbation in 1980 was 2.4 million, amounting to 21.4% of the national population, giving a population density of 286 persons per km². In 1990, this same area would have had about 3.6 million populations with a density of 439 persons per square kilometre and 6.5 million inhabitants today (DBKL, 2010). The skewed trend of population agglomeration over the period 1960/1990, especially the specific bias towards the Kuala Lumpur Core Urban Region, has resulted in a marked inability in the areas to cope with traffic congestion, housing, and environmental problems. In other words, the quality of the urban environment is deteriorating at a higher speed than either local population growth or territorial physical expansion. This phenomenon, unless controlled, is bound to affect quality of life here. The situation is compounded by a lack of precise urban development policies to contain population movements. Urban development policies in the 1970s were linked to exigencies of dealing effectively with, first, the disparities between the rural and urban sectors through better rural-urban linkages and making urban functions more accessible to the rural populations; and, secondly, differences between regions and states by stimulating growth in lagging regions. It was only in the mid-1980s that

an attempt was made to develop a National Urbanisation Policy (NUP) to guide urban development (King, 2008; Thong, 1996).

The on-going fast track urban development has erased large chunks of traditional urban fabric in Malaysia. Placing central Melaka and Georgetown on the World UNESCO Heritage List and the introduction of the National Heritage Act was a step forward but still insufficient to retract from the aggressive urban redevelopment practice (Shamsuddin, 2011).

In the Ninth Malaysian Plan, the National Heritage Act 2005 (from now on referred to as the NHA 2005) was enacted to give protection and preserve many tangible and intangible cultural heritage and has been promoted for the tourism industry. The Act provides for the conservation and preservation of National Heritage, natural heritage, tangible and intangible, cultural heritage, and underwater cultural heritage (Ghafar, 2010; Mustafa & Abdullah, 2013).

There is an ongoing debate on adverse side-effects of fast-track urban redevelopment. This study analyses the implications of contemporary urban revitalisations in Malaysia by drawing attention to elements, such as urban form, public realm, social dimensions, cultural values and local climatic conditions.

Contemporary KLMR provides a planned road based and low-density urban conurbation and regarding its low density, road-based infrastructure, and high car dependency is portrayed as the 'Los Angeles of Southeast Asia' (Rimmer & Dick, 2009). The urban region is marked with a network

of highways, modern buildings lacking tropical design features, megamalls, and commercial complexes. In between the vast and concrete jungle and web of highways and infrastructure, corridors are isolated oases such as Kuala Lumpur Central City (KLCC) or Putrajaya containing planned and well-designed tropical environments and also some high quality leafy residential precincts including Bangsar and Damansara Heights. Following the classification of two major American cities Los Angeles and San Francisco by Idenburg (2015), where the city environment of Los Angeles, is referred as a 'dystopia that had gone right' while at the same time San Francisco is labelled as a 'utopia that had gone wrong', the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region' can be described as a dystopia with enclaves of utopia. According to King (2008), the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region is a juxtaposition of public spaces representing Malay, Chinese and Indian space, the internet, cyberspace and hyperspace, traditions, memory and origins, and formal and informal economy. Added to this collection should be the comprehensive network of highways cutting across the entire region.

Since the 1970s, redevelopment of the existing urban fabric associated with the destruction of the old urban fabric was the practice applied and accepted at all levels of government. An example of a major urban transformation was the development of Kuala Lumpur Central City (KLCC) complex including the Petronas Towers, a large shopping complex, a convention centre

and a 20-hectare urban park all replacing a former Turf horse racing track (King, 2008). The decision to redevelop the last remaining peri-urban village within central Kuala Lumpur called Kampung Bharu to a high rise commercial and residential precinct was made by the Federal government in 2009 (Kampung Bharu Development Corporation 2016).

In recent years the Federal, State Governments and local authorities have stepped up initiatives to slow down the destruction of the traditional urban fabric. Urban regeneration, including historical conservation and recycling and reuse of the building stock, has emerged as part of the urban planning agenda.

The KLMR transformation also affects the existing urban village in the centre of the city. One such case is the ongoing transformation based on the recent proposal of Kampung Bharu Comprehensive Master Plan. The Kampung Bharu Development Corporation was established in 2012 to guide and coordinate the redevelopment of Kampung Bharu but also to protect and retain existing character of its central part (Kampung Baharu Development Corporation [KBDC], 2016). The planning strategy for Kampung Bharu prevails in four integrated strategies: "holistic, inclusive and balanced planning, appreciation of the land value that is competitive, preservation of identity and heritage and green development for urban diversity" (KBDC, 2014). In this regard, urban renewal should be aligned with world class vision, expectations, and sustainability to achieve the development

objectives (Alhabshi, 2012). As Kuala Lumpur progresses to be a modern city, the original setting of the kampong has transformed into a more compact urban layout. In 1969, most of the high-rise buildings were concentrated in one side of Kampong Bharu where else in 2004, high-rise buildings could have spread to other areas around the area (Hashim & Yaacob, 2011). Currently, the kampong is defined by high-rise buildings including the iconic tower of Kuala Lumpur city centre (KLCC) and high-density mixed-used development. The social and cultural values of the place could vanish if the new development fails to consider the understanding of the principles of the tropical sense of place, the life and belief system of the residents. The physical and social identities that define the uniqueness of the place should not disappear alongside the emerging redevelopment. Social coherence, place identity, and quality of life affect the people's well-being, therefore, should be prioritised in future redevelopment initiatives (Ujang & Aziz, 2016).

Another successful urban regeneration project in Kuala Lumpur includes the upgrade of parts of Jalan Tun Sambanthan in Brickfields (Nilai Harta, 2016). More recently a major urban regeneration project launched by the Federal, State Governments and DBKL is the River of Life (ROL) Project including the revitalisation of the Gombak and Klang Rivers corridor in central Kuala Lumpur. DBKL commissioned AECOM, a large US-based design, planning and project management firm to produce a master plan

for a 10.7 km stretch of the Klang and Gombak river corridors in the central part of Kuala Lumpur. The master-plan prepared by AECOM has been endorsed by DBKL and the first construction works commenced in 2015 (Kozłowski, 2015). In 2015, DBKL endorsed Urban Design Guidelines for Central Kuala Lumpur which includes an entire section on preserving heritage buildings. As part of the heritage guidelines for Central Kuala primary, secondary and specific character zones have been identified. The detailed guidance focuses on retrofitting buildings facades, readapting internal layouts and on urban infill developments (DBKL, 2014). However, the Urban Design Guidelines for Central Kuala Lumpur is a strategic document and therefore its recommendations as yet are not legally binding.

Another local authority in the KLMR area that has introduced urban regeneration policies is Petaling Jaya Municipal Council (Majlis Bandaraya Petaling Jaya (MBPJ)) which recognised the importance of sustainable urban regeneration practices. The Local Draft Plan for the city has come up with a Special Area Plan that was displayed for public scrutiny in 2008. The Plan included policies that would encourage urban regeneration practices as stipulations that allow for the increase in plot ratio and maximum building height of land converted to commercial uses subject that there is restriction on any new industrial activities and no new manufacturing activities are allowed (Nilai Harta, 2016).

Recently a Federal sponsored body called Think City Urban Renewal was established aimed at injecting life back into the central parts of Kuala Lumpur. Its aim was to revitalise the most decayed and redundant parts of the central city (The Malay, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Local authorities in the KLMR only recently have embarked on a new approach to urban planning and regeneration. In attempting to elevate the city's status on par with other world cities, the local authorities have recognised urban regeneration as one of urban design and planning mechanism that can help achieve this goal. The city of Kuala Lumpur has introduced urban design policies aimed at conserving old historic buildings and precincts and has commenced with the regeneration of the river corridor in the central part of the city. Although there is much rhetoric and studies supporting urban conservation and revitalisation, its practical side has still not fully matured. The urban regeneration principles and guidelines have not yet been incorporated in the local statutory planning documents. Until recently the discourse on urban conservation and heritage has focused mainly on Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya and not so much on the other urban centres located in the KLMR.

The KLMR local authorities must revitalise its remaining older urban fabric and protect it from further demolition. Also, Malay, Chinese and Indian motifs

and traditions are essential in the design of new urban spaces and buildings. Given the urban conurbation's urban geographical framework, illustrating a growing polycentric structure, a regional approach is critical. Imposing urban regeneration measures and highlighting a sense of place and identity at the regional level can also ensure a better delivery at the local level by informing the statutory and strategic local development plans. A regional plan would also ensure that urban regeneration principles and objectives are applied to the urban region not only in specific areas such as central Kuala Lumpur or Petaling Jaya. Apart from promoting regional and city-wide urban revitalisation objectives, it is imperative to emphasise the neighbourhood, streets, and individual site scale. The street – neighbourhood scale of intervention represents a piecemeal approach to urban regeneration which only regenerates a fraction of the city targeting a specific user group. However, it can be applied in different urban cultures and most political environments. It is also imperative to introduce programmes and incentives for private developers who are willing to undertake regeneration of older building stock and abandoned spaces. Promoting community awareness and introducing community participation in the urban regeneration process is also critical. Measures should also be adopted to tackle the issue of urban gentrification and mitigate the rapid increase in property prices.

Introducing a regional approach with urban regeneration at the regional,

citywide, district and neighbourhood site levels would significantly contribute to a holistic environment and social equilibrium necessary to achieve a smart city status.

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