

Urban Life and the Changing City

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Abstract

Cities hold both the promise of economic opportunities and social mobility yet at the same time are hosts to massive poverty and social exclusion. The nation is confronting a host of problems associated with urbanisation common to the contemporary world, such as the impact of the auto mobile and mass transits, and the pressure of modernity on traditional society and community life. The impacts of our urbanites society coupled with the common issues of modern world certainly had impacted our society and cultural values that we have uphold for generations.

This paper takes a critical look at issues plaguing urban life and argues that the perfect modern city living is only in a state of mind and our daily existence are already radically different from the urban images we carry in our minds and hearts. Our city has suffered from the dreary sea of uniformity, lacking in the diversity of orchestration of spaces to completely evoke a complex and dynamic public use.

This paper identifies the factors which contribute to the phenomena and that have an impact on the makings of a liveable city. This paper reiterated that the challenge lies ahead of us to make changes and improvement to our cities for the loss of our great public life and public realm in city spaces. Urban public spaces when given prominence and focus can achieve monumentality and serve as a marker or gesture for the public to engage socially. Our city must invest its future in these spaces by creating all the opportunities and forms to respond to a dynamic public environment.

Keywords: public realm, urbanisation, liveable city, community living

1. Introduction

Few would disagree that one of the critical issues in the twenty first century is the rebuilding of our cities, including manifesting the transformation from a tropical tin mining town to a modern metropolis. From the highway, the serene looking city landscape represents the icons of modernity with an increase in mobility and accessibility; economic efficiency and industrialisation along with an improvement in public hygiene. This visual image is also embedded with the idea of social progress in an industrial civilisation which has made many Malaysian embrace in the wholesale believe in the goodness of modernity.

The modern city is “a legal, political, economic, and social unit all rolled into one. It is a large body of people, possessing some striking social characteristics, massed in a small area, chartered as a municipal corporation, having its own local government, carrying on various economic enterprises, and busily engaged in trying to solve the multifarious problems which its own crowded life puts upon it” (Munro,1926). As Pile S. observed in *Real Cities* (2005), we are longing for a dream city that suits our personality and can fulfil our every demands and cravings. We hope that this city turns into dreams and dreams turn into city. Therefore, provide us a modern city living without any urban pathologies or abnormalities.

Currently, Malaysia is only partway along the urbanisation journey. Today’s urbanisation level of 67 per cent and GNI per capita of RM22, 000 falls short of the more developed countries. As Malaysia aims to reach high-income status by 2020, we will need to accelerate the pace and intensity of urbanisation. The current Malaysian government is ahead in recognising the economic importance of cities and committed to pursuing a strategy to achieve high-income status. By embarking on the Economic Transformation programme (ETP), the

government intends to propel economic transformation by implementing specific targets via the twelve National Key Economic Areas (NKEAs).

However, it is important to bear in mind that urbanisation is not only about economic growth. Cities need to be equipped to accommodate the demands of rising residents, and meet the needs of present dwellers while improving the quality of life for all. As one of the NKEA, Greater KL/KV is more geographical focus, rather than industry focus like the other eleven NKEAs. The aspiration for Greater KL/ Klang Valley is to drive rapid growth in parallel with upgrading the city's liveability, hence a priority for Malaysia's next decade. While urbanising intensively, Greater KL/Klang Valley also emphasises on improving liveability.

A good city does not mean an expensive one: costs for urban residents and businesses should not be exorbitant. A city is not just a place to work but to have leisure, to seek knowledge and to nurture families. By developing a positive and sustainable mode of city living, we will be able to sustain a social life. There are many surveys that measure and compare the quality of living for cities. For example, the Quality of Living Survey organised by Mercer follows 39 factors that are grouped into 10 categories including political and social environment; socio-cultural environment and recreation. The findings of the survey conducted from September to November 2011 indicated the top cities are Vienna, Zurich, Auckland and Munich while Kuala Lumpur is No 76.

It is worthwhile to note that the world's most liveable cities are well planned and prosperous, and they require national attention to critical policy areas including infrastructure, transport, environmental management and socio-cultural aspects.

Since the majority of us live in urban areas, it is time we take a deeper interest in the urban issues. Malaysians yearn for a better living conditions and standards in all aspects of their lives. They wished for more 'happiness' translated in a stable economy; and physically and emotionally healthy. Malaysian urban dwellers start to explore the phantasmagorias of city life in their search for 'happiness', then came the idea of modern city living and its promises of good livelihood and 'cultured living'.

2. The Conundrum of Modern City Living

In reality, living in a modern metropolis is not exactly a smooth sailing experience as we besotted with the constant onslaught of various socio-cultural problems such as crime, moral degradation, unhealthy life styles and lack of community living. Mc Kenzie observed that the growth of large cities constitutes perhaps the greatest of all the problems of modern civilization. While the city is a problem in itself, creating certain biological and psychological conditions which are new to the race, the city is even more an intensification of all our other social problems, such as crime, vice, poverty, and degeneracy (Ellwood, 2007; Adam et al. 2000; Beck, 1992). These new challenging socio-cultural phenomena are perplexing to our urban culture and are beginning to constraint our emotional resources to live our lives as we struggle between the sphere of work, family and leisure.

The city is relatively a modern problem due to modern industrial development and process of urbanization. The issue of public safety is just one example how city living can contribute to our emotional and psychological anxiety. Social phenomenon such as violent and sexual crimes toward infants, children and women; road rage; school gangsterism and drug abuse has become a common occurrence in our daily urban life. The neighbourhood parks and public open spaces are becoming breeding ground for moral decadence. Instead of functioning as an important social watershed, they have been abused to become favourite hotspots for sexual activities and school gangsterism. The sense of insecurity out of the built environment can be amassed from newspaper headlines and community bulletins. Society's reactions such as 'Something just have to change'; and 'More police petrol in the neighbourhoods' has become a common dialectic phenomenon in the mass media.

Woolley (2003) reiterated that modern social problems can be reduced by instilling the sense of community and civic pride among the urbanites. An increase in public surveillance to the public places will help reduced crime. Spaces that promote social interaction and gathering often discourage crime and misdemeanour. Urban communities need to embrace the true meaning of the sense of belonging; this will propagate the urge to keep an eye on their neighbourhood. In addition, the amalgamation of the two senses will help strengthen the true value of community living and simultaneously lessen the likelihood of transgression. Concurrent with Woolley, Turner (1996) proposed active sports as means of crime prevention safety. He observed that sport would lessen problems associated with gangsterism, besides improving the physical health of urban teens.

Across the city, the urban community's cultural attitudes toward urban lifestyle are becoming more sedentary, often engaging in self-indulgence and lacking interest in the public realm. The society's mindset and social values has shifted from communal living to a culture of individualism and personal autonomy. There is a disturbing feeling that the emotional and cultural experience of this urban lifestyle failed to meet our desires and

is slowly, but surely, draining our emotional energy.

3. Development Trends and Value of Community Living

The trends in urban development trigger changes in urban community's living and cultural attitude. The residential design and layout in particular, instigate segregation, dividing society via class, status and financial viability among city dwellers and therefore change the landscape of the urban living.

There is a worrying trend in our modern community living which voluntary segregation of society. Developers are cashing in on new development based on gated community concept as opposed to the traditional open community and an anti thesis of virtuous community living. These barricaded community complete with security guards are being created fulfilling the property's trend in sophisticated lifestyles and instilling the culture of individualism and personal autonomy. Gated communities complete with recreational space and amenities are segregating society based on lifestyles and income status while completely detaching itself from the rest of the community. Socially speaking, gated communities have a dangerous effect of legalizing social discrimination (Touman, 2002). Critics deliberate gated communities as private enclaves that not only sustain segregation, but also help to increase it. As a result, our life spaces in the city are getting smaller by the day by these gated communities which inhibit access to shared public activities.

Whatever that is left in our open communities is subjugated to a banal creativity of housing layout that befittingly describe a Russian utopian city of Sotsgorod by Nikolai Miliutin, where life is about the epitome of achieving industrial production efficiency. The ideology of modernism which advocate order and organization of the city form only provides us with a false illusion of diversity. In reality, we are living in an unconscious monotonous conformity of contemporary culture that devoid us from being individually diverse in our physical being and thought process (Urry, 2000).

4. Globalisation and Cultural Diffusion

From the idea of functionalism, we compartmentalize our life activities and conform to planning standards that are being applied throughout our built landscape. Standardisation has no doubt brought us easier to communicate and work together to conform to a particular culture we live in. The linearity of thoughts and rationalization for everything tangible, from our house façade to our thoughts that must conform to the ideology of standards, have influenced and shaped our modern culture that bears its testimony in the way we built our cities.

This linearity of thoughts and standardize and rationalisation have a trickling effect towards relentless uniformity in our cities, our urban landscape and streetscape (Gibbon & Oberholzer, 1991). There is no wonder that we and our children often have great difficulty in identifying our new homes in the terraced housing scheme that all look alike and similar which subscribe to the idea of mass production line in a car factory. Ironically, we then put in great pains to make our house to be different from our neighbours by repainting the gate or having certain planting scheme in our tiny front garden in order to personalize it. Our subconscious thought was screaming for self-dignity by perpetuating action through self-identification in a world of standards and uniformity.

Due to the fast seepage of western cultures, the American's consumerism concept and the capitalist economy, we are now standing on the edge of losing our tradition. Our cultural values are being diluted due to our "easily and happily" accepting the foreign customs in the name of globalization, tolerance and forbearance. The admiration towards our own traditions and cultures are deteriorating and our once reverence towards our language, traditional costumes and food have now withered (Pietrse, 2004; Bauman, 2000). This phenomenon is almost inevitable as quoted by Victor Hugo's *Histoire d'un crime* in 1852 (The History of Crime, 2007), "An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come".

The "Americanisation" of urban landscape exists in almost every nook and cranny of our city scenes. Here comes about another deceitful urban terminology known as "popular culture". By lay man's definition, it means whatever people do in their leisure time. Popular culture might be conceived as that which 'belongs to the people' and that which is 'widely favoured' and 'well liked', such as popular music, popular food and ; popular fashion and lifestyle. The best examples are the mushrooming chain restaurants the likes of Mc Donalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut among others. These American fast food franchise restaurants are fast dominating our city scenes and their existences are strongly embedded in our thoughts. Ironically, "*mee rebus Pak Abu*" and "*roti jala Mak Jah*" are almost alien to our young Malaysians.

5. City for People vs. City for Automobile

Perhaps in our haste to adapt to our new urbanised lifestyle, we have failed to reflect on the wisdom, viability, the physical and the socio-cultural identity of the modern city, and whether the reshaping of society based on a single ideology of modernism has succeeded in significantly improving the urban residents' quality of life. Our

preoccupation with modernism has also stripped us from any cultural meanings to our built form by consciously departing from the past, ignoring the city's layers of meanings and memories.

Our cities are losing its image, as city developed and grow; most traditional values were diminished, along with its traditional and cultural meanings. As the city expand, it gets more confusing, due to the multicentricity of image and identity of landmarks, nodes, skylines and building lines that competes with the city's native *genius loci*, resulting in common elements and views to become alien, therefore significantly reducing its ability to be memorable and remembered (Lynch, 1960; Bentley et al.).

For whatever excitement that we have achieved today in our urban lifestyle might also erode some of the most valuable socio-cultural values and sense of identity that were inherited from the older generations. Good social values and sense of community that our forefather has upheld seem to deteriorate slowly from the modern society. In comparison, the community they lived with was much sociable, democratic and healthy. They had very little traffic, free of congestion and had abundance of recreational activities and public open spaces. They experience a richer and robust social life, whether it's indoors or outdoors and their built environment provides every opportunity for them to walk and socialise safely.

This situation is comparable to Social Tag vs. Price Tag where Social Life and sense of the community were of greater values than that of monetary wealth. In the olden day, human community is a product of the interaction of three factors i.e. (a) maintaining the biotic and social equilibrium namely population, (b) nonmaterial culture, i.e. customs and beliefs and the (c) all readily available natural resources. However, at present due to the dynamics and processes of human community, material culture, i.e. technological developments has become a determining factor of our daily life (Van Der Veen, 2006).

The old cities were built by designing a continuous urban space throughout the city (Alexander, 2000; Gehl, 1987; Salingeros, 1999). By doing this, pedestrian movement was the dominant means of transport in cities: major urban functions occurred in urban space proper. However, in this modern living, urban dwellers are living on the run, everything is progressing at a rapid pace. We are constantly chasing time and walking seems to slow us down. In this modern era, pedestrian-dominated approach had to be revised to let in cars in increasing numbers, which because of their dominant size and speed displaced pedestrians and pedestrian connectivity.

Visibly, modernist urban planners have gone too far in dissolving urban space, and then cutting expressways through city cores. As a result, we are now relying on motorised vehicular routes to carry out our mundane daily activities that could otherwise be carried out in the shortest walking route. At present, an estimated 70% of greenhouse gas emissions come from cities and more than 70% energy is consumed in urban areas. Managing environmental issues in cities can dictate how we will cope with climate change and the quality of life that we will have in future.

The importance of urban space is lost when the philosophical emphasis on meaning structures shifted from the space between buildings, to the pure geometry of buildings standing in isolation (Alexander, 2000; Salingeros, 1999). We lost the opportunity to experience life at street level within our urban landscape. This experiential journey sensitise us to our surrounding; therefore appreciating our city with a sense of belonging to call it our own. We fail to partake perceptual journey in our cities to perceive its' varieties and interesting street cultures (known and appreciated by foreigners yet forgotten by us Malaysians) simply because the street is not roofed with air-conditioned unlike the indoor malls. As accorded by Whyth (1980), good city's spaces must have a cordial relationship with the street, so as to encourage the full utilisation of space and street culture activities.

We are increasingly alienated from our traditional values, subdued by our thirst for progress. The so called modern progressive city is nothing more but a symbol for functioning like bits of data on the information highway. We move as fast as we possibly can, completely sterile of our surroundings and consciously ignoring any life in between city places. Life accomplishment is reduced marginally to nothing more but destination oriented; we feel elated in arriving to work, home, school, gym etc in the shortest possible time. These cultural phenomena are the results of some of the modern city's attributes that oversimplified everyday life in order to achieve convenience and speed. In reality, it is the towns and cities that give a sense of place and their own sense of atmosphere tend to be the most memorable and favoured (Gibbon & Oberholzer, 1991).

6. City for Community vs. City for Individuality

Our forefathers' life experience is certainly less dependent on the automobile. Cycling and walking in the streets provide a gratifying experience of urban public realm. Their daily experience such as savouring *rojak*, *cendol* and *ais kacang* and having a haircut in the open streets while chatting under huge colossal mass of *Samanea saman* or Rain Trees while watching the scenes of everyday life certainly imparts a strong reinforcement of self

reality. Their society was a gregarious society and a pedestrian one, with their rich daily experience lived in the outdoors and streets with high level of awareness of community life.

The reign of outdoor recreation is the new trend and customary with shopping malls, indoor theme park and other retail outlets under one roof. The selfishness in spatial organisation ensue the lack of interest in the public realm, abandoning the traditional public open spaces as places for recreation. Single usage space dominating the land use/building use i.e. shopping malls, theme park – private own park for public use, and often not considering the hierarchy of the space. In addition, indoor recreation eliminates the traditional commercial and retail activities, therefore eradicating public realm at the street level.

Not only that, our reality of the world has been substituted by experiencing indoor hyperspace of gigantic hypermarket chain store, mega shopping malls and communication technology such as the internet and satellite TV. We are highly intoxicated with indoor hyperspace of controlled mechanical environment of air conditioned space with artificial plants, unaware of night and day, rain or shine feeling exuberant at experiencing a false public realm that are geared toward commercial consumption. Our rejection of outdoor public space has sometimes reached to the extreme that we intentionally seek virtual reality in the form of movie hopping in the cineplex to end our weekend. The renowned urban designer, Jan Gehl (1987) observed that “as a society become steadily more privatised with private homes, cars, computers, offices and shopping centres, the public component of our lives is disappearing. It is more and more important to make the cities inviting, so we can meet our fellow citizens face to face and experience directly through our senses. Public life in good quality public spaces is an important part of a democratic life and a full life”.

Modern society’s shift toward indoor hyperspace and virtual reality brought on by communication technology has brought a new culture of urban experience denying the traditional way of life. To compound this problem, the architectural discourse we adopt in this country promotes the superficiality of controlled indoor hyperspace replacing the traditional role of the city space as a public realm. The urban interior mall and hypermarket tend to drain activities and economic viability from the streets. On the contrary, the outdoor spaces, when properly designed have a strong attraction to functions as major gathering spaces for varied activities. Even simple street life activity such as eateries by the *mamak* bistros community has succeeded in attracting people to enjoy their meals in the outdoors.

Obliviously, we are caught in the late modern urban planning paradigm of the functionalist approach that strives for efficiency, health, economic sustainability, and the glorification of architecture. The by-products of this approach are cities that focused on the automobile, the differentiation of function among residential, factories, public buildings, the placement of grand architectural buildings and so on. The city is the goal by itself and not the inhabitants. Punter and Carmona (1997) and Rubenstein (1992) reiterated that urban design strategies have tended to focus on buildings and the external appearance of development. We emphasised on the physiological and the functional aspects of the city to the extent that we overlook their psychological and social needs. We assume the large green areas provided between buildings would be obvious location for recreational activities and rich of social life. What we failed to recognise is that buildings and other urban forms also had great influence on outdoor activities and consequently on the social possibilities.

7. City for People vs. City for Architecture

The failure to create living experience with public meaning in the city is mainly due to our wholesale belief in modernism. In the practice of modern architecture, there is a tendency to divert from understanding the public meaning and contextual sensitivity in designing their urban projects. These architects that possessed artistic creativity in a narrow sense are detached from appreciating or understanding culture and public life, often produced designs that are metaphors and concept that only make sense to their creator. In the end, what we are creating is just another artefact without any meaningful public experience.

Real architecture is not just about the public or the private realm but is the wholesome embodiment of personal, public, environment, art, technology, desire, hope, refinement, social, history, culture, economic and political expression that define the aesthetic of living. Aesthetic in this sense does not connote the narrow meaning of achieving visual pleasure but awareness in all of human activities and senses. Thus, the architects must appreciate and look at life, be it ordinary everyday life to the grandest occasion in life, rather than just attempting to stimulate visual pleasure. Living and being able to feel pleasure and pain is aesthetic in a truest sense as in the opposite of numbness (anaesthetic). The sensitivities of contexts, cultural meanings, and able to interact and discover our own realm within that space are aesthetic at its utmost and must therefore super cede any personal objectives or glorification.

Architecture can mediate between the social, economic and cultural of city life and promote a balance between

these elements. The French/Swiss architect and theorist Bernard Tschumi believes that architects should design for the events and the interactions between and must ignore the notion that Form follows Function. Form must facilitate (human) events. This is what our cities must strive for and what architects must help us to achieve by intensifying the rich collision of events and spaces. While buildings are designed by architects, and roads by civil engineers, the urban space in between is still under the landscape architects realm. It is these urban spaces that provide the setting for the life and activities of the city (Gibbon & Oberholzer, 1991).

8. Conclusion

The trapping of modern city have caught our pride on modern living. We continue to adapt to this negative environment based on the myth of modernity with all its connotations to industrialisation, wealth, and privilege, believing that in a long run, will be beneficial for humanity. Although urbanisation and urban policies are important instruments for national development, the government's good intention to drive for progress via the Economic Transformation Programme, is more embedded in the material culture and pursuance of technological advancement. With the adoption of this notion, we assume our society has been advancing to a more progressive civilisation without realising that it has worn down the old belief in the social order's inherent goodness.

While there is no doubt that humans are highly adaptable to their living environment, however, if the imbalance in the equilibrium between socio-cultural and physical aspects of the built environment is not addressed, the city in the long run, will be caught up with plaguing social illness, thus deeply affecting emotional and spiritual hardship. At present, the modernist-functionalist city design that we embraced seems to neglect the potential of the built environment in shaping a socially productive environment and may lead to a long-term effect on urban quality of life and contribute to social catastrophe.

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