

Defining the Garden City of Kuching

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Abstract

Since a new idea and new vision of “Garden City” has been benchmarked for the city of Kuching, it is also our responsibility to study this idea first before any wrong steps taken, by any party. From observation, the city center is loosing out due to a typical crisis faced by other major cities all over the world, which is urban sprawl and decentralization. Clear land use zoning and decentralization are outdated ideas in urban design and it is important that we can provide a better solution towards this crisis, not by abandoning wholly the idea of Garden City, but to recuperate or reanalyze this idea in our modern society.

1. Introduction

Kuching has been declared “Garden City” by the State Government on the 21st of July 2003. According to Kassim (2004), head planner from the State Planning Unit, claimed that the declaration of Kuching as a Garden city by the government is both ‘natural’ in terms of the availability of abundant natural beauty within and out of the city, and ‘timely’ in view of these natural resources are under pressure from various types of development.

This is very true since so many new developments were undergoing at various locations throughout the perimeter and outside Kuching City center, threatening the livelihood of the abundant natural environment. On the other aspect, demographically, citizens of Kuching are moving further and further from the city center.

In other words, this paper is suggesting alternatives for the development of the city of Kuching, base on arguments on the way Kuching is planned now and going to be planned by the government after the declaration of Kuching as Garden City. The alternatives suggested will also be based on the author’s hypothesis that due to the government’s city planning strategies, rapid development in the last few decades has created vast urban sprawl, and as a result the city center is becoming a ‘dead city’, a critical phenomenon though not as serious as other major cities in the world, but is wise to examine the causes and impacts, and explore other alternatives, before it is too late.

2. Definition of Garden City

In the Chief Minister’s speech during the declaration ceremony of Kuching as the Garden City, he stated that, “to prevent congestion in the city, the government had

already developed a master plan to decentralize Kuching and spread the housing and commercial activities to nearby towns, such as Bau, Telaga Air, Santubong, Samarahan and Kota Sentosa.” (Sarawak Tribune, 22 July 2003). This statement is indeed one of the criteria set by Ebenezer Howard, which include *decentralization* and *clear land use zoning*. However, it is important to know that when Howard introduced his Garden City concept, his basic concern was at the appalling living condition of the working class population in the city at that time (Kassim, 2004). Today the situation had changed dramatically in view of the social, economic, scientific and technological advancement over the last 100 years. Decision makers and planners today are facing entirely different kinds of problems and challenges. Howard’s model on Garden City may not be relevant to meet the present day situations and problems, but the idea of garden city itself is gaining popularity as many cities around the world have classified themselves as garden city, such as Singapore, Canberra, Christchurch and Adelaide. In Malaysia, the Prime Minister declared the vision of making Malaysia a “Garden Nation”.

For most people, the Garden City conjures an image of a city set in gardens and greenery where man-made buildings and structures are laid out in a garden setting that is either natural or man-made. For some, it infers an important legacy of the early British planning concept that had dictated how most British imperial cities are built. When Ebenezer Howard put forward his concept of “Garden Cities of Tomorrow” by way of four simple conceptual diagrams just over a century ago, it was greeted with such enthusiasm that it predisposed his subsequent thought in urban planning. Central to this concept is a system of human habitation with clearly defined land use for efficient layout for communication, social, cultural and economic interaction. (Oditia, 2003)

Seen today are the various mutations and interpretations of Howard’s models in planning urban communities. The debate on its full implementation is far from resolved. However, taking into consideration other variables such as the ever-changing facets of growth supported by new technology, and how our resources are managed, the realization of garden cities as originally envisioned by Howard is almost uncertain. On the other hand, Howard’s principles are still deemed relevant and remain fresh with creative contributions and insights by subsequent planners and urbanists whose perspectives of a city encompasses aspects of health, comfort, safety, economic vibrancy and social interaction.

Therefore, in defining the Garden City of Kuching, several essential questions raised: What if the population increases? Will the satellite cities keep growing, since these cities can only hold a small amount of population? Will people still go to the city center since satellite cities are themselves self-sustained and self-contained? Will people still want to travel to the city center since the more satellite towns constructed the more the distance between them and the city center? And finally what will happen to the city center? Will it continue to serve its function as a vibrant, diversified, social place, since city center are becoming less and less important and since mono-functionality (in Kuching, it means tourism sector) weighs down all other function?

3. Defining Factors influencing Kuching’s current Urban Planning

3.1 Kuching’s collective time-line

A collective time-line of Kuching is devised out aim at studying the factors that may affect the current city planning of Kuching. Four aspects conceived including *garden city movement around the world*, *political influences in Kuching*, *living environment in Kuching*, and *development culture in Kuching*. The time-line is shown in *Figure 1*.

KUCHING's socio-living timeline

	environmental awareness around the world												
	1824	1841	1870s	1880s	1900s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960 - 1970s	1970s	1980s	1990 - 2000s	
garden city movement around the world			1898 garden city concept first suggested by sir Ebenezer Howard		1900s - garden city pioneer company limited set-up - leitchworth became the first garden city, followed by welwyn and radburn in new jersey			1960s garden city concept and other contemporary city planning has been criticized in Jane Jacobs book "the death and life of great american cities"		1970s national environmental protection agency established in america	1980s garden city concept revived, but taking on a very different approach from earlier concepts	1990 - 2000s many cities associate/ declare themselves garden nations, such as Adelaide, Christchurch and Singapore	
political influences in kuching	1824 pengiran indera mahkota relocated his court to a place called kuching	1841 James Brooke as governor of sarawak - advancement of native interest	1870s Charles Brooke - continue on not to patronize the natives; - encourage inter marriage among officers and locals - dismiss english way of governing		1900s Charles Vyner Brooke - introduced radio, built roads and motion pictures		1940s Japanese occupation, then became British colony - kuching as an administration town			1960 - 1970s Sarawak independence, became a state in Malaysia	1988 Kuching declared a city	1994 Clean and healthy city program in collaboration with World Health Organization (WHO)	2000s Kuching declared itself as garden city by the state government
living environment in kuching		1841 - Chinese timber shophouses and farm houses - Malay kampungs	1870s - European bungalows - Chinese timber shophouses and farm houses - Malay kampungs	1880s - cost of living relatively low - safe and clean town		1940s housing estates replaced agricultural land	1950s larger buildings such as government quarters and terraced houses introduced			1970s - most agricultural land within city has been turned into housing estates - housing development increased towards city south - increasing shophouses in the city		2000s - increasing housing estates towards north and south of city - shophouses in the city become unpopular among the locals	
developments culture in kuching		1841 - head hunting and piracy activities banned - Chinese trading activities increased	1860s Chinese open up surrounding land for farming as well as returning to trading	1870s diversified local economy	1900s educational, religious and social activities increased	1930s mainly agriculture and residential developments	1940 - 1960s - moderate development - residential increased to the south - national integration introduced			1970s - most rapid development - industrial, admin. and commercial development increased	1980s - more commercial developments - shopping complexes increased - megascale project at the north - tourism sector introduced	2000s new towns emerged around the city	

Fig. 1. time line showing the inter-relationship between the four aspects

From the time-line in *Figure 1*, it is clear that the two main influences that affected the current planning of Kuching and whilst the declaration of Kuching as a Garden City, include the influence of world-wide environmental awareness and the influence of continuous government's effort on Kuching.

3.2 Influence of World-Wide Environmental Awareness on Kuching

The City of Kuching is surrounded by natural landscapes. On the north is the South China Sea with the picturesque coastlines of Bako and Santubong Peninsular. To the east is the Muara Tebas area with large area still under mangrove, on the west are the Kubah National Park, and the Wildlife Centre. At the south there is the green area of Semenggok Forest Reserve and the Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre. The city is thus surrounded by natural landscapes which act as green belt as most of the lands are under effective control of the government (Abang Kassim, 2004) *Figure 2* shows the green belt areas within the district of Kuching whereas *Figure 3* indicates the green areas within the city. From observation, the city itself is blessed with many parks and recreational areas all developed for the enjoyment of the people. Thus in as far as the "natural infrastructure" is concerned, the city of Kuching has plenty to offer. Kuching can be said to have the physical qualities of the "Garden City" as envisaged by Ebenezer Howard, 105 years ago. (Talha, 2003) By having control of the surrounding countryside the first

concept of Ebenezer's theory is already at hand, whereby physical growth can be regulated and controlled.

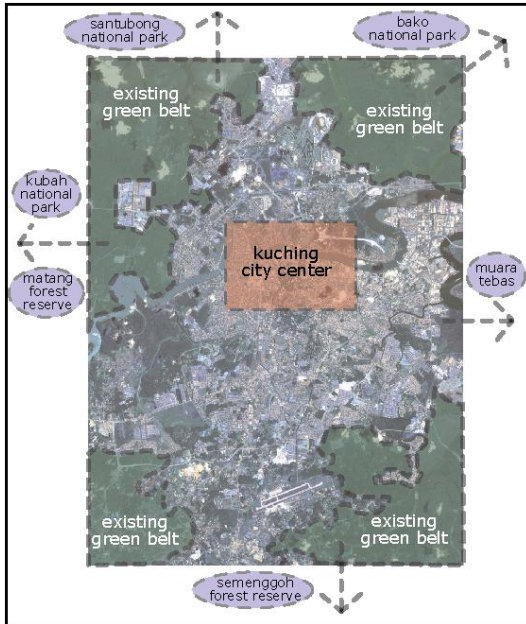


Fig. 2. Satellite photo showing the existing green belts within the district of Kuching

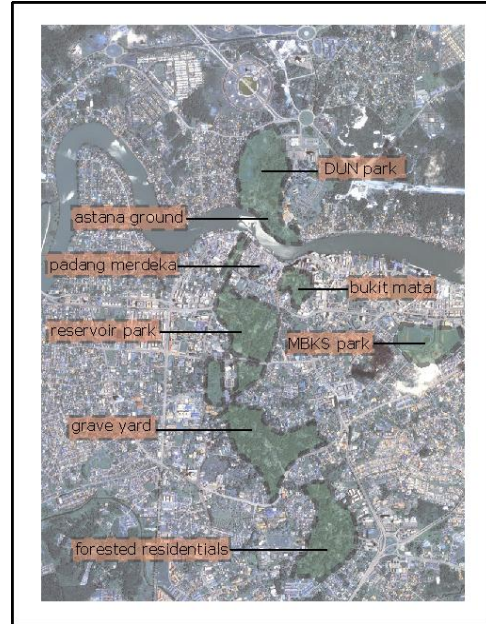


Fig. 3. Satellite photo showing the existing green parks within the city of Kuching

3.3 Influence of Continuous Government's Effort on Kuching

According to Abang Kassim, the two major planning strategies implemented for the development and expansion of Kuching city has been: (i) creation of more new satellite towns that are self sustain and low density outside or at the perimeter of Kuching city, and (ii) clear land use zoning. These two strategies are illustrated in *Figure 4* and *5*.

These self-sustain towns such as 7th mile, Taman Hui Sing, Taman BDC, Tabuan Jaya, Batu Kawa, Satok, Matang Jaya and Petra Jaya are located at the perimeter of the city, and are themselves equipped with vast commercial complexes and residential housing that are low-density and low-rise. Creation of these towns has are to cater for the increasing population in the city, leaving the city uncongested and not overpopulated.

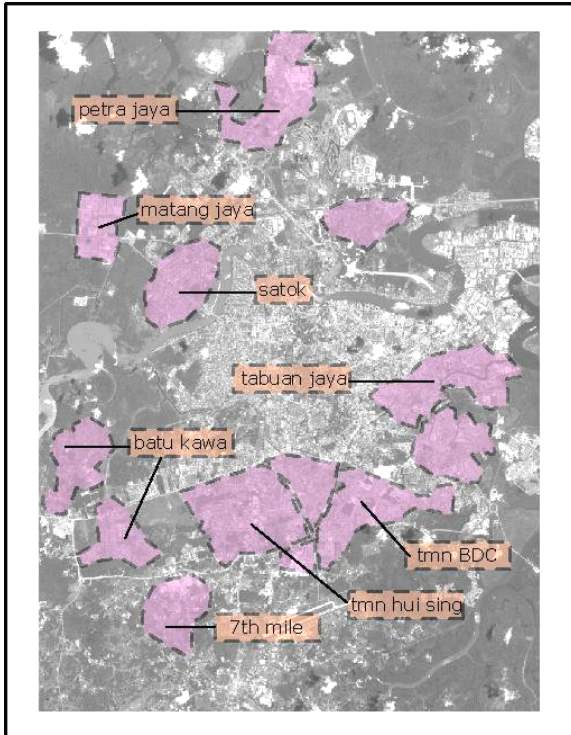


Figure 4. Satellite photo showing self-sustain towns at the perimeter of Kuching city

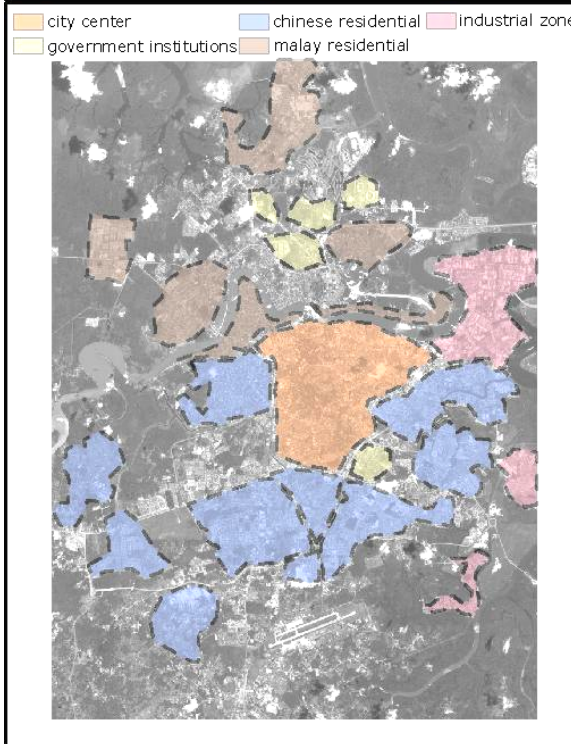


Figure 5 clearly shows the clear land use zoning applied by the government. Malay settlements (at the north) and Chinese settlements (at the south) are separated rather obviously, leaving the city center more to tourist purposes and for government institutions. As for the industrial zones, they are located outside the perimeter of the city.

Fig. 5. Satellite photo showing the general land use zoning within the Kuching City

4. Determining the Impacts

From the influences described above, the impacts of these influences will be derived. These impacts are listed down and are categorized into the positive and negative

impacts. This is aim at recognizing the current main problems that Kuching's city is facing. The impacts are illustrated in *Figure 6* and *7*.

4.1 An Overview of the Negative Impacts

Comparing the positive and negative impacts as shown in previous figures, it is obvious that the government's strategies of implementing regional planning and providing segregated and clear land use zoning has resulted more negative than positive impacts towards the city, including the influx of citizens staying outside city that created a vacuum within the city, as well as causing environmental impact towards other areas outside city center. This conclusion is supported by theories from other designers, such as Dantzig and Saaty.

In Kuching's context, the city center suffers the flight of its citizens to suburbia. And as a result, buildings especially shophouses and apartments that do not have the gardens or land provided at suburbia housings, suffer from the lack of people. This is shown in *Figure 8*.

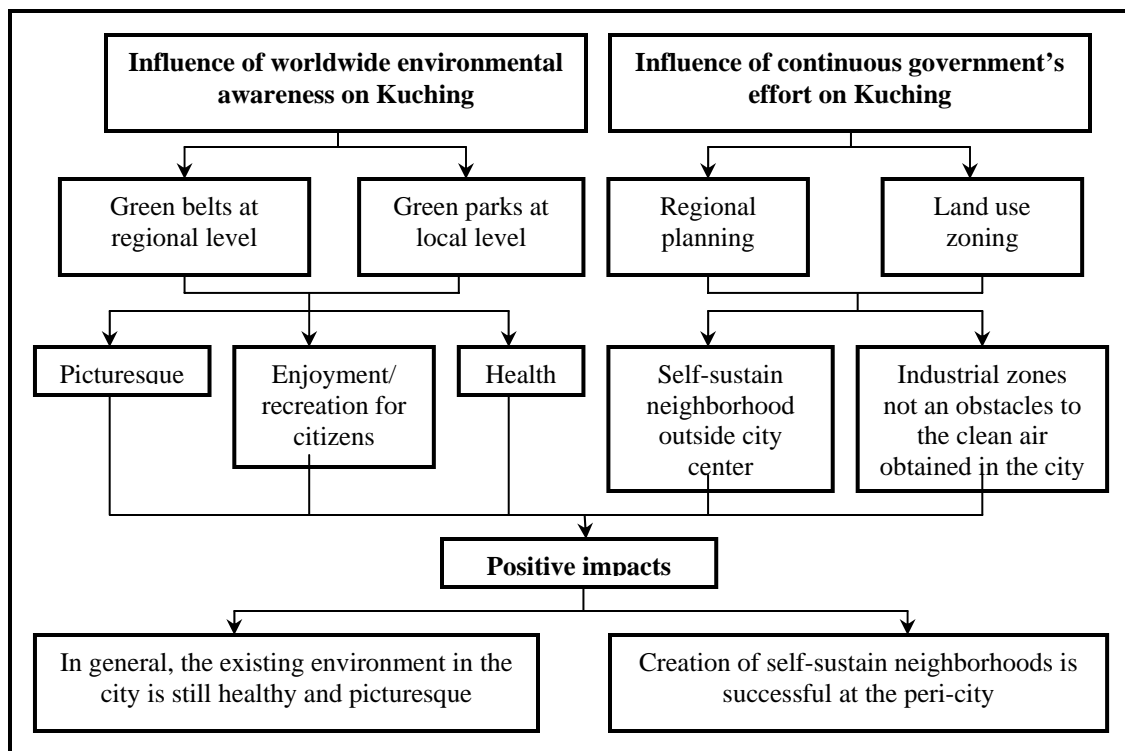


Fig. 6. Flowchart showing the positive impacts resulting from the two major influences

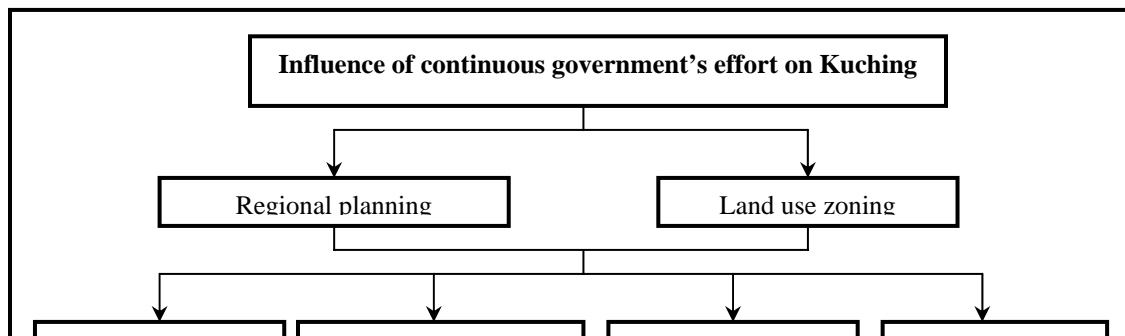
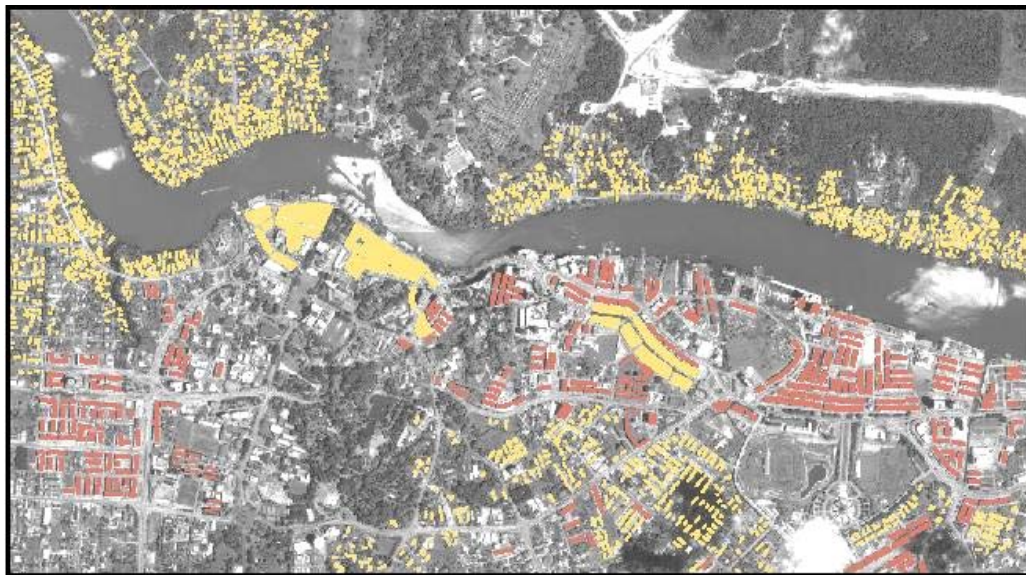


Fig. 7. Flowchart showing the negative impacts resulting from the two major influences



■ occupied ■ underused or vacant

Fig. 8. The occupied and underused or vacant housings within the city center of Kuching.

5. Bringing people back into the city – Liveable Cities

In bringing people back into Kuching city, the main aspect identified is “Liveability” of the city. To identify the priorities and indicators for creating a liveable Kuching city, the local guidelines will be integrated with case studies of successful strategies and plans of

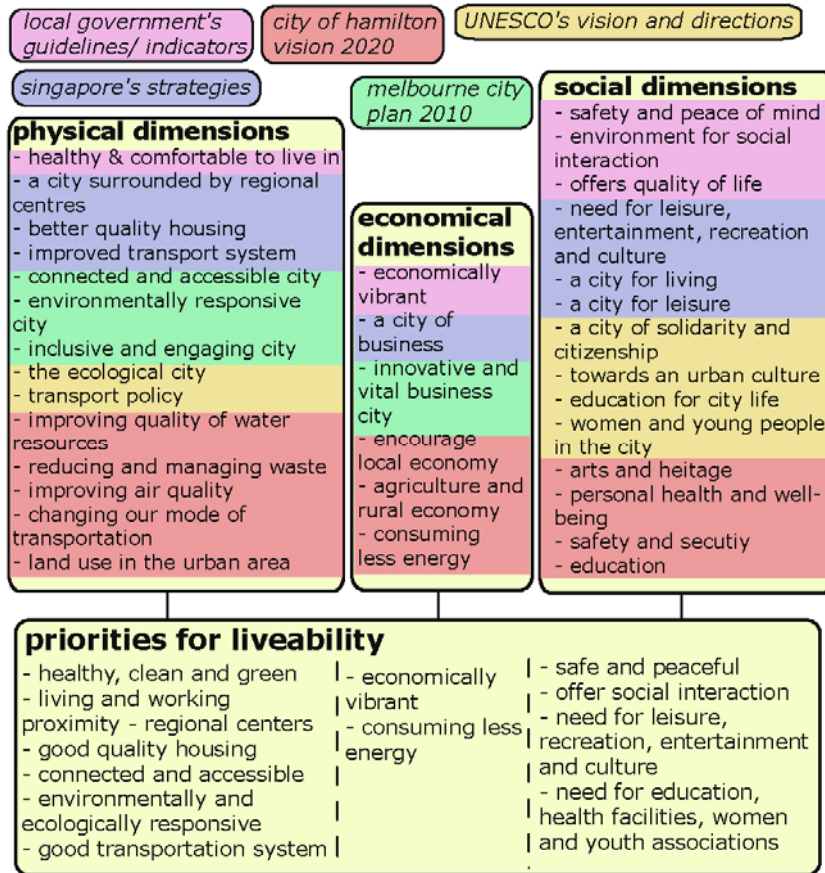


Fig. 9. Flow chart showing the analysis of the objective of bringing people back into Kuching city

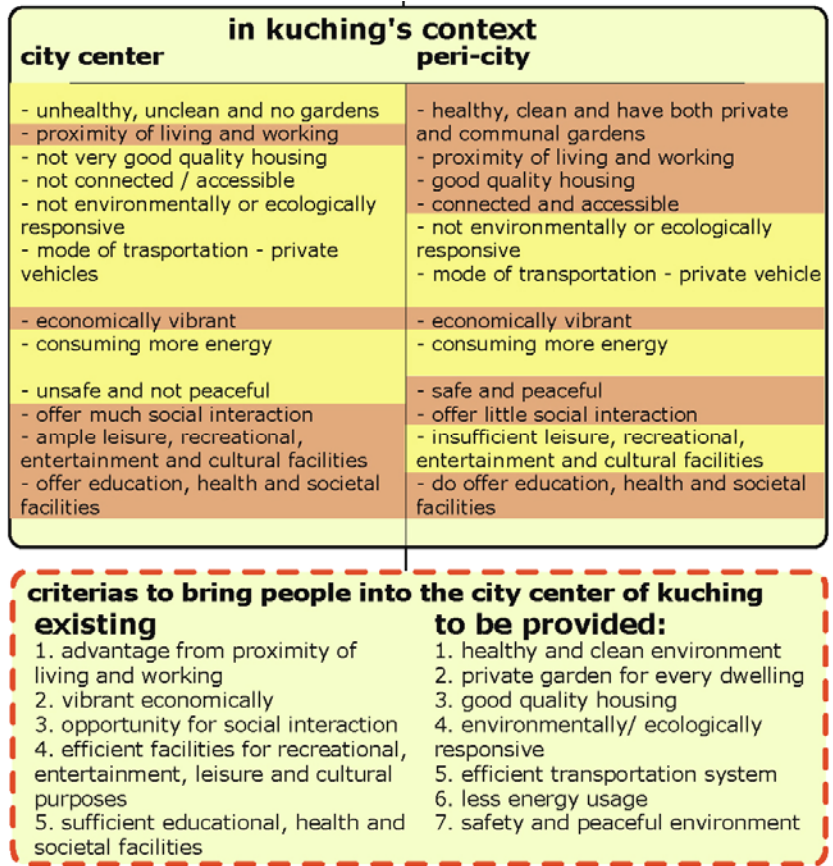


Fig. 10. Flow chart showing the synthesis of the objective of bringing people back into Kuching city

6. Creating a Better Living Environment in the City - Tropical Cities

In creating a better living environment in Kuching city, case studies on tropical cities are adopted in view of the climatic factor. This is aim at providing the city a friendlier environment not only to the people or citizens, but also the urban ecology. The case studies include The Tropical Asian City for the 21st Century by Tay Kheng Soon, and The Tropical Verandah City and Eco-Tech City by Ken Yeang. The summary of the analysis can be seen in Figure 11.

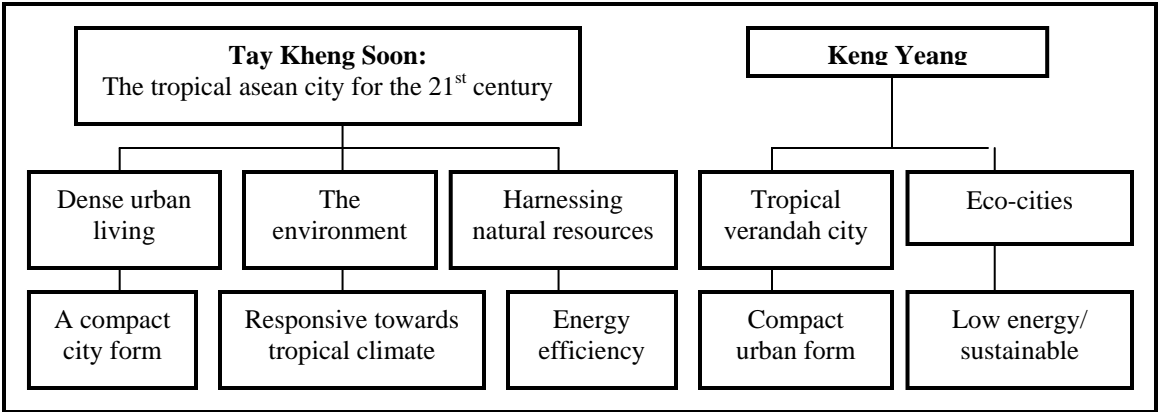


Fig. 11. Flow chart showing the main criterias for a tropical city's environment

7. Conclusion – Garden City of Kuching explained

Eventually, from the synthesis above, an urban design parameter or guideline is derived (*Figure 12*). This parameters or guidelines are the keys to the creation of a successful garden city of Kuching.

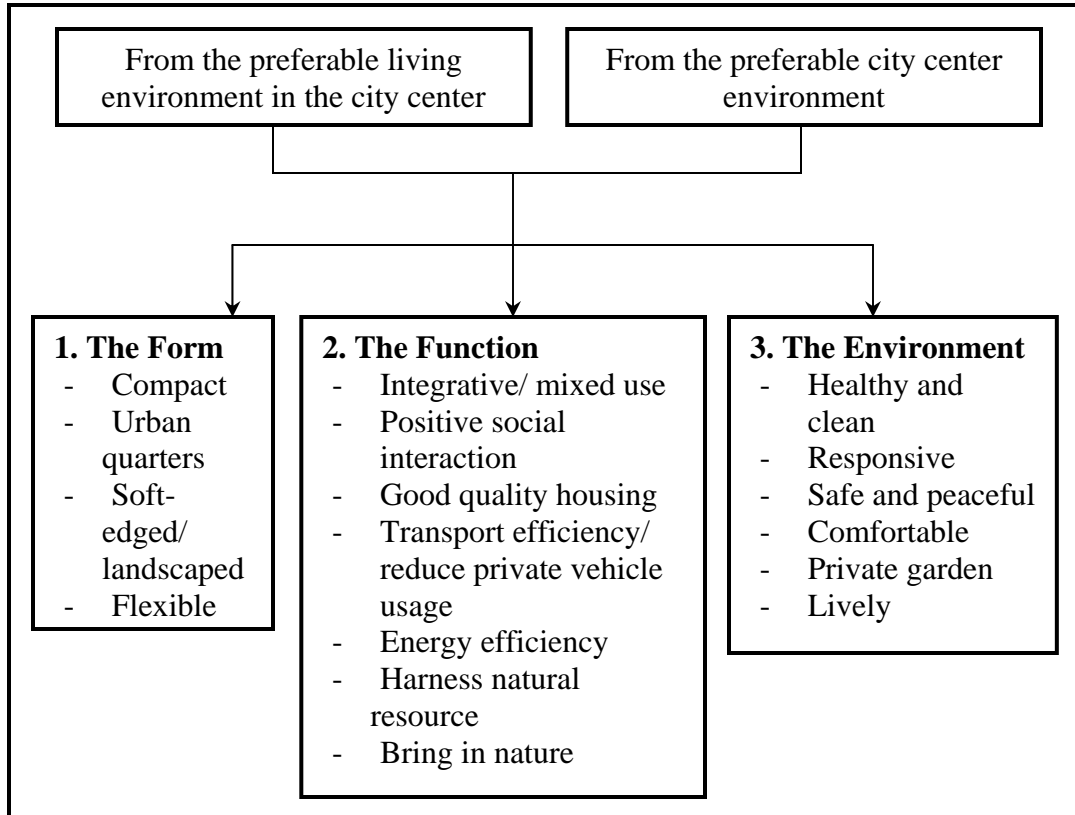


Fig. 12. Flowchart showing the parameters for the new model of Kuching's city center, derived from the two main objectives

Thus, it is obvious that Garden City of Kuching is not just about having abundant green parks, it is more than that, it is about having functional parks, well-accessible park, and privately own parks; It is also not about decentralization, low density, low rise, or clear land use zoning, but about compact living, integrative and energy saving. An image of a proposed 'compact garden living' in the city center of Kuching is shown in *Figure 13*.

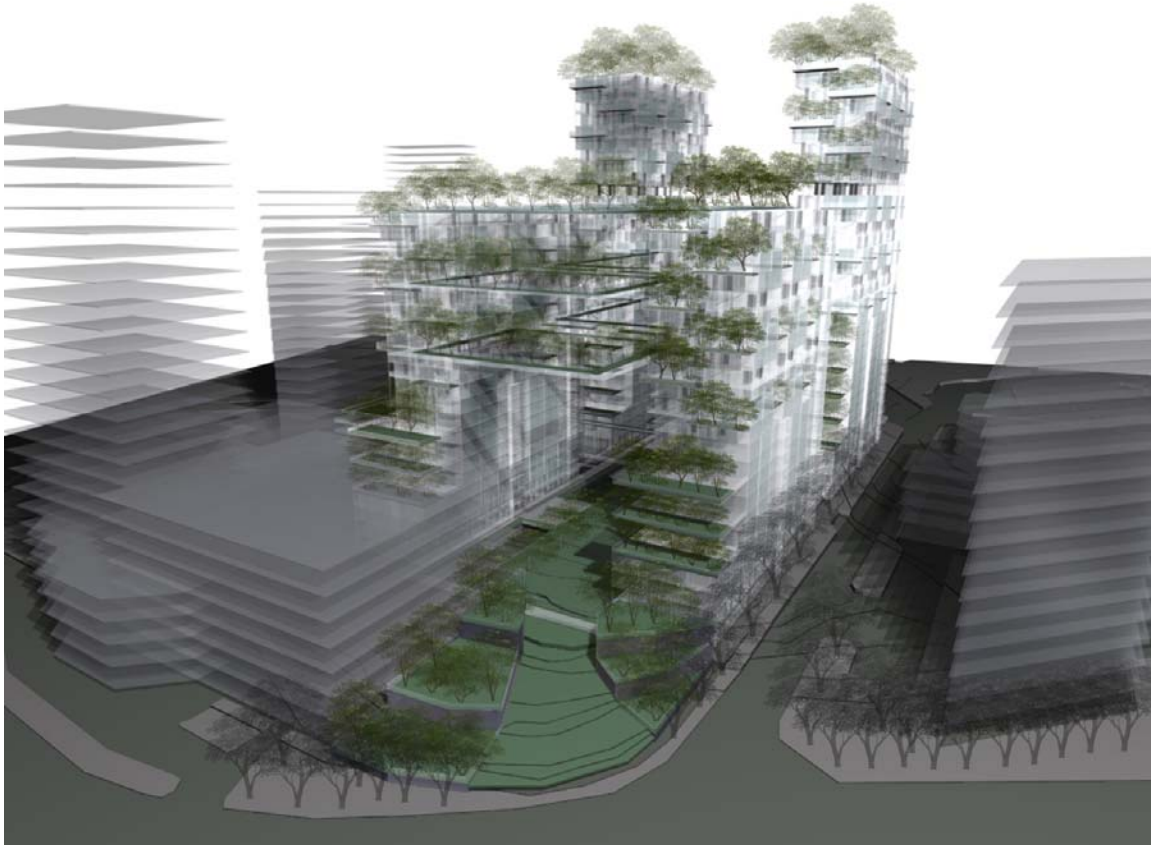


Fig. 13. Image showing a proposal for a 'compact garden living' by the author at the Kuching's New Business District center.

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