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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

piece of urban heritage, historic squares and historic buildings should reinforce each others' identities in order to retain their significant values (Balsas, 2007). In the discussion of heritage and tourism, Nuryanti(1996) discussed that the conservation of built heritage as part of tourism requires an understanding on the 'interdependencies' between the heritage and the community. Visitors should be able to experience and have 'enriched understanding' on the significance of a historic place, as it is a 'carrier of historical values from the past'. This requires our understanding on how places acquire their meaning from people, and how people ascribe meaning to places.

Recent studies on place meaning have found that places allow people to reconnect with past feelings and experiences, memories, and events that have marked to be significant for an individual or as collectively as a society (Manzo, 2005). However, most studies conducted on the relationship between altered environments or setting towards place meaning are within the areas of outdoor recreational setting and wilderness (Brehm, Eisenhauer, & Stedman, 2012; Kyle, Mowen, & Tarrant, 2004; Wynveen, Kyle, & Sutton, 2012). These studies found that the setting or environment of a place influence the construction of meaning that the place has towards people. When certain place meanings appear to be more prevalent towards an individual, the conception that a person has towards a place will eventually shape their emotions, behaviours and attachment to that place. In the context of urban research, numerous studies examine and discuss the role of place attachment and sense of place in understanding the value of place to people. The construction of place identity derives from meanings that people give to a place, which depends on the degree of engagement of the users and their perceptions to their environment (Ujang, 2012). The functions of the place, emotional bond that people have towards the place and the socio-cultural attributes that make up a place compose people's place attachment (Shamsuddin & Ujang, 2008). This demonstrates the reinforcement of meaning and attachment upon one another.

The meaning of places derives from both physical and experiential attributes. Saar and Palang(2009) found several factors that can make places to become meaningful, such as through the experience and relationships that people have with other people. Some places hold past memories for people to recollect and reconnect with their histories. There are also places that acquire their meaning through certain activities that people do or engage. The spatial and experiential attributes that shape the meaning also create memories. Mowla(2004) suggested that 'memories have a context and place form', while place acts as a structure to reinforce or aid the recollection of memories. However, when these qualities start to disconnect with the individual and places becomes less familiar through change, memories might also diminish (Sumaiyah Othman, Nishimura, & Kubota, 2013). One of the challenges of dealing with historic spaces is the 'lack of positive response' between the historic site to its context and surrounding (Tiesdell, Oc, & Heath, 1996). The physical changes and spatial aggregations that result from the evolvement of the urban fabric may also shift the meanings of places and how spaces are defined. Do changed spatial and experiential qualities of a place then reshape the meaning of places? Saar and Palang(2009) contended that 'meaning become especially strong when the places as they were are not there anymore'. Embarking from this position, this study examines how different group of users assign various place meanings to a historic square that has been totally redeveloped.

3. Methods

This study uses a case study approach in order to examine the place meanings that locals and tourists attribute to DataranPahlawan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 60 participants that consist of locals, domestic tourists and an international tourist to explore the functions and meanings of the historic squares that shape their experience. The researchers conducted the data collection process across four different time intervals on weekdays and weekends (morning, afternoon, evening and night), to ensure that the sampling includes the different types of activities and typology of visitors. This study focused solely on semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection to allow visitors to express their personal connections with the square and emphasize on their relationship with the place without predetermined answers (Spartz& Shaw, 2011; D. R. Williams, 2008). The interview questions were structured into three parts: respondents' profiles (age, gender, nationality, cultural backgrounds), motivations for visit, and meanings of the square to them. The researchers recorded the interview responses in two ways, either by writing word by word based on the respondents' verbal answers, or by the respondents who answered the interview form in writing. The texts that described the meanings by the different visitors are then

processed through Wordle, a data visualization software that accentuates most frequently used texts in the form of ‘word clouds’ and reveal word hierarchies (McNaught& Lam, 2010; W. Williams, Parkes, & Davies, 2013). The meanings that emerge from this process are then analysed in relation to the respondents’ profiles and their motivations for visiting. The limitation of this study is that it only analyses the place meaning ascribed by the present day users and does not compare the place meaning ascribed by users before the square was redeveloped. The small sampling size is also not representative of the larger population of visitors in the case study area. However, it provides an insight into the variations of place meaning captured from the interviews. The timing of the data collection, which was not during a school holiday or a public holiday, may have also limited the inclusion of a wider typology of tourists and visitors.

4. The case study: Dataran Pahlawan

In order to comprehend the variations of place meaning, it is important to first understand the evolution of the case study area, Dataran Pahlawan. The name Dataran Pahlawan (literally translated into ‘heroes square’) originated from the names Padang Bandar Hilir and then Padang Pahlawan. The term padang refers to an open green space or field. During the British colonization period, the padang functioned as an open space for military training, recreational ground and events. It also has a strong contextual adjacency of the St. Paul Hill, where the A’Famosa fort stands. Marking the end of the colonization period in 1956, Padang Pahlawan became a nationally significant site because it was where Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysia’s first Prime Minister) declared independence. As a civic ground, people recognized the padang as a historic site, and it continued to operate as a public space that also accommodated informal economic activities such as hawker and souvenir sellers. However, in 2004, the city developer transformed the ‘field’ into a ‘square’ by converting the open space into a commercial complex. The lack of design integration between the old and new development has diminished the identity of the historic area (MohdBaroldin&Mohd Din, 2013). (Refer Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. (a) Craft sellers (Selvarani, 2013); (b) Elevation of the square; (c) Current view of the square.

5. Findings

5.1. Profiles of respondents

This study gathered findings from 60 respondents of DataranPahlawan (henceforth referred as DP) that belong to three types of visitor typology: local visitor, domestic tourist and international tourist (refer Table 1). Two-thirds of the total respondents comprised of local visitors from Melaka, where majority of them are Malay. The rest of the respondents were domestic tourists that came from other states in Malaysia, such as Pahang, Terengganu, Johor and Sarawak. At the time the interviews were conducted, only one international tourist from Singapore was willing to participate in the study. However, during field observation, a group of tourists from Korea also visited the square, but was unable to respond to the interview due to their lack of fluency in the English language. The age profiles of the respondents largely consisted of adolescent and youth aged between 15 to 19 years and adults aged between 20 to 29 years (refer Table 2). Visitors in the former age group were mostly local visitors, although a small number of

them represented domestic tourists who came as part of their educational visit to Melaka. Only nine visitors aged 30 years and above visited the square at the time the data was collected. The profile of respondents and their age groups were an unexpected discovery in this study because based on previous studies visitors of historic sites and heritage attractions would incline more towards the older age groups.

Table 1. Profile of respondents at DataranPahlawan.

Visitor typology	No.	Place of origin	Cultural background
Local visitors	41	Melaka	38 Malay, 3 Chinese
Domestic tourists	18	Other states in Malaysia	17 Malay, 1 Indian
International tourist	1	Singapore	1 Chinese

Table 2. Age groups of respondents.

Age range	No.
15-19	35
20-29	16
30-49	5
50+	4

5.2. Visitors' motivations for visiting the square

Based on the interviews, respondents' answers on their motivations for visiting DP are categorized into five themes: leisure, sightseeing, working, recreation and shopping. The main reason for visiting DP as informed by 24 respondents was for "leisure", which constitutes the activities like sitting, relaxing and meeting friends. These leisure activities were conducted throughout the day, from morning until night, except in the afternoon, considering that the microclimate at the square is hot and sunny. The second highest reason for visiting the square was "sightseeing", where 17 respondents visited nearby historical sites, as part of their visiting activities or educational program. Visitors generally conduct sightseeing activities in the daytime, particularly in the morning, especially those who came as part of educational trips. This corresponds with the opening hours of the historic sites and museums nearby. Other reasons for visiting DP comprised of "working" (meeting, business), "recreation" (exercise, skateboarding) and "shopping" (at the adjacent shopping malls). Although the nature of "leisure" and "recreation" are similar, the interviews and observations revealed that the types of activities in the square had more variety at night. While relaxing and socializing activities continued from day to night, more active activities such as exercise, gatherings, picnics and skateboarding started to happen in the late evening and at night when the microclimate is shadier and cooler. Exercising activities were also observed to take place early in the morning around 7 am until 8 am, especially on weekends.

5.3. Types of activities conducted at the square

The shift of the daily activities revealed another important finding in this study as it reflects the evolution of the function of this transformed historic square (refer Fig. 2). Social and leisure construct the primary activities of the square as a public space for locals and tourists. This type of activities is similar to the activities that were previously conducted at the former *padang* (green open space) where locals used the field to conduct recreational activities such as exercising and jogging (Said & Harun, 2010). While recreational and leisure activities continued in the evening and at night, the typology of the users shifted to the younger crowd. The data indicated that visitors aged from 15 to 25, mostly those who came in groups consisting of three people or more, utilised the square as their

gathering spot. Based on the observation, the addition of paved walkways around the field attracted skateboarders and children-cyclers, which reflects the emerging type of night recreation. Sitting activities also moved from the shaded benches located at the outer perimeter of the square during the day to the centre open field in the evening and at night.

Based on the daily life cycle of the square, tourists visit DP during the daytime, while the locals use the square from morning until night. This finding has critical implications on how future events and economic activities can synchronize with the users of the square. For instance, tourism-related activities such as interpretations of the square’s history or selling of souvenirs and local crafts would be most suitable to be conducted in the morning and evening when tourists visit the square. On the other hand, supporting activities at night should cater for the needs of the local communities, such as providing services to complement leisure and recreational activities.

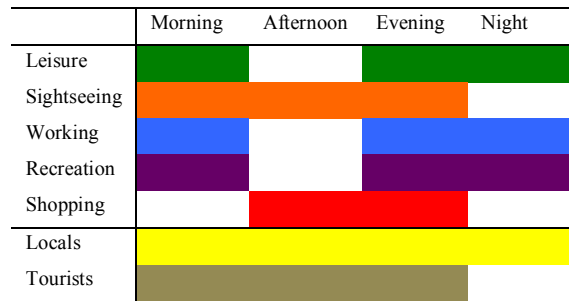


Fig. 2. Daily life cycle of DataranPahlawan.

5.4. Place meaning ascribed to the square

In the interviews, the researchers asked the respondents on what DataranPahlawan means to them. Their responses were recorded verbatim and then keyed into the word-cloud software to obtain words that they frequently used. Most of the responses were in Bahasa Malaysia. The data revealed that the top most frequently used words were “relax/leisure” (*bersantai*), “tourist” (*pelancong*) and “history” (*sejarah*). Meanings associated with leisure and recreational activities correspond to the earlier findings from the study conducted by Ismail Said and Nor ZalinaHarun(2010) on the place attachment that local residents had over Padang Pahlawan. In their study, majority of the respondents associated the *padang* as a “green space” and “recreational grounds”. In their findings, the respondents valued “economic activities” by the hawkers as a sense of familiarity that the site has. A comparison between the findings from the 2009 data with this study reveals that there has been a change in the meanings and values ascribed by users of the square. Economic activities were not mentioned in the respondents’ answers, aside from “shopping” at the adjacent shopping malls that only represented a minority of visitors. This phenomenon is evident due to the relocation of the souvenir vendors to the underground shops below the square, which indicates the loss of visibility of economic activities that once flourished as part of the square’s main activities. However, new meanings that link the square with its historical value and tourism attraction begin to emerge. The transformation of the square instigated or evoked the feeling of place attachment towards the historical values of the *padang* that is seemingly no longer there. For local visitors, the word that was most frequently used by them to describe the meaning of DP was “leisure” (*bersantai*), which represents the square as a place for them to relax (refer Fig. 3). Since local visitors comprised the dominant users of the square, “history” (*sejarah*) still formed as one of the main meanings associated with DP. Other emerging words were “we/us/our” (*kami*) and “calm” (*tenang*), followed by “bonding” (*silaturrahim*), “friends” (*rakan-rakan*), and “tourists” (*pelancong*). These meanings reflect the square as giving a sense of belonging to local visitors, where it is regarded as a place for visitors to bond with their friends and families. Visitors also regarded the square as a place where they can calm their minds, taking into account that the square is one of the largest open spaces in the city. Three local visitors responded with the word “don’t” (*jangan*), where they did not want to lose the square. Their expressions were “Heritage! Don’t disturb”, “Don’t take away our

field” (*Janganramspadang kami*) and “Do not destroy our land”. Although these responses were not reflected in the majority, they still signify a strong place meaning and attachment that locals have towards the square.



Fig. 3. Word-cloud of place meanings of DataranPahlawan from local visitors.

For tourists, DP acts as a landmark for Melaka, a “historic site” (*sejarah*) and a “tourist” attraction (*pelancong*) (refer Fig. 4). Although the physical spaces of the *padang* has been totally transformed into an urban square, tourists still recognize the site for its historical significance. It is interesting to note that leisure activities were not regarded as a significant meaning to tourists. This is most likely contributed by the nature of tourist activities that are often done as a brief visit, as opposed to local visitors who frequented the squares daily and weekly. Another meaning that was ascribed by two domestic tourists from Pahang aged 23 and 34 was “patriotic” (*patriotik*), which resonates with the historical value of the former Padang Pahlawan as a place of the declaration of independence. Two respondents aged 16 (from Perak) and 21 (from Shah Alam) also regarded the square as a place for “bonding” (*silaturrahim*), similar to the meaning assigned by local visitors. Community bonding as a strong place meaning for DP is closely linked to the nature of social and leisure activities, such as relaxing with friends and mingling with other visitors, conducted by visitors from the adolescent, youth and young adult groups.



Fig. 4. Word-cloud of place meanings of DataranPahlawan from domestic tourists.

6. Discussion

6.1. *The physical transformation of the square changed the types of activities that visitors do*

The square remains to serve primarily as a leisure and recreational space for local visitors, as how it was used in its earlier conception. The majority of the locals considered the square as a place where they can relax by themselves, with their friends or families. This activity is able to persist because the transformed square still offers ample open space that can be utilized by groups of visitors. While earlier studies have found that locals use the square mostly during the daytime, this study discovered that the leisure and recreational activities have extended until late evening and the nighttime. During the square's earlier days before it was redeveloped, it is not common for people to sit in the middle of the open field. However, the provision of spotlights, compound lighting, hard paved surfaces and seating around the green area have invited new types of leisure activities to emerge, such as night gatherings, picnics, cycling and skateboarding. The alteration of the previous field that had no hard surface into a square with grassed and paved areas invited people to engage in new forms of recreational activities. This is also contributed by the changing urban lifestyle and trends of social activities in public spaces, which have shifted the leisure activities of the square from its edges to its centre, and lengthened its use from day to night. As a result of this change, "leisure" appears to be a stronger place meaning among local visitors compared to the value of "history". Nonetheless, the historical significance of the square is still well regarded by the locals. This finding corresponds with other studies on historical sites where the constant engagement of the locals with the site can build stronger place attachment and meaning.

6.2. *Locals and tourists ascribe different place meanings to the square*

As discussed by several literatures, the backgrounds, experiences and intensity of engagement of users influence place meaning. Local visitors have longer and deeper engagement with the square because they occupy it as part of their daily or weekly activities. On the other hand, tourists only inhabit the square momentarily and transitorily as part of the sightseeing activities. As stated in the previous section, locals strongly associate the square with "leisure" activities because those are the activities that they mostly do. This meaning intensifies when their activities in the square become more frequent that they begin to develop an attachment and bond to the square. Conversely, tourists perceive the square's value as a "tourism attraction" because the square is still associated with its former historical significance and promoted in tourism brochures, although the historic sense only remains as a site that was once there. They regarded the square as a landmark to Melaka because of its past history. However, information or interpretation regarding the square's historical value is barely noticeable, and this may result in a lack of knowledge and appreciation towards the square's history in the future. The different place meanings of the square demonstrate that the conservation or revitalization of the historic squares must consider the needs of both locals and tourists.

6.3. *Elevation of the square makes the area fragmented and less connected with its historical context*

In the total redevelopment of the *padang*, the square was transformed from a ground-level field to an elevated square that is surrounded by three modern shopping complexes. This spatial aggregation has resulted in the diminishing of several historical and functional meaning of the square. For instance, the *padang* that was once known for its hawkers that sell souvenirs and local products are no more associated by the respondents in this study. The relocation of the hawker stalls to the underground space underneath the square has disconnected an important activity that previously contributed to the square's vitality. The change of levels of the square space and the presence of high-rise buildings surrounding it also weaken the visual connectivity and visibility between the historic square and St. Paul Hill. The lack of imagery of the historical context may eventually lead to the loss of appreciation towards the historic value of the square.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

This study has examined and demonstrated the effects of redevelopment of a historic square to its place meaning. While the dimensions of place meaning associated with the historic square were not discussed in this paper, this study found that the changed setting has a strong influence on the types of activities that people can do, which eventually lead to the different place meanings between locals and visitors. DataranPahlawan has been totally redeveloped. It does not retain any portions of its original setting, other than its function as a public space. The findings reveal that although some of the square's meaning is able to persist in the changed setting, the historical values may soon fade if its significance and bigger role in the city of Melaka is not strengthened. New groups of users may ascribe meaning that only relates to their personal experience, rather than the history that shaped the square in the first place. To sustain the square as a meaningful historic place for both locals and tourists, this study recommends that the city council needs to play a stronger role in managing what is left of the historical site. This is also vital for other historic open spaces in Malaysia that need to be protected and managed through the implementation of policies before they are lost to commercial developers. For DataranPahlawan, place-making activities can help to reinforce the values and meanings of the square, such as celebrating how people utilized the field in its old days, commemorating its historical significance through occasional events, and incorporating public art as a form of creative interpretations of the square's history and stories. Temporary weekly activity such as a street market that sells souvenirs and local products can be organized along the streets that connect to the square to St. Paul Hill as a strategy to physically reconnect the historical sites, revitalize the souvenir vendors that have been relocated to the underground bazaar, and to attract people to the square. This study concludes that projects on conservation, urban development and tourism need to work hand in hand, where the needs of from all aspects and all users must be taken into consideration. Further research may examine the role of context and spatial attributes in the construction of place meaning of historic or heritage sites and the different models or strategies on how historic open spaces can sustain alongside urban development.

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