

Kuala Lumpur - from a tin mining settlement to a neoliberal stronghold of Southeast Asia

Kozlowski, M. & Huston, S

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KUALA LUMPUR - FROM A TIN MINING SETTLEMENT TO A NEOLIBERAL STRONGHOLD OF SOUTHEAST ASIA`

Key Words: Urban planning and design, climate responsive design, neoliberalism, and property led development, regional planning

Abstract

Kuala Lumpur (KL) emerged as the capital of the newly independent Federation of Malayan States in 1957 with a population of 316,000. Over the next sixty years, the city expanded into a major urban regional conurbation. It now covers an area of 2,790 km² and has a population of around 7.7 million.

Purpose

In the last two decades, market-driven, fast-track development, underpinned by road infrastructure has accelerated the city's urban transformation. Especially over the last two decades, a spate of urban redevelopments, including commercial and retail complexes, specialised centres, industrial parks, educational complexes, and residential estates have transformed the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR) beyond recognition. KL is only one example among many of intensive Southeast Asian property-led urban development, fuelled by demographic pressures and global capital inflows that transformed regional natural and built environments. The purpose of the study was to describe and interpret the development of the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region. To interpret the evolution of KL's built form and its understand its current socio-cultural legacy, the researchers applied the themes of globalisation, neoliberalism, and property-led development..

Methodology and approach

The study adopted reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) and actively imposed the themes of *globalisation, neoliberalism* and *property led development* to interpret the urban form and structure of the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region. The RTA methodology remains unapologetic about researcher subjectivity. Rather, it emphasised the personal daily observations and interpretations of KL's urban form. So even though the purpose of the paper is mainly a description of KL's development, the situated researchers actively interpreted phenomena data through their own particular socio-cultural, disciplinary and ideological positionings to tell their version of KL's development story.

Findings

After immersion in urban phenomena, reading, reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering and writing and re-writing, the researchers imposed the themes of *globalisation, neoliberalism* and *property-led development* as interpretive outcomes of the research. It became clear that these three themes explained the **shift from government-sponsored development in the post independence period to the current globalised-private oriented development** The major findings of this research suggests that the global, property-led mode of urban development, whilst superficially successful, undermined traditional and tropical-climate urban landscapes. It also bequeathed many urban or property level problems, including traffic congestion, air pollution, planning governance and building management issues whose debilitating health legacy the recent COVID 19 pandemic has accentuated. The paper outlines narratives for a more balanced and sustainable mode of urban development, more in tune with local culture and climatic conditions.

Originality

This paper provides a deep insight analysis and evaluation of the Kuala Lumpur's growth from a small town into a global metropolitan region. It identified *globalisation, neoliberalism* and *property led development*, as the three themes that enable a coherent interpretation of the city's evolution, character and challenges.

Introduction

Over the past 70 years, urban populations in Asia have exploded, non-more so than in Malaysia where UN (2018) figures suggest the compound annual growth rate of percentage urban population 1950-2020 was 1.92% compared to Asia's 1.54% and the World's 0.92%. Like peer examples in other countries of Southeast Asia and also India or China, KLMR's transformation was rooted in specific narratives of, 'demolition, dispossession, redevelopment, peri-urbanisation, and peripheral mega urban developments' (Hamnet and Forbes, 2010, Wu, 2020). The paper characterises the urban evolution of KL since its beginning; to ascertain the role of political and economic determinants, and to identify the current global forces including neoliberalism that influence the urban form and structure of the KL Metropolitan Region.

The notion of neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s during the era of economic sluggishness and recession. Its leading argument was that a liberal free-market approach is much more efficient in development and management, and allocating resource than the traditional state government interventions. Since the 1980s, at least until the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, neoliberal dogma was a major driver of globalisation and dominant at the international, national, and local levels of the political spectrum. It strongly influenced urban policies, especially in large world cities. Instead of preserving and enhancing public spaces for the end-users, urban local authorities preferred to create semi-privatized and revenue-producing enclaves that boost the image of the city to the outside world. Policies aimed at disadvantaged neighbourhoods and developments of affordable housing were overshadowed by large scale urban transformation and gentrification (Purcell 2011).

Davies and Monk (2010) argue that architecture and urban design outcomes guided by neoliberal principles generated exclusive fortified enclaves in form of luxury-themed environments, boutique shopping malls, artificial island and waterfront suburbs, and gentrified downtown districts. These new bourgeoisie utopian enclaves mushroomed globally. They combine three distinctive elements. Firstly, these new places are embedded in layers of security with access restricted to the high-income classes and ruling elites. Secondly, re-developed locales are multifunctional. They combine residential, employment, leisure, and entertainment functions that discourage well-healed residents from mingling with the *hoi polloi*. Thirdly, these new semi-private or privatised spaces are artificial landscapes with a sanitised cultural message. They confirm social status and reinforce individualist impulses in the *status quo*. Al-fresco and formal dining, high-end boutiques and sundry bland commercial utopian sceneries comfort a wealthy and conservative clientele.

Harvey (2011) describes neoliberalism as a concentration of privileges, wealth, and impunities. Smith (2011) linked neoliberalism with urban regeneration via gentrification in American cities. Smith argues that new urban policies create a new frontier for restructuring urban space. As a result of gentrification, many residents are relocated and replaced by high-income earners.

The growth of neoliberalism has had an impact on urban policies and urban planning and design. As a result of neoliberal policies, urban design has been gradually shifting from a universal discipline aimed at developing urban inclusivity and creating places for all people to a master planning tool delivering new urban enclaves characterised by exclusionary qualities.

Since the 1990s, Malaysia has effectively followed the main precepts of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism took root during the two decades of administration under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and was continued under Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and Najib Razak (Lim 2017). The legacy on urban form and city structure are now manifest. KL and its entire metropolitan region were more affected by neoliberalism than other cities in Malaysia. Neoliberalism had a profound impact on the urban development of KLMR since the early 1990s. Semi-privatisation of major urban services including waste and water management's energy supply, and telecommunication services follows the trends and practices of other major cities around the World. The only urban infrastructure that was not privatised was the public transport system. The main rapid transit cities operating in KLMR including the LRT, Monorail, and MRT are still fully subsidised by the government. Neoliberalism constituted a key strategy ensuring a partial government involvement in the maintenance and operation of the

urban infrastructure services. As a result of neoliberalism, the private sector took the leading role in commercial and residential development (Indah Water Consortium 2018, Tenaga Nasional Berhad 2018, DBKL 2016, Pigeon 2012, SPAD 2016).

This study is divided into three parts. The first part describes the evolution of Kuala Lumpur and its urban conurbation since 1957. The second part analyses the contemporary KLMR in the context of urban form and structure, environmental degradation, socio-economic issues, property development and urban policies and strategies. It demonstrates how property led development, triggered by the principles of neoliberalism, dominates current urban transformation. The third part includes urban planning and development recommendations for the future

Methodology

The study adopted Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) which is one form Thematic Analysis on a spectrum from code book approaches (such as the Framework Method) to the more flexible and subjective RTA approach. RTA shares some aspects of other qualitative approaches that look for patterns in data - but is nevertheless distinctive from e.g. grounded theory, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or discourse analysis. Subjective interpretations sometimes reflected on urban and property phenomena via a theoretical/deductive lens but, at other times, reflections were inductive. In other words, we grouped similar phenomena but without using formal coding framework. Nevertheless, as the investigation proceeded, the researchers actively but gradually created or generated the themes of *neoliberalism* and *property-led development*. For, as noted by Braun & Clarke (2021 p. 334) unlike with coding TA, its reflexive variant (RTA) is only not overly pre-occupied with coding accuracy or reliability. In fact, the avoidance of bias is 'illogical, incoherent and ultimately meaningless'. Rather, for this KL investigation, researcher subjectivity underpinned experiential and critical qualitative knowledge production. To generate meaningful knowledge, researchers made assumptions and interpreted various urban and property phenomena. So even though the purpose of the paper is mainly a description of KL's development, the situated researchers actively interpreted phenomena data through their own particular socio-cultural, disciplinary and ideological positionings to tell their version of KL's development story. The interpretation involved informal coding that grouped observations with similar facets and eventually distilled out multi-faceted themes with shared meaning of *neoliberalism* and *property-led development* that explained KL's urban evolution. Qualitatively, the research conducted an extensive review of the literature linked to the growth of KLMR, its phenomena, and responses from the local, state, and federal governments. Besides, applied methods included documentary research and policy analysis. The investigation relied mainly on secondary data sources (such as planning documents and policies) but also accessed professional literature, journals. However, some primary data were collected and included field assessments, visual observations, and interviews. Field assessments aggregated observations and evaluations of existing public spaces against a set of internationally recognised design criteria for tropical urban development. Urban visual observations are an essential tool to portray perceived images of the existing built environment.

The first part of the study describing the evolution of KL is reliant mainly on secondary data including the review of professional literature and planning documents. The literature review originates from books, journal articles, produced by international and local scholars. A substantial amount of information regarding the case study areas derives from government and non-government web links. The second part of the study focused on contemporary KL also used primary observation and other data collection, including field surveys and a structured interview. The RTA methodology was flexible enough to incorporate aspects of a case study approach that Yin (2003) suggests permits a richer understanding of physical, social and economic phenomenon with Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region itself as the case study area.

The Colonial Period

KL is a major urban conurbation of Southeast Asia. The city administrative area has a population of 1.7 million and an area of 243 km². The population of the KL Metropolitan Region, covering an area of 2790 sq.km., is 7.7 million (World Population Review 2019).

The city's beginnings are associated with the tin mining industry. In 1857, Raja Abdullah set up KL as a tin mining trading post at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers. A direct translation of the Malay term 'KL' into English means "muddy confluence" (Seng Fatt, 2004). In the early stages of the city development, the rivers were transport arteries for tin mines. After 1910 the city expanded away from the rivers' confluence, and the importance of these fluvial corridors gradually diminished (Abu Latip et al., 2009).

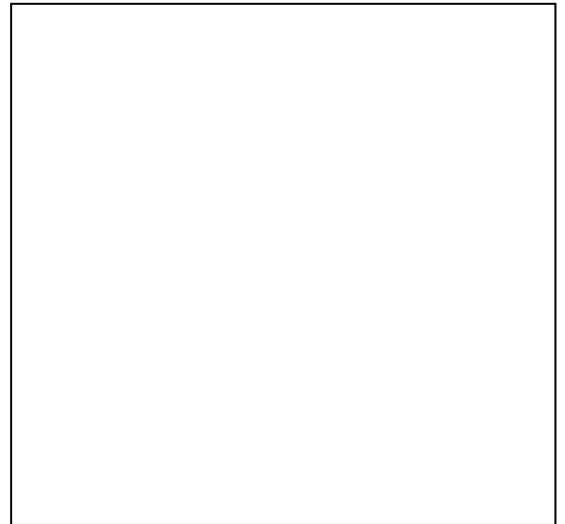
During this first period in KL's development, the first streets were established linking the Klang/Gombak River confluence with the tin-mining fields in Ampang, located further to the east. Several of the key streets of modern KL such as Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Ampang, (Ampang Street), Jalan Java (Java Street) (now Jalan Tun Perak) Jalan Petaling (Petaling Street), and Market Street were formed during that early period. The Chinese neighbourhood, laid out on a gridded street system, was located in the south around Petaling Street, now very popular with foreign tourists. The west bank of the Klang River became the new location for the British residency and the administration buildings. Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square), opened in 1957, lies 150 m to the west of the river confluence. It was the former site of the Selangor Club, a social club founded in 1884 to serve the British colonial elite (Seng Fatt, 2004). In the 1920 and 1930s, the rail and road systems gradually took over the function of the main transport movement corridors. The new road system was developed in a haphazard way which quickly resulted in major traffic congestions (Abdul Latip et al., 2009).

Throughout the colonial period, until 1957, the main drivers of urban development were economic. The early urban settlement resembled a 'cowboy style town' full of gambling saloons, opium dens, and brothels (Sang Fatt 2004). It was mainly inhabited by migrant workers from China and other parts of the South Asian or Southeast Asian Regions (Sang Fatt 2004, Too, 2007)

As a result of political decisions, the British colonial powers contributed to the growing urban landscape by developing major institutional buildings including the KL Railway Station and the Sultan Abdul Samad Building. Their main objective was to leave a permanent colonial legacy in the urban landscape of KL. Both buildings are the best showcase examples of the British Raja architectural style featuring Mogul, Moorish, and European neo-gothic styles enhanced by oriental decorative fantasies (Bunnell, 2014, Tajuddin, 2007).

Another political move that had an impact on the urban environment of KL was a decision made by the Sultan of Selangor in the early 1900s to grant to the Malay Muslim population a 223-acre land located to the north of the city centre for permanent settlement. As a result, a Malay village called Kampung Bharu (new village) was established on the northern fringe of KL (Ujang, 2016). This move was supported by the British administrations that were uneasy about the overwhelming Chinese population dominance in the city (Sang Fatt, 2004). The Malay population opted for their traditional timber kampong houses built on stilts which were in a total juxtaposition to the solid Chinese shop-housesⁱ. With the arrival of migrant workers from India who settled in Masjid India and Brickfields areas, KL became a well-established multi-ethnic and multi-cultural urban centre at the beginning of the 20th century (Seng Fatt, 2004). This ethnic diversity had a profound impact on the built environment as all the four major groups (the Chinese, Malays, Indians, and the British) left their mark on the urban landscape of KL.

Although KL grew throughout the 20th century its population at the brink of the Second World War in 1939 just surpassed 170,000. Even the eve of independence in 1957 reached only 316,000 (Yaakob et al., 2019). The images of KL from the 1940s and 1950s portray a medium-size city embedded in rich tropical landscape foliage. Many major streets were lined up with tall canopy trees providing shade and thermal comfort for pedestrians (Cheah, 2008). Images of KL in the 1940s are shown in Figure 1



Central KL in the mid-1940s. Source: www.pinterest.com

Note: This image is 75 years old therefore it constitutes a public property

The Post-Independence Period

In 1957 KL emerged as the national capital of the new Malay Federation. KL was still a medium-size city, significantly smaller than other capitals in the Southeast Asian Region, and even within the Malay Peninsula, it was overshadowed by Singapore and Penang.

Abdul Latip (2017) argues that in the early post-independence period in Southeast Asia, there was an urgent need for progress and modernity and there was no time to dwell on the meaning and importance of the local roots. The new developing countries began to open their doors to foreign capitalist enterprises resulting in urban infrastructures based on imported templates. The Malaysian urban planning legislation was very much based on the British planning system

The major challenge for the new Malaysian government in 1957 was to identify a new image and sense of place for KL and to encourage the Malay population to settle in the city which is overwhelmingly inhabited by the Chinese and Indian population.

The expansion of the city took place in the 1960s with the development of the new satellite cities including Shah Alam and Petaling Jaya and new residential districts to accommodate the Malay population (Isa and Kaur, 2015). This political decision to build new satellite cities and encourage the rural Malay population to move into the new urban areas had an overwhelming influence on the physical, economic and social environments of KL and triggered the development of a large urban conurbation. The first planned township of Petaling Jaya had developed into a major city with a population of over 500,000 (Petaling Jaya City Council, 2018).

Economic factors also played an important role in the development of KL and the surrounding urban centres. The 1970s witnessed a gradual makeover of the retail sector. The traditional shop-houses and department stores were gradually replaced by new indoor shopping complexes which were very much modelled on the western type shopping malls. Ampang Park was the first indoor shopping centre opened in 1973 triggering future similar shopping centres in KL and surrounds and as a result changing the shopping habits among the local population. Other major shopping centres that opened in the same period include Wisma Centre, Sungei Wang

Plaza, and the Bukit Bintang Plaza. Private offices located in shop-houses also stated to relocate to modern air-conditioned self-contained complexes. (Varghese and Keogh, 2007).

The majority of the housing projects in the 1960s and 70s in Malaysia were sponsored by the federal and state governments. According to Shuid (2020) in Malaysia, similar to other East and Southeast Asian countries, the development of housing were part of a government strategy to eradicate poverty and redistribute income particularly among low-income people. Therefore the government played a key role in the development of new satellite cities including Petaling Jaya, Shah Alam and Subang Jaya and new housing estates around Kuala Lumpur.

KL only received city status in 1972. This was followed by the formulation of the KL Federal Territory in 1974, and the establishment of a local authority Dewan Bandaraya KL (DBKL) (KL Municipal Council) (DBKL, 2019).

The Mahathir Period (1981-2003)

The period when Malaysia was governed by Prime Minister Tun Mahathir (1981-2003) witnessed rapid development in KL and the surrounding area. The major developments that took place in the 1990s include KL City Centre (KLCC), KL International Airport (KLIA), and the Multimedia Super Corridor including Putrajaya (the new administrative capital of Malaysia) and the multi-media city of Cyberjaya. All three developments had a major effect on reshaping the image of the newly developing KL agglomeration. The reasons behind these major developments were both economic and political. The new KL International Airport was a necessity to improve international links with Malaysia. The new airport significantly boosted international tourism and the national economy (Airport Guides, 2019).

KLCC is located on land previously occupied by the Selangor Turf Club, a British colonial-era horseracing track which had been a popular social venue for the British ruling elite and local punters. The Club was one of the main activity nodes of central KL. It also became a symbol of gambling elevating the dominance of Chinese culture in the city. As a result of a direct intervention of Prime Minister Mahathir, the Selangor Turf Club was converted into a new central city core comprising office towers, shopping mall international hotels, upmarket high-rise residential apartments, a convention centre, and a large 20-hectare recreational urban park. The KLCC Master Plan was prepared by US-based consultants Klages Carter Vail and Partners. The major landmark of the new centre was the twin Petronas Towers, completed in 1995. This development was financed by the national petroleum company Petronas and designed by the renowned US-based architect César Pelli. For years the Petronas Towers was the tallest building in the World. It immediately became the new symbol of corporate Malaysia and the main landmark of KL. The Taman KLCC (the KLCC urban park) became the most popular public space in the city frequented by all ethnic groups, all social groups, and local and international tourists (Stevens, Kozlowski, and Ujang 2016). Images of KLCC and the surrounding corporate environment is shown in Figure 2.

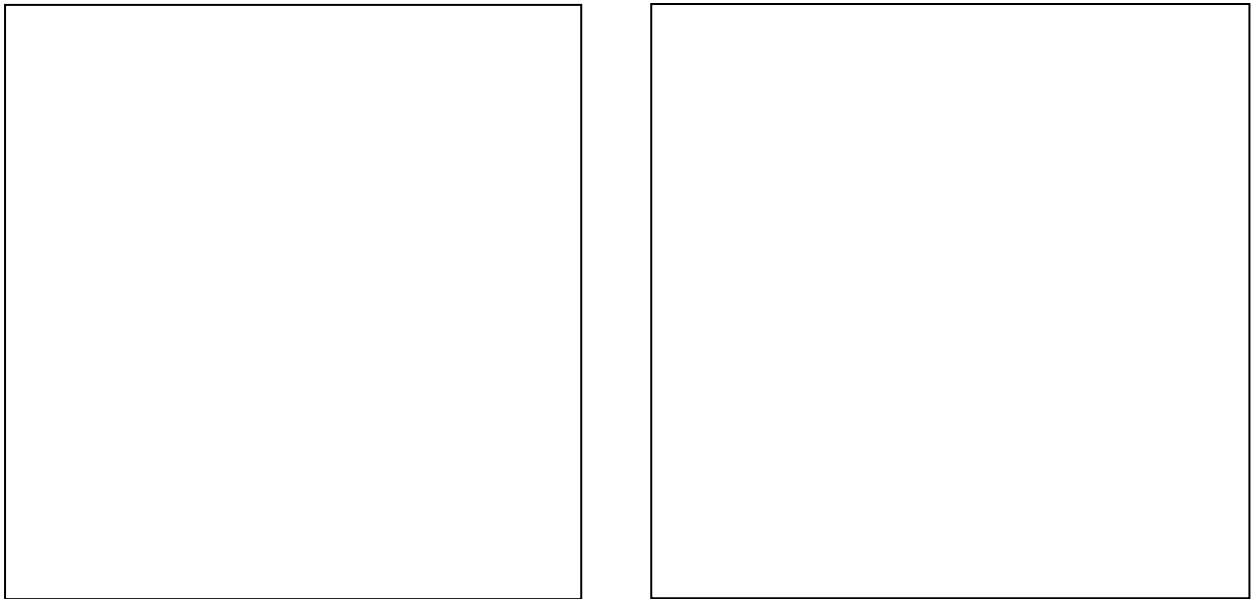


Figure 2: KLCC and the surrounding corporate environment. Source: Authors

Another major transformation during the Mahathir era was the remake-over of the Bukit Bintang area. The Bukit Bintang area was converted from a 'sleazy' entertainment area to a popular shopping and entertainment precinct.

In the 1990s Malaysia's federal government commenced the development of Putrajaya, a new administrative national capital city located 25km south of KL within the new Multimedia Super Corridor that stretches a further 40km south to the new KL International Airport. The Corridor was intended to relieve and redirect existing growth pressures in other parts of the Klang Valley. Putrajaya itself, in addition to being a showplace of new post-colonial Malaysian identity, was also intended to relieve the pressure that federal government agencies themselves were placing on KL's property market (King 2008).

Following the trend behind the development of new national capitals around the World, the urban environment of Putrajaya is completely different from a typical Malaysian city. KL Central City (KLCC), developed as a joint venture of the private and public sectors, represents an image of a 'modern and corporate Malaysia' that can be marketed to the outside world. Putrajaya built by the federal government portrays an image of strong legislative, judicial, and executive powers giving a boost and popularity to the ruling political establishment (Kozłowski 2014, King 2008). Putrajaya was planned and developed following orthodox planning principles where residential areas were separated from commercial and institutional precincts (Kozłowski 2014). Images of the planned city of Putrajaya are shown in Figure 3.

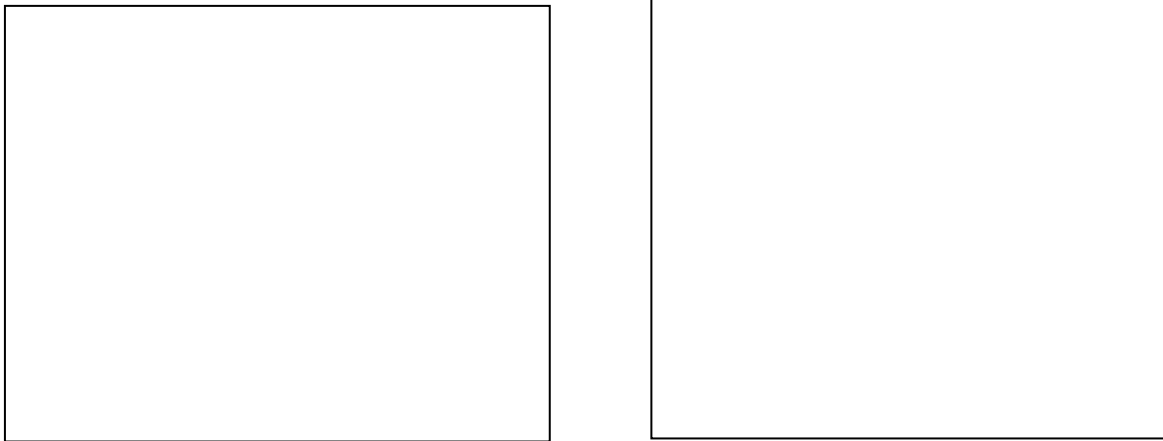


Figure 3: The planned city of Putrajaya administrative capital of Malaysia -institutional and commercial central precincts devoid of any residential areas. Source: Authors

During the 1980s, it became increasingly clear that the government sector could not maintain the role as a sole producer of housing and that this responsibility must be partially transferred to the private sector. Since the 1980s the growing KL agglomeration has witnessed a gradually increased role of the private sector in the delivery of the housing stock. This new trend was parallel with the semi-privatisation of primary municipal services including waste, water supply, sewerage, energy supply and telecommunication. However, there was still a strong commitment from the government sectors to provide social and affordable housing. In the late 1990s, the National Housing Department launched the People's Housing Project (Program Perumahan Rakyat or PPR). PPR was low-cost high rise flats developed for the low-income population. The main purpose of this program was to eliminate squatter housing in Kuala Lumpur by providing social housing for the city's poorest section of the community (Goh and Yahaya 2011).

The 1990s can be seen as the decade where global trends such as neoliberalism and property led development started to surface in Malaysia. This period saw a rapid rise in commercial property development including the construction of major shopping malls such as Sunway Pyramid and the Mid-Valley Complex, Utama 1 in Damansara and the Mines Complex in Sri Kebangan (Kozlowski, Mehan and Nawratek 2020)

Contemporary KLMR: The March towards a Global City

The post-Mahathir period can be described as being influenced by global neoliberal trends resulting in property led to fast-track development. The new millennium witnessed the establishment of a new urban conurbation called Greater KL or the KL Metropolitan Region. The area of KLMR or Greater KL is defined as an area covered by 10 municipalities surrounding KL, each governed by the following local authorities; KL City Hall (DBKL), Putrajaya Municipal Council (Perbadanan Putrajaya), Shah Alam City Council (MBSA), Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ), Klang Municipal Council (MPK), Kajang Municipal Council (MPKj), Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ), Selayang Municipal Council, Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ) and Sepang Municipal Council (MPS). Also, the regional area is spread across two state governments; Selangor and Negri Sembilan, and also contains two federal territories. The city of KL and Putrajaya are designated as Federal Territories under the direct jurisdiction of the Federal Government (International Urban Development Association 2015).

Figure 4 shows the evolution of KL from a tin mining settlement to a metropolitan region

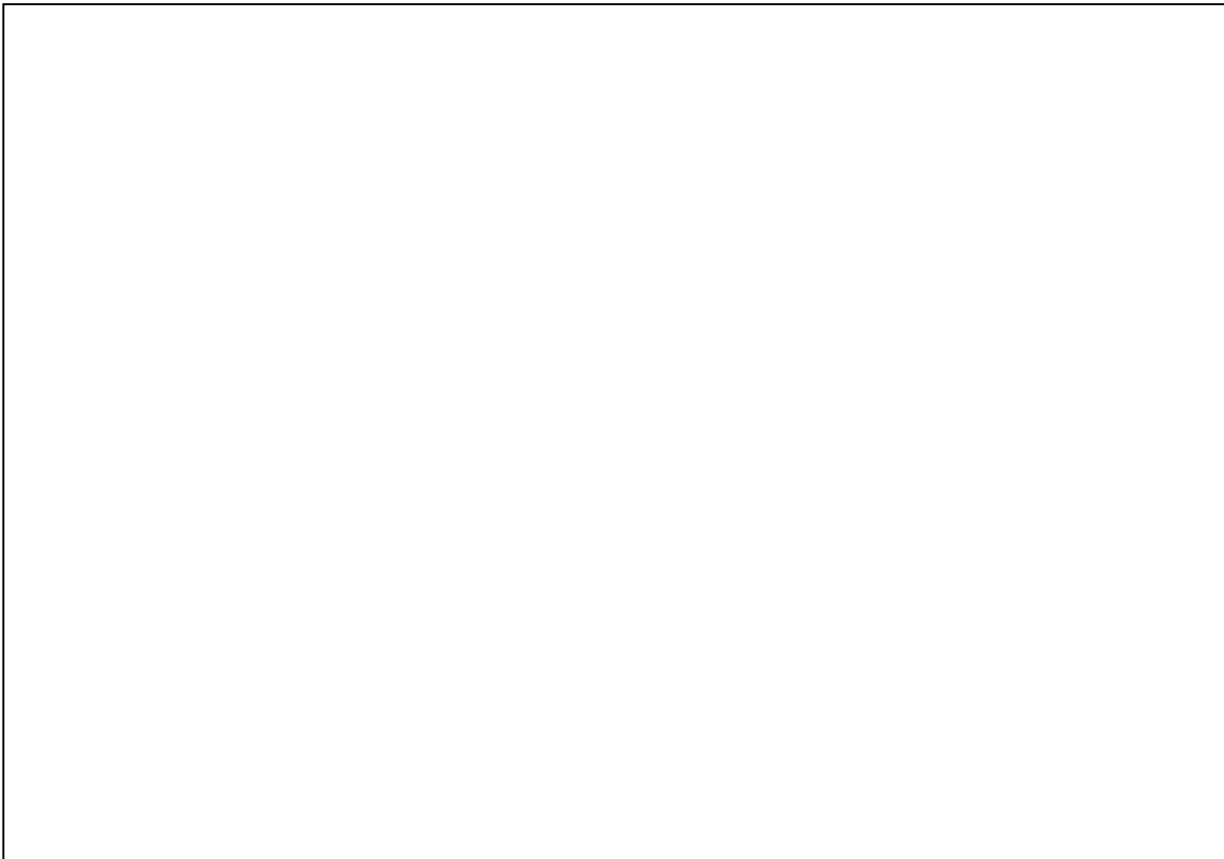


Figure 4 The evolution of Kuala Lumpur from a tin mining settlement to a metropolitan region. Source: Thinkcity and Authors

The section below discusses the impacts of globalisation and neoliberalism on the urban form and structure, environmental degradation, social -economic issue, property development, and urban policies and strategies

Urban Form and Structure

The urban structure of the KLMR is polycentric and based on a hierarchical distribution of centres connected by a network of transport corridors very similar to a typical model of an American post-industrial city. The region contains the primary centre KL with its Central Business District, multi-national company headquarters, major shopping malls, and iconic building landmarks. Specialist centres include the multi-media city of Cyberjaya, KL International Airport (KLIA), and Port Klang. The KLIA area has grown from an international airport to the main specialist centre comprising duty-free outlets, international hotels, and specialised commercial precincts. Shah Alam, the capital city of the state of Selangor, Petaling Jaya, Kajang, and Subang Jaya can be classified as principal activity centres, each having a population of a few hundred thousand. There are also several major centres such as Bangi, Serdang, Gombak, and Rawang and the new townships including Setia Alam, Desa Park City, Sunsuria, Bandar Entsek, and Beranang. There are prominent themes park resorts such as Sunway Lagoon and the Mines Resort and major regional mega shopping malls including Bandar Utama, Mid Valley Megamall, Sunway Pyramid, and IOI. The inner-city area of KL has experienced decline however, there are a few gentrified and exclusive areas within and in the proximity of new major developments. Putrajaya, the new administrative capital of Malaysia has become a principal institutional centre.

In terms of urban form, the metropolitan region has a mixture of different architectural styles with local vernacularism paving the way to global regionalism aimed at reflecting local tropical themes. Residential

development offers a blend of low-rise and high-rise buildings (Kassim et al., 2017). The majority of high-rise office and mixed-use towers are located in the central parts of Kuala Lumpur. The Petronas Towers are still the leading landmark however, their dominance is gradually being taken over by two new towers under construction; The Tun Razaak Exchange 106 and Merdeka 118 (Tun Razak Exchange, 2019).

The majority of new mega-developments in the KLMR are all market-driven and aimed at boosting the city image on the world arena. Two major projects currently under construction in central KL are The River of Life Project (ROL) and the Tun Razak Exchange. The ROL is a long-term project headed by the federal, state, and local government aimed to transform The Gombak and Klang Rivers into a vibrant waterfront. Tun Razak Exchange is a master-planned development aimed at creating a world financial precinct in the heart of the city. Both projects will have a profound impact on the image and urban form of KL (River of Life, 2019, Tun Razak Exchange, 2019).

The property-led development featuring high-end complexes and master-planned communities contributes to the provision of a high-quality private realm. However, in contrast the public realm in the metropolitan region is in poor condition. Based on public opinion surveys conducted in 2004 and in 2014 the Greater Kuala Lumpur/ Klang Valley and central parts of KL are not pedestrian-friendly environments, as it currently has inefficient design, poor maintenance, and poor accessibility. Locals and visitors often find that there are no linkages between buildings, poor continuity in pedestrian walkways, and lack of access for the physically challenged and the elderly. In 2015 an initiative has been taken by the authority to improve the pedestrian network by constructing covered walkways at several locations. However, it is felt that without the proper guide on how to improve the 'friendliness' of streets and paths to the visitors, improvement to the existing situation may not be comprehensively carried out (Zakariah and Ujang, 2015, DBKL, 2014). At the building level, building potential and services are undermined by property management short-comings (Nizam Kamaruzzaman and Marinie Ahmad Zawawi, 2010).

Kozlowski (2015) argues that to become a world city, apart from conducting catalyst projects, KL must improve the quality of its public realm. To undertake a comprehensive urban improvement and regeneration program targeting existing streets and public spaces in central parts of KL and other regional centres it is imperative to have financial mechanisms supporting such projects. Malaysia does not have the Tax Increment Finance (TIF) system that helped to rejuvenate degraded areas of many American cities. The existing property tax system in Malaysia is based on the gross floor area of the building and 6% of their commercial rental values (Property Taxes in Malaysia, 2019, World Bank 2019). This could be insufficient to generate funds for urban improvement projects.

Environmental Degradation

As a result of massive fast track development, KL has experienced environmental degradation with a significant loss of green open space. Some argue that the green tropical oasis of the 1960s has metamorphosed into a sprawling concrete jungle. The green space per inhabitant ratio in the city of KL is 8 m² in 2014 a significant decrease from the figure of 13.5 in 2010 (Abu Kasim et al., 2019). The figure of 8m² of green open space per inhabitant is below the minimum of 9m² required by the World Health Organisation and significantly lower than that of neighbouring Singapore where every resident can enjoy 66 m² of green open space or European capitals such a Vienna where the ratio is 120 m² (Abu Kassim et al 2019). The situation in other cities in the metropolitan region is better. For example, 38% of Putrajaya is green open space although there is not enough residential population to take full advantage of this asset and the majority of parks remain deserted throughout the day (Kozlowski, 2014). However, a small fraction of a natural habitat located in Bukit Nenas in the heart of the city (the Kuala Lumpur Eco-Forest) has been retained and significantly contributes to the unique character of the city (Seng Fatt, 2004).

KLMR's population has rapidly increased in the past decades what has an introspective impact on the natural environment and biodiversity. The process of continued clearing, pollution, and fragmentation of natural habitats together with the degradation of the natural environment has adversely affected the region's biodiversity, air, and water quality, resilience to climate change, local traditions and culture, agriculture, local economic potential, and

community well-being and created a heat –island effect. These factors have to be reversed otherwise they will continue to further decrease regional sustainability. Protecting and managing the natural environment is fundamental to achieving a sustainable future for the entire metropolitan region (Ling, et al., 2010)

Socio-Economic Issues

As a result of political decisions taken in the early 60s and the implementation of New Economic Policy (NEP) [1] in the 1970s the demographics of KL and the surrounding urban conurbation have changed. Today the demographic figures for the city of KL indicate that the Malay/Bumiputera constitute 45.9%, the Chinese 43.2%, Indians 10.3%, and others 1.6%. The percentage of the Malay population in satellite cities of the KLMR is considerably higher. For example, the Malay population of Shah Alam is 65%, and in the new administrative capital of Putrajaya Malays constitute an overwhelming 97% of the total population (World Population Review, 2018, Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2019)

The rapid development of the KLMR together with the large influx of population from the Southeast Asia Region and South Asia has contributed to the rise of crime. According to the 2017 Crime Index by Numbeo, KL has the highest crime index and lowest safety index among major cities in Southeast Asia. Although the number of major crimes, including murder and manslaughter, is relatively low, petty crimes such as motorbike and car theft and house brake-ins boost the figures (Numbeo, 2018).

Property Development

Because of safety and security concerns, numerous small to medium size gated communities have mushroomed in the KLMR, creating a fragmented network of exclusive urban utopias. Residents living in the gated communities are sealed off and as a result not fully integrating with the rest of the urban community. The development of self-contained townships such as Desa Park City, Gamuda Cove, and Setia Alam, where secluded residential areas are sealed off and the general public space is limited to shopping malls, and recreational parks only add to the rapid growth of ‘secluded paradises’ as described in the book by Davies and Monk (2009). As a result of growing safety concerns, traditional residential middle-income neighbourhoods are putting up physical barriers and engaging security guards for protection. **Examples of two gated communities in Cyberjaya are shown in Figure 5**

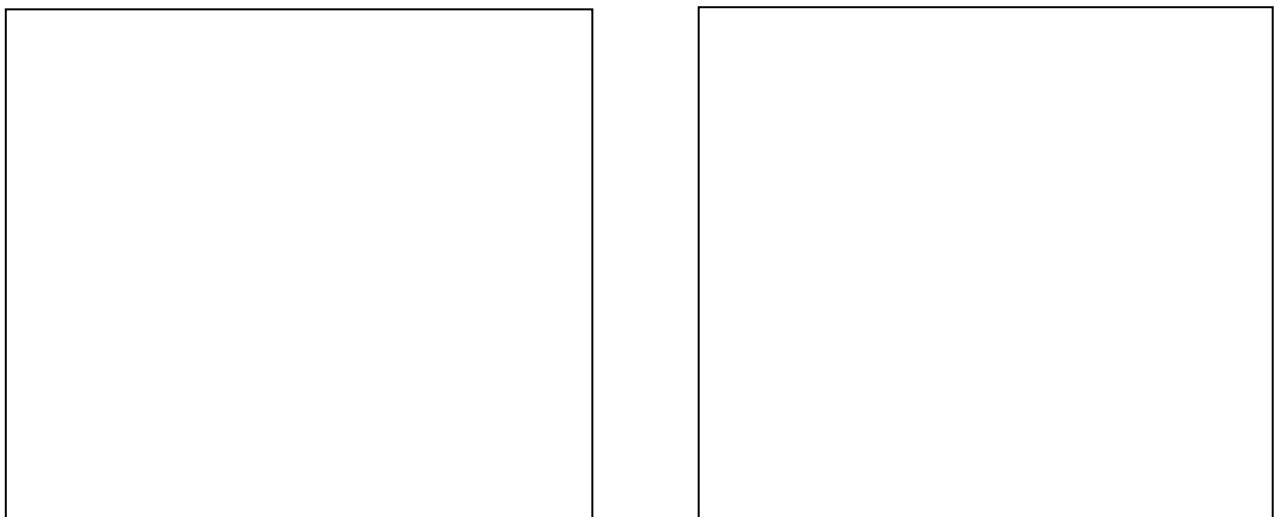


Figure 5: Setia Glades (left) and Symphony Hills (right) two gated communities in Cyberjaya. Source: M.Kozlowski

The economy of the entire KLMR contributes to 37% of the GDP of Malaysia with the city of Kuala Lumpur being the major business hub of the region. KL is home to 3600 multinational company headquarters. The region with its public and private universities and other tertiary educational establishments produces 113,000 graduates annually (Invest KL Malaysia 2020) As a result of globalisation and property led development in the last two decades, there is a sharp increase in property prices with KL, and its urban conurbation is located mainly in the state of Selangor declared as areas where houses fall in a 'severely unaffordable category'. The other reason for the sharp rise in prices is; the growing demand for housing, reduction of land zoned for residential purposes, and also high foreign ownership of the housing stock which in some parts of central KL is as high as 20% (Malaysia My Second Home, 2018, DBKL 2012). However, according to Numbeo 2020, (a, b, c,d,e) Kuala Lumpur remains one of the cheapest and most affordable cities in Southeast Asia. The average house price to average income ratio is 2-3 times lower than in Bangkok, Hanoi, Jakarta, and Singapore, and 4 times lower than in Manila. In terms of property prices, an average apartment in central parts of KL costs 2570 USD per m2 which is much lower than Bangkok (5,379 USD per m2) and a far cry from Singapore with a staggering average price of 17,938 USD per m2.

Notwithstanding these price advantages the KLMR is unaffordable for a majority of the local population. According to research undertaken by Mariadas, Selvanathan and Tan (2016) the population increase, construction costs and housing speculation are also the other main factors that trigger the housing price hike in Malaysia. Efforts to increase the affordability should be continued by all the levels of government, policymakers, developers and other related parties to enable young people to purchase their residential property (Mariadas, Selvanathan and Tan 2016). Example of unaffordable housing enclaves in central KL are shown in Figure 6.

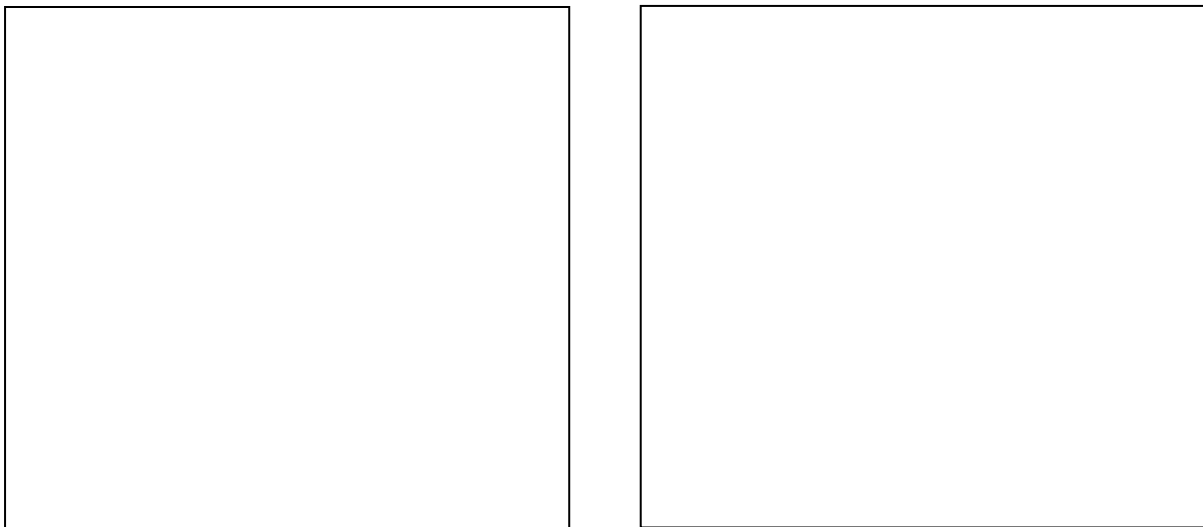


Figure 6: Upmarket residential enclaves in central Kuala Lumpur around the KLCC area. Source: Authors

Despite a strong property led development trend, the Federal Government and the Selangor State Government are still interested in providing affordable housing. To address housing for the growing middle-income groups, the Federal Government established several housing programs

The programs include Peoples's Malaysia Housing Program (PR1MA), Malaysia Civil Servant Housing Program (PPA1M), Rumah Mesra Rakyat Malaysia (RMR1M), People's Housing Project (PPR), My Home Federal Territory Affordable Housing Policy (RUMAWIP) and Rumah Selangorku (Zainon et.al 2017). The most popular program is the People's Malaysia Housing Program (PR1MA). It is an affordable housing project established under the PR1MA Act 2012. PR1MA's main mission is to plan, develop, construct, and maintain high-quality housing for middle-income households in key urban areas (PropertyGuru 2020). Examples of affordable and social PPR housing are shown in Figure 7

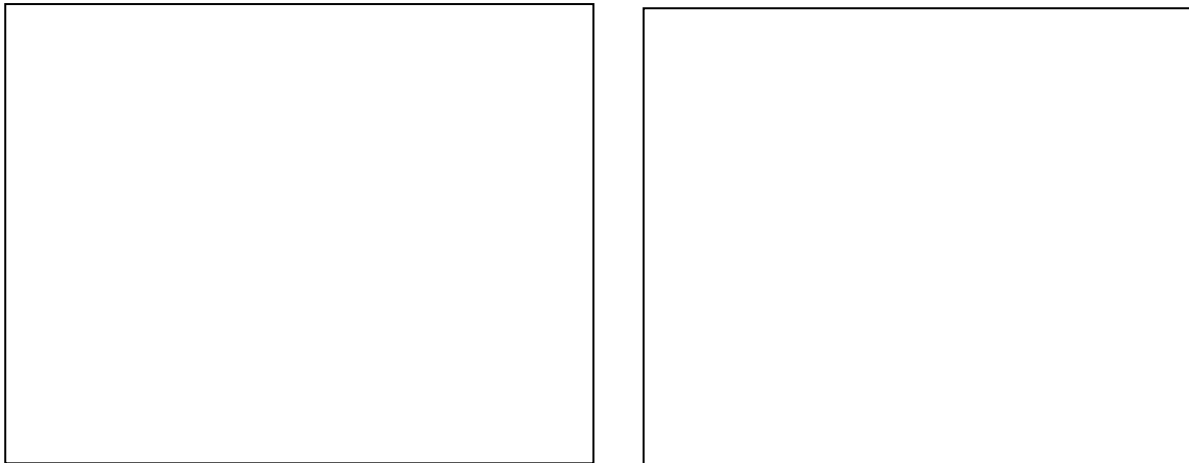


Figure 7: Examples of social PPR Housing estates in Kuala Lumpur. Source: Authors

Similarly, to the phenomena in other world cities, some central city areas in KL are experiencing gentrification. For example, the Bukit Bintang precinct developed into a popular shopping destination in the 1980s and 90 s is being slowly converted into a high-end shopping district. The former popular centre Bukit Bintang Plaza has been demolished and is currently being redeveloped for a more exclusive shopping destination (The Edge Markets, 2019)

One of the most prominent commercial property development in the metropolitan region is the Tun Razak Exchange. The Tun Razak Exchange (TRX) is a property development project built on a 30-hectare area in the heart of Kuala Lumpur by 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). This catalyst project is part of the Economic Transformation Programme to create a vibrant financial district in Kuala Lumpur. The master plan for the TRX focuses on integrated infrastructure development, ensuring high quality of comfort and sustainability to its communities, including comprehensive transportation links alongside international institutions and support services. A central park featuring terraced gardens and water features will connect all the buildings of the new financial district. (Tun Razak Exchange 2019)

Urban Policies and Strategies

Urban development and planning in Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region are coordinated through local plans prepared by the ten different local authorities. There is no regional plan for the entire metropolitan area and although the term Greater Kuala Lumpur was established in 2010 there is no framework for permanent liaison and cooperation between various local authorities (Eco Business, 2010). In the city of Kuala Lumpur development is controlled and promoted by the Kuala Lumpur 2020 City Plan (a strategic planning document) and the Kuala Lumpur Development Control Plan (a statutory planning document) (DBKL, 2012).

In the last decade, the federal, state governments and local authorities have introduced measures to mitigate the rapid uncoordinated growth, reduce the destruction of the old urban fabric, and promote new climate responsive development, and regenerate streets and public spaces in central parts of KL and other cities of the metropolitan

region. the establishment of organisations such as Think City (an NGO sponsored by the federal agency Khazanah National) and Urbanice Malaysia (a federal government subsidiary) to conduct small scale urban regeneration projects and promote a smart city concept is a step forward in combating the negative side effects of globalisation and property led development. The Green Building Index (GBI) introduced in 2009 addresses the tropical and sustainable design and buildings and new townships (Shari, 2015).

The Federal Government and DBKL have strong desires to significantly enhancing the quality of the built environment and transform KL into a world-class A city on the same level as Singapore and Hong Kong. As a result, in the last years, DBKL together with the assistance of private consultants has prepared a series of planning documents and studies aimed at achieving smart growth and sustainable development outcome (DBKL, 2014, 2016, 2018). However, until today very few recommendations have been implemented. The Urban Design Guidelines for Central Kuala Lumpur is a comprehensive document with a set of design recommendations for streets, public spaces, buildings, parks, street furniture, and even issues such as street art and location and distribution of signs. However, as a result of insufficient public realm improvement mechanisms, only a handful of recommendations have been realised.

Lately, the DBKL has drafted a new community and smart growth-oriented Kuala Lumpur 2040 Draft Structure Plan. The new Plan aims to be in parallel with the national visions for sustainable development. The Plan strongly promotes issues such as affordable housing, a pedestrian-friendly environment, quality public transport, and efficient green infrastructure (DBKL, 2020).

The recent COVID pandemic demonstrated that the rapid economic growth based on the principles of neoliberalism and fast-track property development has a series of shortcomings and failed to secure a healthy and liveable urban environment. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated the deleterious impacts of the degraded physical and economic environment of central KL. The crisis turned off the stream of international tourists and business travellers, that central areas had come to rely on. The visual impact of COVID Pandemic on Central KL is shown in Figure 8

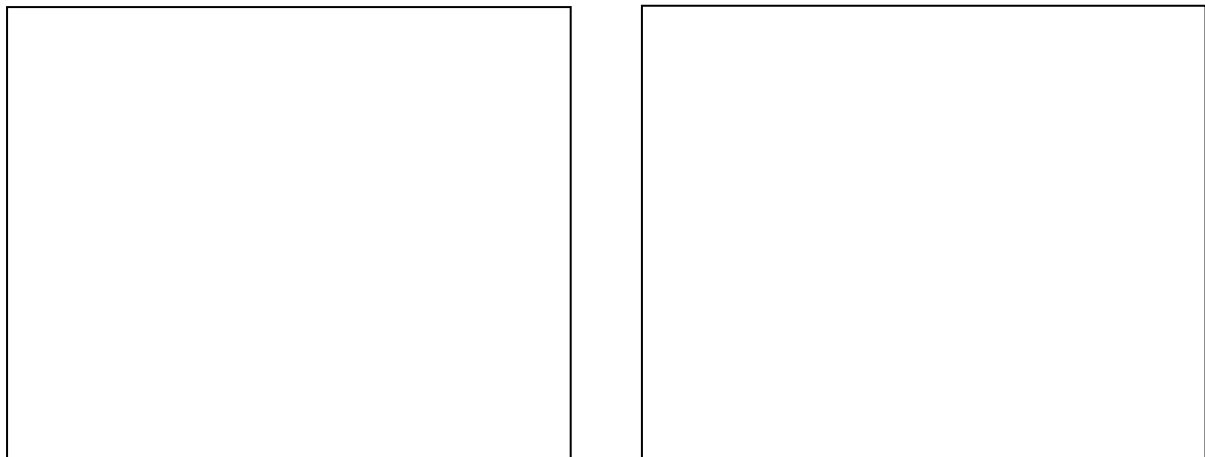


Figure 8: Week-day lunchtime in empty Central Kuala Lumpur (the KLCC area and Bukit Bintang) during the COVID Pandemic. It should be noted that these images were taken during a partial lockdown not full lockdown. Source: Authors

The reluctance of the local population to use public transport triggered massive traffic jams and delays. Surely, the Federal Government and Local Authorities should take stock, consult experts, listen to local concerns, and

modify planning arrangements or actively intervene to prevent KLMR from developing into one large 'urban nightmare'.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Greater Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region (KLMR) is one of the fastest-growing regions in Malaysia and Asia. Recent manifestations of this growth include a spate of new residential, institutional, and commercial developments. Unlike in China until 2000, much of this development was mainly market rather than state-driven but influenced by economic vagaries and political expediency. Such rapid property-led development often neglects local conditions, natural settings, and the tropical climate. All too often, the result is degraded surrounding public spaces. The current statutory local plans focus mainly on development control addressing issues such as height, bulk, and orientation of buildings rather than promoting identity or a culturally-sensitive tropical sense of place.

This used reflexive thematic analysis and generated the three themes of *globalisation*, *neoliberalism* and *property-led* development to interpret the transformation of KL over the past decades from a medium-size tropical city to a major urban conurbation of 7.7 million inhabitants. KL of the 1960 and 70s was a friendly city embedded in a tropical green landscape and inclusive of all social groups. Today, it has developed into a prominent globalised urban conurbation sprawled across the Klang Valley, layered by a web of highways and dotted by a fragmented network of exclusive gated communities, semi-private townships, and up-market mixed-use complexes. Neoliberalism abetted this fast-track, market-driven development but, often, the resulting built form was disentangled from local building traditions or ill-suited to a tropical climate. Over time, many unforeseen property management issues emerged that undermined residential or commercial services and urban aesthetics.

As noted earlier, until the 1980s the state, federal and local government played a leading role in the development of new urban areas and housing estates. Housing was heavily subsidised by the public sector. Commercial private development played a secondary role in the growth of the KL agglomeration. It was overshadowed by public housing projects, cultural, institutional, sports and educational government sponsored schemes. This situation started to change gradually in the 1980s, and by the end of the 1990s the private sector took a leading role in the transformation of the KLMR. Today private developers are dominant in the region and they have infiltrated traditionally state-sponsored educational and cultural developments

On the surface, statistics suggest that living standards for many KL residents have increased significantly and the quality of urban services has radically improved. Nevertheless, large swathes of the community are frustrated and discontent. An interview with a Non-Government Organisation, Coalition to Save KL (CSKL)ⁱⁱ revealed that some community residents feel that basic social needs such as green open spaces, quality public areas and amenities, affordable public housing, and efficient urban infrastructure have been neglected and overshadowed by exclusive international development projects. The community is frustrated with issues such as increased traffic congestions, the problem of safety, and lack of community participation in urban planning and infrastructure decision-making. The fact that city mayors are not elected through the popular vote but appointed by the state or federal government only exacerbates misunderstanding between the local authority and the urban community.

A salient drawback of the current system is the lack of a regional plan or a regional advisory body. Although the Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Region covers an area located in two different states and two Federal Territories, there is no regional plan or regional coordination for the entire urban conurbation. Each local authority prepares a local plan and a development control document specifically targeting their area without considering the situation in the surrounding municipalities

Future growth resilience would be strengthened if representatives from federal, state governments, and each of the ten local KLMR councils were involved in decision-making to prevent uncoordinated growth. Although the construction of the road network and development of the public transport system has been managed and coordinated on a regional scale by the federal government, the bulk of planning and development decisions are

made at the local levels. As yet, there is no systematic framework for consultation between the various local authorities. A city that promotes smart growth must prepare a vision for the entire metropolitan area. This vision should inform all of the local plans and planning strategies. Given the climate and obesity crises, such a vision must enforce walkable and sustainable urban communities with a strong sense of place and identity, efficient and sustainable public transit, and quality urban infrastructure. All the physical development must respond to the principles of a smart growth vision. As the current KLMR does not have a smart growth vision, it is something of a pickle and piecemeal urban solutions that cannot solve the overall problem. The uncontrolled urban sprawl should be halted with a designation of an urban footprint and development-free natural green areas.

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Chinese Shop House was a mixed-use two to a three-story building constructed from a timber frame and with an attap roof. It had commercial/retail space on the ground level and residential area on the upper levels. The characteristic feature of the shop-house was a five-foot-wide colonnade (called five footway) along its street frontage. The Chinese shop-house became one of the dominant features of cities in peninsular Malaysia, Borneo, and other parts of the Southeast Asian region (Too, 2007).

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with representative of Coalition to Save KL (CSKL) carried out in April 2019