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FRONTING THE BACK LANE OF HERITAGE STREET: CASE STUDY OF PETALING STREET

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Abstract

Back lanes are ubiquitously found in every city as they are a required component according to the by-laws. The intention of back lane is to serve as a service road and consequently society tends to neglect and had led to a forgotten public space due to its lack of maintenance. Thus, this has discouraged the pedestrian movement as it is unsafe because the laneway is mainly hidden from public eye. Therefore, it became a space for undesirable activities to be taken place especially for hoodlums. In line with the Kuala Lumpur Tourism Master Plan 2015-2025, that gives emphasise to revitalise forgotten spaces, this research looks into the issues of back lanes in Petaling Street with the aims to unlock its potentials. The study adopted a qualitative approach through 2 phases. The first phase is through literature review to study and understand its historical background follows by site observation through photographs and recording of the site existing conditions. The second phase is through interviews with urban planning experts and business owners to discuss the historical value, issues and parameters to revitalize the back lane. The outcome of the research divulges that revitalization of back lane and shifting the front façade to the back lane or adapting to a double façade are able to greet the public with new urban social spaces and that tenants are able to utilize and give it a new meaning.

Keywords: Alleyway, back lane, cultural heritage, pedestrian, revitalization

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INTRODUCTION

As of late, back lanes have gained more attention from the public than ever before due to the rising trend of revitalization of the lost space and green alley programmes in western countries. According to Clay & Barnett (1978) a study on neglected back lane had been done where they claim alley to be a hidden resource channelling an idea for urban residents to rethink the possibilities of the lost space. Back lane is often defined as an alleyway or a path that is tucked in between two building blocks presumably the back façade of shophouses or residential terrace house (Hess, 2008; Ismail & Ching, 2016; Wolch et al., 2010). Back lanes predominantly serve as a secondary access which its ends will be linked to the major road.

Rapid urbanization in Kuala Lumpur since 1990s has made drastic transformation in its urban landscape, especially the Central Business District (CBD) with multiple on-going mega development projects such as the Warisan Merdeka Tower and Tun Razak Exchange (TRX); sandwich in between the old and new of Kuala Lumpur has changed the landscape of its city (Draft Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040, 2020). Studies have also presented that back lane and alleyways plays a vital role in forming the entire city network especially for its pedestrian to elevate social cohesion and improve street connectivity (Handy et al., 2003; Alawadi et al., 2020). Therefore, isolated back lanes in the city centre have disrupted the efficacy of the pedestrian network system where pedestrian may have to take a detour instead as safety precaution, especially for females. According to Khalid et al. (2018), respondents from his research mentioned that urban core area of Kuala Lumpur is lacking accessibility, social and economic activities. He highlighted that the city needs better quality of space planning to spike organic growth in urban area. Back lanes are valuable assets to the community as mentioned by Wan (2017) and help builds pedestrian connectivity.

To building a better city and a safe one, pedestrian network should be prioritized to mitigate one of the main urban issues namely traffic congestion, pollution and crime (Wan, 2017). According to the Safe City Programme that was launched in Malaysia in 2004, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) was one of the key measures to be integrated as part of the development strategy under the city's Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040 (Boon et al., 2020). Green alley programme which is consider a strategy for CPTED is explored by Weber and Schneider (2021) where greenery is integrated to alley beautification as a tool to elevate the nature experiences and well-being in city centres. Therefore, an upsurge of beautification of improving alleyways is practiced by many countries and Malaysia is not to be excluded. In fact, the government is seem actively pushing on alleyways improvement programme especially places that has heritage recognition or cultural value (Isa et al., 2020).

In 2009, with a RM20 million budget from the Ministry of Finance, Think City was established by Khazanah Nasional Berhad to safeguard the city's

heritage after George Town, Penang was awarded the UNESCO World Heritage status. From then on, they have launched a George Town Grants Programme (GTGP) to work on projects to improve on the public realm and encourage placemaking and conservation (ThinkCity, 2009). Think City has completed a total of 8 alleyways improvements thus far. In addition, since 2018 uprising initiative to revitalize back lane by Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) itself and other private organizations can be witnessed in the back lane of Jalan Alor vicinity and Brickfields (Chan, 2018).

However, Petaling Street which is situated in the secondary heritage zone had been paid little attention to. The challenges to heritage preservation were highlighted by Bindajam et al., (2020) as a response to the 'Draft Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040' mentioned that there are little to no effort being made to safeguard heritage areas that had been damaged. Petaling Street known for its street hawking activities and traditional food hawkers is in gradual demise and is becoming inconsequential due to the aging community and shop vendors (Tan & Aminuddin, 2019). Moreover, constant public debates of street hawking activities that hire migrant workers sparks incongruity in cultural authenticity (Yeoh, 2014). However, the recent rejuvenation of one the back lanes tucked in Lorong Panggung which also function as public outdoor gallery, resulted in restaurants and cafes opening their back door as an entrance to visitors and thus open up the potential of impactful urban intervention. Therefore, this form the research gap on why Petaling Street is chosen as the selected site for this case study because of its constant progressive state to bridge the tangible and intangible cultural aspect of old and new.

This research explores the back lanes to be rejuvenated as to celebrate and safeguard the cultural heritage in Petaling Street. The objective of the research includes to understand the heritage value of back lane in Petaling Street which includes intangible aspects, to investigate and analyse the current condition of back lane in Petaling Street and more importantly to understand the parameters in revitalization of back lane. This research only focuses on selected back lane namely, Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee, Lorong Petaling and Lorong Panggung. These selected back lanes are chosen due to their potential of revitalization based on its pedestrian connectivity from the main pedestrian nodes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a case study approach as a qualitative research methodology whereby a specific site and area is chosen for in-depth investigation. A case-study strategy is fit for this research because it is dealing with its contextual condition (Yin, 2017).

Selection of Case Study Area

The case study area chosen is Petaling Street also known as Chinatown in Kuala Lumpur. Each back lanes in Petaling Street are historically prominent and has its own story. The back lane scene of shophouses in Petaling Street are homes to street traders and food hawkers that has been around since the 90s. In 2019, one of the back lanes namely, Lorong Panggung located at the fringe of Petaling Street went through a facelift that has gentrified the area attracting various visitors and tourist back to Petaling Street. However, the rest of the back lanes in Petaling Street especially Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee and Lorong Petaling deserve more attention for uplifting and revitalization.

The data collection is mainly divided into two phases: 1) Preliminary Study 2) Semi-structured interviews.

Preliminary Study

Literature review is carried out before field observation to research and understand the background of the site and its recent development. A preliminary site investigation was done to survey the selected back lanes in Petaling Street. Site observation is used as a tool to discover how these back lanes are currently being utilize and its existing conditions as there was no data available. There are total of 5 back lanes found in Petaling Street. Three back lanes are chosen for this study based on their cultural values, pedestrian potential and current happenings - Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee, Lorong Petaling and Lorong Panggung.

A structured observation was carried out by using the sustainability model as a guide for the checklist which includes three components of environment, society, and economy.

Semi-structure Interview

The interview with business owners was carried out with the objective to investigate the pros and cons of having back lane as part of the front façade and entrance to their business premise. The interview was separated into two parts, elite interview and feedback interview. Elite interviewing involves affiliate experts or authority in capable of providing comprehensive answers to this research (Gillham, 2000). An elite interview was conducted with respondents from Think City that has completed revitalization of back lane projects in the Kuala Lumpur vicinity. The second elite interview was carried out with a respondent Management that has completed the recent Little Demon Alley Project. Secondly, feedback interview was carried out with shophouses owners that effected by the recently completed Little Demon Alley project and two owners of shophouses that having double frontage entrances on Lorong Panggung. Among the business occupying the shophouses are as in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Feedback Interviewee
Source: Author

Shopfront facing	Name of Shop	Nature of Business	Interviewee
Lorong Panggung	Concubine KL	Restaurant & Bar	Co-Founder
Jalan Petaling	Bubble Bee Cafe	Restaurant & Cafe	Barista
Jalan Petaling	Da Bao	Restaurant & Bar	Founder
Jalan Panggung	Kaffe 16	Cafe	Senior Barista
Jalan Panggung	Luckin Kopi	Restaurant	Manager

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

First Case Study: Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee

Historical Value

Based on literature review, Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee was known as Madras Lane for having a Madras Theatre which was burned down in 1979 (Bernama, 2019). There was no tangible heritage left behind. The empty plot of land functions as car park, local wet market and home to food hawkers that has been around for more than 50 years (Lee, 2019). Therefore, Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee is best defined as an intangible cultural heritage value due its traditions and practices among the community which are the wet market and the street food hawker. The locals especially the baby boomer’s generation that grew up in the area would always go back for its hawker delicacy even though they already have move out of the city into the suburbs.

Current Conditions

The current condition of the back lane is overall unpleasant. The dampness from the wet market and rubbish from pedestrian resulted in an unhygienic condition. Lack of lighting and ventilation due to the metal roof supported by very rusty steel structure that is providing shade resulted in the back lane being damp creating a foul smell. This resulted in the wide use of artificial lighting by vendors. Compounded by restricted Covid19 Movement Control Order, the overall environment is slowly dilapidating as the market is less frequented by regulars.

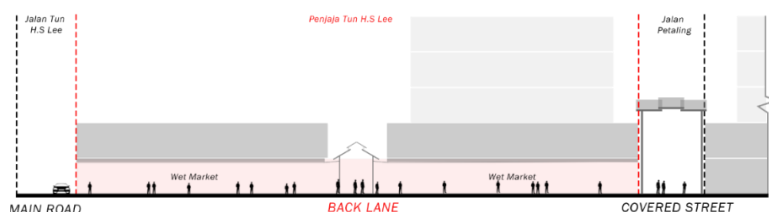


Figure 2: Cross section across back lane of Penjaja Tun H.S Lee

Source: Author



Figure 3:
(L) Unwelcoming entrance from Jalan Hang Lekir, (R) Damp floor at the wet market
Source: Author

Second Case Study: Lorong Petaling

Historical Value

Lorong Petaling, a back lane famous with its street hawking culture that start as early as 5am in the morning namely Pasar Karat. According to the Kuala Lumpur Hawkers and Petty Traders Association multiple controversy against the flea market had been raised due to the questionable items sold which ranges from antiques, old handphones, pots and pans, clothing, shoes etc and also concerns of blocking emergency exits. There were plans to rebrand the market by DBKL in 2017 by streamlining the lot size, repainting the murals and ensuring the legitimacy of the goods sold (Lim, 2017) but yet to happen.

A long time Teow Chew porridge vendor operated by 3 siblings who has occupied the alley for half a century (Lai, 2019) continues to operate with its non-permanent plastic sheeting roof and just a few tables and chairs to maintain its traditional look. Similar to the first case study of Penjaja Tun H.S Lee, the antique market of Pasar Karat and the street food vendors have made their mark in Lorong Petaling for decades, establishing the intangible cultural values of the street.

Current Conditions

The current condition of Lorong Petaling is overall well maintain but it gets quiet in the late afternoon when there is minimal activity and pedestrian flow. The marking of the lots on the floor for the vendors in Pasar Karat can be seen however, the conditions of the murals are fading and peeling off. The busy hours occur only in the morning until afternoon. The use of space in the evening is mostly used as a car park and one of the restaurants utilizing the back lane as a spill over space for grilling (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Condition of Lorong Petaling.

Source: Author

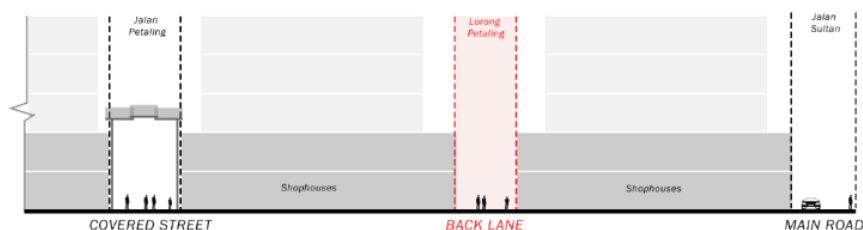


Figure 5: Cross section across back lane of Lorong Petaling.

Source: Author

Third Case Study: Lorong Panggung

Historical Value

The third case study is Lorong Panggung also known as ‘Little Demon Alley’ as narrated by one of the respondents for its three historical tales. Firstly, it was the playful children making noises that would disturb the neighbour, secondly was the said ‘entertainment’ establishment where the gang members and brothel were given names such as ‘gambling ghost’, ‘smoking ghost’ and ‘whoring ghost’ resulted in the name ‘Little Demon Alley’.

A little local coffee shop also known as kopitiam called Ho Kow Kopitiam tucked in one of the lots in the back alley has been operating for almost 60 years ago with the usual traditional spilled over area serving Nanyang breakfast to regulars. Another Chee Cheong Fun stall operating in the mouth of Lorong Panggung is also a go-to spot for locals. When conducting community engagement, the owner of Chee Cheong Fun shared with the respondent that he was living right at the corner of Lorong Panggung when he working as an electrical mechanic and had remained there for decades. In 1981, he eventually moved out from the city with his family but went back to Lorong Panggung to set up his Chee Cheong Fun store. Unfortunately, the street hawker has permanently closed due to a fire outbreak in the end of 2020.

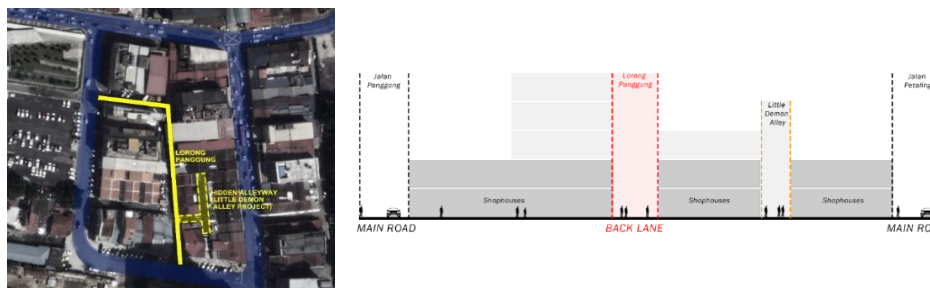


Figure 6: Location of hidden alleyway “Little Demon Alley”.
Source: Author

Lorong Pangkung compared to the first and second case study differs since it has four shophouses with double frontage, one facing the main road another the back lane. These shophouses are only halved length compared to typical adjacent units, no air well or courtyard and no five-foot way at the main entrance. However, a hidden alleyway is sandwiched in between these shophouses breaking them off and creating a courtyard space within. These hidden alleyways have been left abandon for the longest time with rubbish and debris everywhere. A revitalization project was launched that took 8 months for completion involves cleaning up the dilapidated area, restoration of the 4 shophouses and building an arch bridge from the main entrance.



Figure 7: Before and after revitalization of “Little Demon Alley”
Source: Bai Chuan Management

A total of six mural paintings are introduced as part of the revitalization strategy to attract pedestrians. The art murals are carefully plan and selected to reflect on the daily lives of the early Chinese settlers in the back lane, as refer to Figure 9. Each of these murals incorporate with a QR code next to it which allow visitors to listen to a recording of voice clip tells the tale of the past. 10 shophouses that shared the Little Demon Alley are rented out to carefully selected tenants that is able to bring value and contribute to the essence of the area. After the revitalization of the hidden alleyway, it was very well received by the public and became a new attraction that has attracted many urban dwellers to revisit the lost roots of Petaling Street. (I. Lim, 2019)



Figure 8: Art murals depicting the daily life in the back lane of early Chinese settlers
Source: Author

Current Conditions

Lorong Panggung is inviting and pleasant, mostly due to the revitalization project that has since become a tourist attraction for foreigners as well as locals. The back lane is clean and odourless, comfortable to be wandering around. However, only the front portion of the back lane is more densified in terms of pedestrian movement, the back part remains quiet with no activities.



Figure 9: Before and after revitalization of the shophouses facing Lorong Panggung
Source: Bai Chuan Management

The four double fronted shophouses are all restaurant, bar and café that started their business after the revitalization of the Little Demon Alley as many entrepreneurs and business saw potential in the new area. One of the main concerns that brought up by the business owners for having both front and back entrance is crowd control and the need to constantly monitor the back entrance, facing issues such as passer-by using it as a short cut thus call for security concern.

Parameters in Revitalizing Back Lane

Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee and Lorong Petaling are two case studies that require further revitalization. However, Lorong Panggung case study highlight

parameters for successful revitalization of back lanes - understanding its historical and cultural importance, current issues, community engagement, planning programmes and maintenance. Research on historical and cultural background of the back lane either through archival research or oral history establishes desired culture value of the place, a *genius loci*. Baseline study is necessary to understand the current issues such as homeless and drug addicts that are often found in the back lanes, as in Petaling Street example. Whereas rigorous community engagement identifies current and future needs of the community and how to improve existing conditions before any revitalization takes place.

Crafting programmes and activities after the revitalization helps to promote and at the same time as part of the community engagement. For example, Lorong Fest Festival to celebrate the cultural heritage of Penjaja Gallery Tun H.S Lee with art exhibition and posters to capture the stories of the long-time food vendors. Little Demon Alley are often used as an outdoor exhibition space especially during any Chinese festivities. After revitalization, maintaining the back alley is the key factor to a successful back lane project that requires financial assistant either from the community, sponsors, or authority.

CONCLUSION

This research has unveiled the importance of the intangible cultural heritage of Petaling Street through its back lanes stories that have yet to realize its full potential. The image and identity of Petaling Street is already tarnishing and will need to be carefully rebuilt to par up with new urban development especially with the on-going mega development of Merdera 118 and the increase foot traffic from the MRT interchange station that begun in the end of 2016. Revitalization or an uplift is very much needed to improve the back lane condition especially on the back lane of Penjaja Tun H.S Lee and Lorong Panggung. With its intangible historical footprint of traditional street hawkers and markets the vendors deserve a better space. Revitalizing these back lane will not only activate the lost space but also encourage the use of public space that will contribute to the slowly gentrified Petaling Street when new business and cafes starts blooming in Petaling Street. This can be seen from the case study of Lorong Panggung, in the hidden alley of Little Demon Alley revitalization project that set an example of how a revitalize the alleyway can boost economical means and bringing back the locals to revisit Petaling Street. The result from this research will highly encourage back lane revitalization especially in historical sites to activate its lost space to draw in urban dwellers and shop owners to treating the back entrance as equal importance as the front entrance.

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