Historic Cities of The Straits of Malacca UNESCO World Heritage Site: Threats and Challenges

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■ Abstract

This paper presents the impacts of new development projects on the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the Straits of Malacca, which is composed of two cities: Melaka and George Town. Apart from potentially affecting their World Heritage status, these intrusions could erode the character of the heritage sites due to inadequate urban planning and a lack of proper zoning for urban development that respects the boundaries of the protected cultural heritage properties. There are legal instruments for the conservation of both cities, but the absence of a management plan and effective enforcement is causing the erosion of their values. Moreover, there is no specific model or management system for controlling the vulnerabilities to hazards in both cities, which could increase due to the new development projects.

KEY WORDS: Straits of Malacca, UNESCO World Heritage Site, Management

■ 1. Introduction

The Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, consisting of George Town and Melaka, were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) on 7th July 2008. These two cities claim to be the most extensive historical port settlements in the history of Malaysia. Their urban patterns date back to the 16th Century (Melaka) and the 18th Century (George Town). George Town represents 200 years and Melaka 500 years of multi-cultural trading exchanges between the West and the East, which created both tangible and intangible heritage. These elements convey the multi-cultural identity of these cities. The heritage values of George Town and Melaka have been recognised as demonstrating Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) through their inscription on the World Heritage List, based on criterion (ii), as exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns; criterion (iii), as living testimonies of multi-cultural heritage, tangible and intangible; and criterion (iv), as melting pots of unique architecture, culture, and townscape

(UNESCO 2009). Both cities are jointly inscribed as a WHS due to sharing a footprint of rich multi-cultural trading heritage that associates with colonialism and foreign cultures (UNESCO 2009).

■ 2. Significance of the Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca

The Straits of Malacca are located between the Peninsular of Malaysia and the island of Sumatra, Indonesia [Fig. 1A]. This area is one of the most ecologically vulnerable, also known as "Sunda Hotspots," which contains essential biodiversity for the world's total endemic plant species and endemic vertebrates (Wuff et al. 2013). Historically, this waterway was an important highway for maritime traders and merchants from all over the world. The Straits played an important role in the political expansion and economic development of the Malay Kingdom (SAP 2013). Not only were they the busiest highways, but the Straits of Malacca were also the only waterway for spice routes and contributed to the growth of Melaka as an entrepot. Melaka [Fig.

1B] was established as an important regional empire during the Malay sultanate in the 15th century, followed by the Portuguese colonization, between 1511-1641, the Dutch occupation, between 1641-1824, and the British era in 1824-1957 (UNESCO 2009). The founder of Melaka was Parameswara, the prince of Palembang (Winstedt 1948). The footprint of Melaka town was from Hindu-Buddhist Srivijayan heritage (Hitchcock, King & Parnwell 2010); although, this was demolished during the colonial periods. Like George Town, Melaka began as a small fishing settlement. The mouth of the Melaka River divided the city into two: the administrative enclave and the residential/commercial enclave. Melaka is a melting pot of multi-cultural heritage, including Malay, Chinese, Peranakans (Baba-Nyonya), Chetti (Indian Peranakans), and Portuguese Eurasian (Kristang) cultures.

George Town [Fig. 2] is the capital city of Penang State and it represents the British footprint of the 18th century's development: it is both the first British port town and the oldest British colonial town in South East Asia (UNESCO 2009). George Town is recognized as having a significant architectural and cultural townscape, without parallel to any places in the East and Southeast Asia (UNESCO 2008). The city became an entrepot, where the products from Britain and India were sold to local merchants and distributed throughout the country (Purcell 1928; Baker 1991). The city successfully developed and became a maritime base used to protect the British against their rivals, the French and Dutch. As a port city, George Town brought a large number of traders from the Northern region of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, India, China, and the Arab region, which resulted in cultural integration through intermarriage (SAP 2011). The intermarriage between immigrants and local people is reflected in the lifestyles of the local people and co-existence of various ethnic communities living in George Town.

As important trading ports, various cultures have been present in Melaka and George Town, leaving significant footprints of unique architecture. Melaka's urban pattern features streets which are laid out in a tangle of irregular narrow streets; whereas George Town displays blocks and streets patterned in a picturesque grid pattern (Shuhana 2011). There is a mixture of building types in these cities, combining clan houses, mosques, temples, administrative buildings, government, residential quarters, schools, warehouses, railway stations, etc. Yet, shophouses are the most predominant building type in these historic cities [Fig. 3]. George Town has the highest number of these pre-war buildings[1] compared to any other urban centre in Southeast Asia. There is also the presence of terrace townhouses which creates an atmosphere of domesticity [Fig. 4].
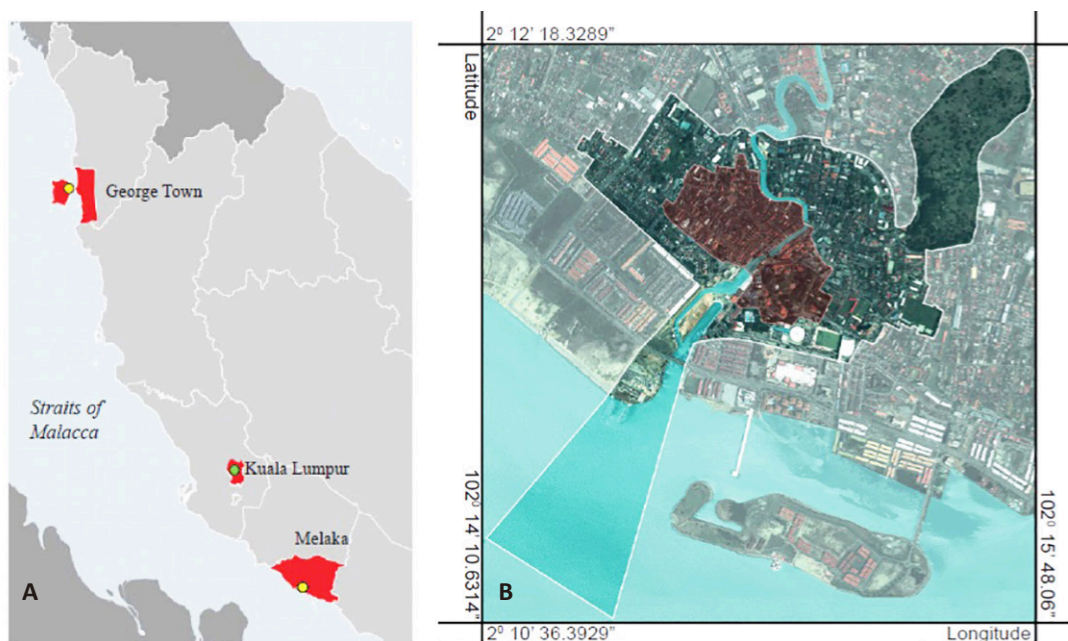

Figure 1: A. Map of the Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, George Town and Melaka; B. Map of Melaka UNESCO World Heritage Site (Source: SAP 2011, 2013)

[1] In Malaysia, historic pre-war buildings are defined as historic pre-World War II built ranging from 1800 to 1948 (Kamarul et al in Kartina et al, 2016).

Figure 2: Map of George Town, Penang UNESCO World Heritage Site (Source: SAP 2011, 2013)

Figure 3: George Town, Penang shophouses (Author 2018)

Figure 4: George Town, Penang the presence of the terrace townhouse (Author 2018)

In exploring nature and culture linkages, we find that these two cities represent cultural landscapes where the historic built environment, present cultural activities, and surrounding natural features of the straits, forest, and hills are interdependent layers. Historically, water had been the main transportation system and starting point for the development of both cities before reclamation and development took place and disrupted their relationship with the sea. Currently,

Melaka city centre is no longer facing the seafront and the access to the sea is limited, while some parts of the historic George Town waterfront are visually blocked from the public because of the presence of marinas and residential developments.

◼ 3. Management, State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

The monitoring of heritage properties in George Town WHS is carried out by George Town World Heritage Incorporated and in Melaka by the Melaka Historic City Council. These two organizations are responsible for managing the statutory and non-statutory issues pertaining to the World Heritage 'Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca.' There are existing by-laws that govern both cities, such as: Town and Country Planning Act 1976, National Heritage Act 1976, Local Government Act 1976, Enactment of Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage in Melaka 1988, Uniform Building by-laws, Guidelines for the Conservation Area and Heritage Buildings for George Town 2010, and other related laws.

Before its inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List, the historic enclave of George Town captured public attention after being included as one of the World's 100 Most Endangered Sites by the World Monuments Fund's Watch List (WMF 2002; 2004). After the World Heritage inscription in 2008, George Town faced the risk of losing its place on the World Heritage List because development projects contravened height restrictions that are described in the Nomination File (UNESCO 2009a). Due to the impact of these proposals, the Penang State government had to implement the recommendations made by the World Heritage Committee during its 33rd session in June 2009 (UNESCO 2009a). Special Area Plans (SAPs) for both cities were gazetted in the year 2013 and implemented as statutory resources for the cities. In reviewing the effectiveness of the plans, there are several shortcomings in the implementation of the conservation guidelines for both cities. The guidelines in the SAPs acknowledged the need to manage the development of both cities, but inadequately addressed the intangible elements that currently affect the *genius loci*.

The World Heritage nomination dossier (UNESCO 2008) highlighted the threats of development and the impact of tourism facilities which causes pressure on these historic cities. Tourists prefer living experiences that display local cultures and festivals on the streets. Conversely, this attraction potentially poses a threat because of excessive mass tourism which flows into the historic centres. For instance, many residents of the inner city of George Town have moved out due to rent increases caused by the abolition of the Rent Control Act in January 2000 (MPPP & MBMB 2011).

This resulted in the abandonment of some of the historic shophouses.

Consequences of the eviction and displacement of urban communities in George Town is greater than in Melaka (Lee et al. 2017; Khazanah Research Institute 2017). Some of the communities have been forced to evacuate their premises to make way for contemporary businesses, moving from multi-cultural trading into mono-functional commercial development. Gentrification has displaced the living community and, hence, the character of these cities has changed. The scenario affects the traditional artisans and tradespeople who sustain the OUV by depleting the underlying value of multi-culturalism, criteria (ii) and (iii) of UNESCO inscription for both cities. The cultural activities and practices of different ethnic groups exhibit the importance of interchange, which characterizes Malaysian tradition and culture. The diversity of multi-cultural activities are continuously evolving with the coexistence between different faiths, cultural traditions, trades, cuisine, language, and inter-ethnic assimilations that make both cities culturally vibrant.

As main tourist destinations, physical and socio-economic transformations occurred within the area and led to substantial environmental degradation, including land reclamation, traffic congestion, and air and water pollution. There is a contentious issue related to land reclamation, a current challenge for both historic cities [Fig. 5]. Most of the development on these lands will be used for high-rise condominiums, hotels, and terminals. The issues have brought into conflict two parties with different interests - the pro-development groups and the heritage conservationists. The pro-development groups are concerned with socio-economic improvements, while on the other hand, the heritage conservationists prefer to adopt a more holistic viewpoint, where the development should proceed within the boundaries of what keeps the integrity and balance of the existing urban heritage aspects intact. Any reclamation of the seaside in front of these World Heritage sites (WHS) will have an adverse effect on their authenticity and would change the profile of the WHS [Fig. 6].

There is an approved development of mega-structures scheduled to be built within the reclamation projects on the Melaka River [Figs. 5 & 6]. Once completed, the view of St. Paul's hill, the landmark of the Melaka WHS, will be screened from the Straits of Malacca. Significantly, the geographical feature has changed, the mouth of the
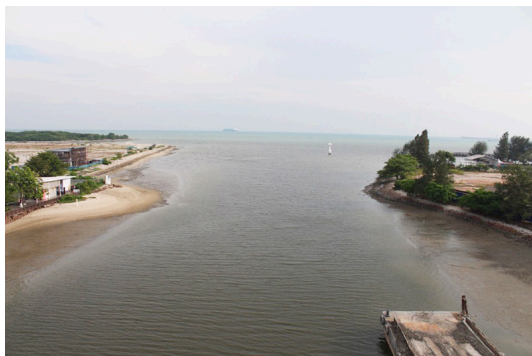
Figure 5: View of the Mouth of Melaka River from St. Paul's Hill, showing the reclamation of the sea-edge. The reclamation of the coastline resulted in the distruption of the setting of this historical port city (Source: Author 2018).

Figure 6: Distruption of the relationship between the natural and cultural heritage. Reclamation of the sea in Melaka for higher density commercial development is changing the historical setting. The core zone of the WHS is located in the inland and now with no direct relationship with the sea (Source: Author 2018).

Melaka River has been relocated further out to the sea. Melaka has lost its natural setting of a historic centre, no longer facing the seafront, and visual access to the sea is limited. This setting is important to Melaka's historical footprint as an international port city and commercial hub. It will affect its original, nestled, setting in between the hills of St. Paul and Bukit China, by the river mouth of the Melaka. These reclamation projects will also affect the Portuguese Settlement, the last bastion of Portuguese descendants in Melaka, the livelihoods of its fishermen, and interrupting the setting of the community's seafront settlements. Besides the visual integrity and setting, the functions and traditions of these historic cities that were acquired over time need to be safeguarded by adapting to new functions without losing the inhabitants, the community [Figs. 7 & 8]. The reclamation may also change the regional groundwater regime, modifying the coastal environment, flooding pattern, and stability of slopes and foundations.

Besides reclamation projects, the forested hilly area of Penang has been cleared for development since the inscription as a UNESCO WHS. A few recent landslides occurred that caused the hilly areas to collapse and, at the same time, Penang (George Town) also launched large-scale reclamation projects, strategically placed near the buffer zone of the city. In 2017, a catastrophic flood in George Town forced the government to conduct a review on the disaster risk management of Malaysia, especially in these historic cities. In promoting both cities as cultural heritage destinations, the government seems to forget the value of maintaining its natural resources, which are essential for the integrity and resilience of both cities.

Figure 7: New architectural designs that fail to respond to the unique historical townscape of George Town UNESCO WHS. (Source: Author 2018)

In spite of these common challenges, there are significant dissimilarities in the two cities. For instance, unlike Melaka, Penang has a vibrant and thriving community that is actively concerned about safeguarding George Town's natural and cultural heritage. Local authorities are working together with NGOs, stakeholders, and dynamic civil society to ensure that the sense of belonging remains. Furthermore, both cities experience differences in the development approach they employ for their heritage sites. The development of Melaka is focused on economic benefits, based on tourism, while the development in George Town has been oriented towards the conservation of its living heritage and the provision of better infrastructure. These variations may affect the conservation of both historic cities differently, negatively impacting their management of the area as one World Heritage property.

■ 4. Recommendations

The conservation of urban heritage is a new phenomenon in Malaysia. To date, there are increasing efforts to reinforce and integrate past heritage with the present development of historic cities. There is a growing interest in preserving the past, both for continued economic growth and for strengthening the national identity.
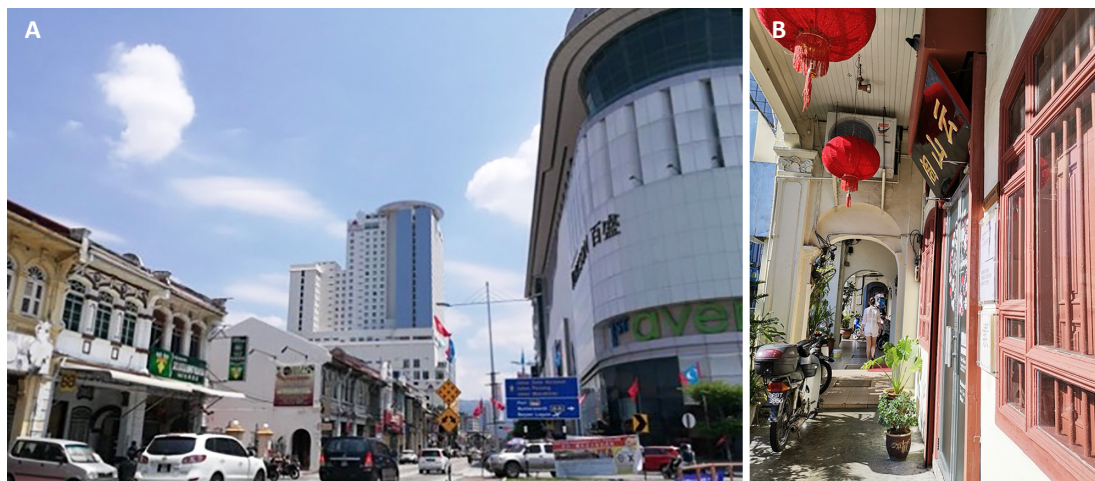
Figure 8: A. New development in George Town UNESCO WHS is changing the physical character and setting of human activities by removing the 'kaki lima'(five foot walkway) B. Example of 'kaki lima' (Source Photo: Author 2018)

However, the declaration of the Straits of Malacca as a UNESCO World Heritage Site was a primary factor in increasing the interest of developers into pursuing commercial projects in these cities. These investment opportunities are highly profitable, especially for the tourism industry. Notwithstanding, the author suggests that the current trend in the development and growth of both historic cities are encroaching on their historic fabrics in efforts to boost their tourism potential. Therefore, it is recommended that the character and integrity of the individual cities must be protected, and measures should be introduced that ensure the conservation of these historic cities within their conurbations as well as measures to guide and control the outward expansion of agglomerations.

The existing policies and guidelines are general and need to be translated to address the concrete situations of both cities. A comprehensive review for the SAPs is recommended for future development and guidance, to safeguard their heritage, observing the larger ecosystem and the local culture. As the custodians of these WHS cities, the authorities need to enforce and apply an adequate method in assessing the heritage impact of the new development proposal. There should be a limitation of acceptable changes between the conservation area (core and buffer zone) and new development districts. Both cities are witnessing development that is not respecting the historical context of these heritage sites and a Heritage Impact Assessments are highly recommended (ICOMOS 2011).

The natural environment of these cities is an inextricable part of their cultural significance. Disrupting their setting would erase the traces of how they functioned in the past while conserving it would support retaining its urban fabric. The visual integrity of the historical setting is important for safeguarding the cultural heritage of the historic urban landscape. Hitherto and generally, it will affect the sensory experience, wholeness, and intactness of these historic cities' urban fabrics and landscape. The protection of these WHS cities needs to follow a territorial approach, by looking at the whole landscape setting, following the UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO 2011). A landscape approach would help to maintain nature-culture linkages, relating the conservation of the historic cities with their larger ecosystem, clarifying the effects of land reclamation beyond landscape views, and highlighting the increasing vulnerability of the whole area of the Straits of Malacca. For instance, silting of the coastal areas narrowed the channels of the Straits, threatening the marine resources and ecosystems. The strong interconnection between natural and cultural heritage elements require integrated management to mitigate the vulnerability of the historic cities and their large landscape.

The inadequate enforcement of conservation guidelines in the WHS, and their buffer zones, and the lack of a comprehensive monitoring system for new developments could not only cause the loss of cultural heritage but also, the increase in vulnerability to hazards and, hence, the increase in disasters risks. Thus, an integrated conservation management plan is urgent, where the nature-culture linkages would be identified, and disaster risk management integrated to the conservation of these World Heritage cities.

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