PLACE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRADITIONAL SHOPPING DISTRICT IN THE CITY CENTRE OF KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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Abstract
Due to the rapid urbanization rate, the traditional urban environment in developing countries has been constantly replaced by modern structures with standardized images. The urban landscape of Kuala Lumpur city demonstrates a similar pattern, which, arguably, may disrupt the continuity in meaning embedded in people’s association with the places. This paper describes the meaning and significance of the traditional shopping districts in the city center of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and field observations to understand the meanings attached to the users’ experience of the traditional shopping streets located in the area. It was also to identify the urban elements that perceived to be important. The results demonstrate that the users translated various meanings of the places. The types and length of engagement, familiarity, cultural characteristics of the users and economic dependency influenced the attachment. The places are meaningful as a reflection of self and group identity thus contributes to the continuity of place identity.

Keywords: place; meaning; traditional streets; Kuala Lumpur City Centre.

INTRODUCTION
In the making of urban places, planners and designers mainly focus on the quality of the physical components of place and often disregard the importance of place meaning and association developed between people and places. A place is seen as the way it is experienced by people who have a strong connection to time, senses and socio-cultural expression (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981). Meaning is with the perceptual and the psychological aspects of environmental experience (Punter, 1991). In this regard, people associate different meanings to similar places for various reasons. However, changes in the existing physical and activity patterns may erase what is significant and meaningful to them. This implies that place meanings that are embedded in the existing social and cultural setting can be disintegrated as a result of unfit physical development.

Urbanization in Peninsular Malaysia has developed rapidly especially during the last two decades whereby the rate of urbanization has increased from 54.3% to 65.4% between 1991 and 2000. This is expected to increase to 75% by 2020 (JBPD, 2006). The population increase has contributed to the decrease in the quality of the urban environment and quality of life of the inhabitants particularly in major cities including Kuala Lumpur (JBPD, 2006). The influx of external influence has created cities with a global character (JBPD, 2006) devoid of the local expression of socio-cultural tradition. With the emergence of multi-storey corporate offices and large-scale shopping complexes, many small and independent traditional shop houses have disappeared. The city witnesses the reducing of diversity in street activities due to the attraction of one stop commercial centers for shopping and leisure activities (Shuhana et al., 2004). The study argues that the meanings of traditional streets has transformed and consequently have influenced the users’ association with and attachment to the places. The following statements
reflect the slowly diminishing character of the historical district known as Chinatown in recent years:

“Much of the built fabrics of Chinatown are gone, as well as many traditional trades. The facades are changing very drastically and because of this the character changes inevitably. The social structure has changed and the nature of what the businesses sell has changed too – there’s no tenacity of the trades anymore” (Elizabeth Cardosa, Heritage of Malaysia Trust Executive Director), Travel Times, 29 March – 4 April 2002.

Unlike a space, a place is a setting with meanings. When a space is perceived and felt significant, it becomes a place (Tuan, 1977). With the physical and functional changes of the commercial districts as a place, do these places continue to hold significant meaning to the attached users? How do the users associate with the streets in the past and present? This paper uncovers how meanings are translated in everyday experience of the users in the traditional streets.

PLACE MEANING AND ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE
Awareness of environmental experience and perception of place is an essential dimension of urban design (Carmona et al., 2003). The experiential and psychological dimensions acknowledge the importance of meaning and attachment in sustaining the physical, visual and symbolic aspects of place.

Place meaning is a form of connection or relationship between a person and the setting (Punter, 1991; Montgomery, 1998). People's interaction with places supports place attachment. These affective dimensions contribute to developing the perceived quality of a place and meanings attached to the experience. The meaning and importance of a setting held by an individual or group based on the experience of individuals and groups with the setting (Steadman, 2000; Williams, 2002) that influences their attitudes and behaviors. For instance, a neighborhood park can be associated with different layers of meanings and association: the functional meaning (a place to walk), emotional meaning (a place to forget problems) or socio-cultural meaning (a place to meet friends and share experiences) or a place of memory of the past. Davenport and Anderson (2005) suggested that places manifest the physical characteristics, activities and experiences, social phenomena and individual interpretation of a setting.

When global environment changes place values, place identity weakens. Place meaning determines the socio-cultural value of a place that form self and community identities (Shuhana and Ahmad Bashri, 2002). However, self or group identity can be disintegrated as a result of the loss of elements that reflect the people’s identity. It is imperative for placemakers to identify how meanings defined places to users, who in most situations, vary in their socio-cultural characteristics, economic status and length of association.

THE TRADITIONAL SHOPPING DISTRICT
The main shopping districts of Kuala Lumpur contain the most significant historic buildings and streets mixed with modern commercial buildings. The area receives the highest concentration of shoppers and visitors. The district comprises of streets known as Jalan Masjid India and Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman (JMI-TAR) and Jalan Petaling (JP). JMI-TAR was part of the early formation of Kuala Lumpur, which began in around 1859. JMI and TAR are traditional shopping streets, which house mainly Indian Muslim, Indian and Malay businesses. Developed in 1879, JP is the oldest traditional street in Kuala Lumpur formed dated back to the nineteenth-century when the country was the world’s foremost tin producer. The family-based businesses occupied the commercial center. Known as the “Chinatown” of Kuala Lumpur, JP is one of the early urban streets housing the Chinese community. The tin mining activities along the Kelang River and...
Gombak River shaped the function of the street located the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Figure 1 shows the pedestrian along JMI (a), the general view of JTAR (b) the street hawkers along JP (c).

![Figure 1: The street scenes of JMI (a), JTAR (b) and JP (c) (Source: the author, 2013).](image)

**METHODOLOGY**

The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured format with 24 samples (JMI-TAR: 12, JP: 12) taking into consideration the length of engagement, ethnicity, frequency of visits and familiarity with the places. Structured questions applied as a framework for questioning. Questions include reasons for engagement and the attraction of the place, knowledge about the place and place memory and personal, social and cultural associations and significance of the place. The sampling is purposeful based on specific characteristics, behavior or experience of the users. This is to enable broad comparison to be made between different important groups of users (Shuhana, 1997). The strategy is appropriate for the shopping streets of Kuala Lumpur city center, which has multicultural population, who gather for different functions and purposes.

**The respondents**

24 respondents participated in the interviews with an age range between 27 and 69 years. The majority of them aged between 40 and 55 years and had been working and making a living on a daily basis for a period of between 5 to 50 years, and, hence, very familiar with the streets. The respondents represent the main ethnic population occupying the streets: Malays (JMI-TAR: 6; JP: 2), Indian Muslims JMI-TAR: 2), Chinese (JP: 10) and Indian (JMI-TAR : 2). Apart from shoppers and visitors (JMI-TAR: 4; JP: 4), the majority of the respondents were those who work and make
a living on a daily basis in the areas. They included shop owners (JMI-TAR: 3, JP: 3), shopkeepers (JMI-TAR: 2, JP: 1), street vendors (JMI-TAR: 1, JP: 2) and office workers (JMI-TAR: 1; JP: 1). They represent the key users from the dominant ethnic group occupying the places. For both cases, 5 out of 12 respondents are males while 7 out of 12 respondents are females.

The period of engagement of the respondents who participated in the interview ranged from 5 – 50 years of which the majority of the respondents had between 10-30 years of engagement. JP indicated a higher number of respondents who engaged with the streets for more than 20 years following the continuation of the family-inherited trading activities. The study involved 24 of the respondents who have engaged in areas between 1 to 5 years (4 respondents); 5 to 10 years (4 respondents); 10-20 years (8 respondents) and more than 20 years (8 respondents). The shop owners and shopkeepers engaged in diverse types of trading activities.

**MEANINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRADITIONAL SHOPPING STREETS**

The traditional streets are meaningful in view of the respondents due to personal, social and cultural significance. They claimed that the streets share meanings as places for financial sustenance. The places also reflect continuity of a distinct culture and variety in products. The following statements indicate respondents’ dependency on the streets due to their functional significance:

"This place is very important to sustain my income." (Malay street vendor: 12 years of engagement), JMI

The respondents associate their attachment with various types of activities. However, based on observation, the majority of the respondents engage in the streets for trading, working and shopping. This emphasizes the dominant role of the place as a commercial center with multi-layers of activities that make the ambiance of the place unique. The respondents mainly engaged in the transaction of textiles, clothing, accessories and perfume (JMI-TAR, JP); jewelry, food, bookshop, vending and legal practices (JMI-TAR); vending, fruits, , flower shops, vcd’s and hand phones, fast food (JP) and souvenirs, fashion accessories and services (JMI-TAR). Figure 2 (a) reflects the diversity of JalanPetaling (JP).

Another apparent form of engagement is the daily and occasional religious and cultural activities (JMI). Located at the main trading area of JMI, the Indian Mosque has been a place of solitude and performing prayers for the Indian Muslims and the Malays. The intensity of use heightened during the weekly Friday congregation during which the pedestrianized street instantaneously turned into praying spaces to support the overflow of worshippers (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. The essence of a place is driven by the economic transaction, sequences of events, the people’s engagement in trading JP (a) and regular religious activities in JMI (b) (Source: the author, 2013).](image-url)
Regarding elements that make the place distinctive, the respondents mentioned that the shopping activities and the products (goods) became the main attractions. The physical component (the building, open spaces and the public facilities) is the least identifiable to the respondents followed by the people in place. Therefore, place engagement strongly linked to the purpose and intention of being in the streets and the ability of the streets to support activities. Interaction and transaction promotes familiarity among the users. JMI-TAR and JP have been synonymous to the traditional pattern of transactions and various types of street vending activities. However, JMI has a greater advantage due to the festive and regular events which include Saturday night market and Ramadhan Bazaar. The choices of traditional and domestic products, clothing, and food are widely available at reasonable prices.

Continued engagement with the shopping streets associated with attachment to particular elements of attraction. The identifiable spaces within the shopping districts are the shopping spaces within commercial buildings, the outdoor trading spaces and public open spaces. The most frequently visited types of the shop are the street vendor (JP, JMI). This is evident in the presence of street vendors occupying JP, which houses a population of approximately 700 hawkers with 400 stalls (alternately used during daytime and night time) while JMI supports approximately 147 street vendor units (DBKL, 2004). In this situation, personal and group engagement with the street activities denotes place distinction.

Despite the popularity of the street vendors in JMI, shopping complexes are the most frequently visited types of shops in JMI-TAR due to the dominance of large shopping malls in JTAR. Unlike JTAR, JP houses rows of well-defined traditional shop houses and street vending units, which became the most visited types of stores. However, the emergence of shopping malls in the 1980’s has had an adverse impact on the significance of the traditional shop houses and early departmental stores in JMI-TAR. This scenario is expressed in the following statements published in the local newspaper:

"Jalan Masjid India (JMI) is one of Kuala Lumpur’s most distinctive areas that is credited as being one of the original shopping hubs before the mammoth malls were built in the city": Metro (Mon. 25 Oct 2004, p. 3-4)

With the changing pattern of transaction, the informal trading activities are struggling to sustain their existence in the area. Despite the attraction of new shopping malls, the popularity of street vendors, department stores and traditional shop houses in JP and JMI-TAR sustains the attachment of related ethnic groups to shop in the areas. However the street vendors are considered unique to the traditional streets (JMI, JP).

ATTACHMENT AND BELONGING
Place attachment concept is closely linked with the affective aspects of environmental meaning (Altman and Low, 1992). Shamai (1991) developed the sense of place measurement indicating the strength of place attachment. The scale ranges from 'no sense of place' (value of 0) to 'deepest commitment and sacrifice to the place' (value of 6). The result suggests that attachment to the study areas is at level three (3). This level displays an "emotional bonding at a higher level with attached meanings". The streets as a center for personal and collective experience embed meanings and symbols that form the identity of the places. The identity of the traditional streets of JMI-TAR and JP linked strongly to their distinctive atmosphere generated by people and buying and selling activities. In addition, the respondents were generally happy with the diversity of the available products. One of the shoppers commented:

"I shop here because I have been shopping here for 25 to 30 years. I come here especially when I crave a particular food that is available here such as bakery, noodles,
and fruits from China. It’s special because it has been here for so long” (Chineseshopper: 30 years of engagement), JP.

The respondents shared not only their knowledge about the places but also sentiments and pride. Their commitment associated with the roles of the place in developing the sense of ‘ownership’ and ‘territoriality’. It has defined their ethnic identity. The emotional investments made by individuals into a particular place or setting and their length of association with the location form place identity (Moore and Graefe, 1994). The emotional attachment was evident in one of the statements made by a concerned user in the local newspaper:

“Now, all the hard work put up by the mosque committee and the huge financial contributions by the Indian Muslim community, including myself, have been made futile by the decision of City Hall to erect this monstrous structure right on the doorstep of the mosque, reaching up to the minarets of the Mosque. It is very disheartening to note that this beautiful and historical mosque is hidden from public view.” (A letter to the Editor from Ibrahim Ismail, Kuala Lumpur) New Strait Times, Wed, 27 Oct 2004 pg.21

Similar emotion expressed by a shop owner who has engaged in the street for 27 years:

“I do not live in this area, but I love this place very much and wish to continue my business here as long as possible.” (Indian Muslim respondent 4: Shop owner) JMI

While one of the street vendors who inherited the family business expressed a strong sense of pride:

“I am very proud to be here because not anyone can own a business here. Mine is my father’s legacy.” (Chinese shop owner; 26 years of engagement) JP

The frequency and the length of engagement influence place attachment. Shoppers expressed a feeling of enjoyment associated with the street activities that influence their frequent visits. Here, the feelings and perception that people have through experience of a place as well as the qualities of a place that make it distinctive from other places create a sense of place (Relph, 1976). The functional attachment is reflected in the form of association with the place. For instance, a pensioner who felt that the shaded open space with seating (despite very few in number) allowed him to gather with his other fellow pensioners. The group’s preference to meet at the spot was also linked to the street entertainment by the blind musicians. He mentioned:

“I choose to be here because this is the only place in the center of the Kuala Lumpur that is suitable and comfortable enough to sit and talk with friends – there is seating and shade. However, when it rains we have to go home. We are not allowed to sit at the shop front areas. We love to listen to the music and songs (old songs) played by the street musicians. So we can sit and talk and be entertained while looking at people passing…” (Malay pensioner/visitor: 8 years of association) JMI

Positive emotion mainly linked to the general atmosphere of the streets, liveliness, character, and the enhancement of image and the physical structures. The enjoyment felt by the shoppers reflects the respondent’s familiarity with the streets and their ability to provide choices of goods with lower price range:

“I enjoy shopping here because I am used to this place, familiar with the shops. They offer a wide choice of things and the price is good…” (Malay shopper: 18 years of association) JTAR

The respondents strongly identified with the character of the places. They expressed sense of pride with regards to the popularity of the places. In relation to the period of engagement, the
majority of the respondents described the way they experienced the streets over time and the uniqueness of the place in comparison to other places in the city center. In both cases, some of the respondents used words such as ‘we’ and ‘ours’ to indicate the sense of belonging to the community. Others associated it with the longing after a long period of not having visited the streets mainly due to the ‘ambiance’ of that particular place to which they were attached.

“I miss this place a lot after not being here for a long period. I long for the ambiance and our friends that we used to gather.” (Malay visitor, 20 years of association) JMI-TAR

“I love this place and will continue to stay here as long as possible. This place has its own unique attraction, vibrant and entertaining” (Malay street vendor; 12 years engagement) JMI-TAR

A stronger self-identification of JMI-TAR indicates an established bond between the long-term users due to similar roles and shared experiences. They identified strongly with other traders of similar ethnic groups and the business community according to their roles (e.g. street vendor, stalls owner and textile shop owners). Here, people and activity are the key components of a living place that generates a sense of belonging (Steele, 1981). The respondents closely linked their special association with the particularities distinctive to the streets, from the historic buildings to local and traditional products. Those include the traditional Indian saris, specially produced carpets, silk, traditional Malay costumes, traditional medicine and others, which could not be found in any other place within the city.

The present site of Masjid India has a long and unique history back to 1863. The original wooden building on the site was built by South Indian Muslim merchants who traded along Malay and Java Streets. The building was the first and only mosque in Kuala Lumpur then. Renovation has been undertaken by the mosque committee to beautify the mosque as a proud symbol for the Indian Muslim community in the heart of the city, and it has been projected as one of the most visited tourists attractions in Kuala Lumpur (NST: Wed. 27 Oct 2004).

“I am proud because this place is unique. I love shopping with my mother because they sell many food specialties.” (Indian Muslim shopper; 10 years engagement) JP

Care and concern for the places are evident and to a certain extent have become a sentiment. The concerns include the quality of public facilities, vehicular and pedestrian accessibility, safety, beautification and improvement, economic sustainability and activity (transaction), social interference, significance or meaningful buildings such as Masjid India (Indian Mosque) and the Coliseum Cinema. Conflicting opinions and sentiments towards the changes and improvements of the streets had clouded by economic and social advantages. This is evident in the following complaint:

“I support improvement but sometimes it does not consider the need of the traders like me. Because of the project the main through road has been closed so that others cannot access this area; customers are not willing to come because there is only one through road going into this area from the main road JTAR, the road is too small and causes bad traffic flow...” (Indian Muslim shop owner, 20 years engagement) JMI

A stronger form of attachment expressed through the respondents' dissatisfaction over physical intervention involving the streets (JMI, JP). Users who had been working and living in the area for a long number of years were very protective about the streets’ livelihood. Since a user’s ability to change and claim a space will affect their sense of ownership and attachment, any form of change can result in the traders having to be relocated elsewhere. This forces them to reclaim a new sense of territory. Therefore, changes in the physical aspects if not appropriate to the needs and sensitivity of the users could result in the loss of meaning and attachment.
MEMORY AND KNOWLEDGE

Place memory is a sign of association between a person and a place. This can be reflected in the place being identifiable and memorable. Memories of the past and particular experiences evoked emotions. The findings indicate that the emotions relate to memorable physical and social changes together with a particular moment of interaction with very familiar customers and frequent shoppers. The respondents cherished childhood memory of being with family members and entertaining cultural festivals. However they associated negative emotions with relocation, confronting intruders and the experience of stealing belongings. The following statements reveal the memories of JMI-TAR:

“I used to visit and shop here with my mother buying all the stuff needed for schooling... I remember Globe Silk Store and a few small shops selling the items on Jalan TAR.” (Malay shopper, 25 years of association) JMI-TAR

“I always go to the Coliseum in JTAR, watching Tamil movies every Wednesday; I have been doing so ever since I moved into the area 15 years ago.” (Indian resident: 15 years of stay) JMI

The following statement describes the continuity of place attachment embedded in the memory however it is threatened by the transformation of the place:

“JalanTunku Abdul Rahman, popularly known as Batu Road, holds fond memories for city folk who used to shop at the popular street during the early 1960s and 1970s. Today, it is struggling to keep up with the image of modern shopping malls” (Star Metro: 25 Oct. 2005)

Respondents linked their memories of JP with shared activities and the street’s physical evolution. These include shopping with parents during childhood, the changing of the place from the early days, going to the cinema with close friends during younger years, buying traditional Chinese specialties, association with other neighboring traders and late family members. Some of these are expressed in the following responses:

“I can recall my everyday life of waking up early and arranging my wares; and my daily ‘tea and coffee’ with neighboring stalls and shops…”(Chinese shopkeeper, 26 years of engagement) JP

“I used to come to JP with friends to look for an old man who sells traditional Chinese candies. But this art has gone and now it is more difficult to find these kinds of sweets…” (Chinese shopper, 20 years of association) JP

Knowledge of the streets is reflected in the descriptions repeatedly mentioned in the conversation. The majority of the respondents shared similar identifiable elements that they thought had defined the character of the streets. The elements mostly associated with the street activities, buildings as place markers, attraction for shopping, the goods and products offered, the physical features, events and the general atmosphere of the streets. For the respondents, the shopping streets are special places of memories. Occasional events and activities with close relatives and friends identified as memorable and meaningful. The knowledge of the streets was vividly described in all cases corresponding to the respondents’ degree of familiarity with the places.

CULTURAL AND ETHNIC INFLUENCE ON TRADING ACTIVITIES

The socio-cultural characteristics of the people, which defines and distinguishes one group’s collective making of the setting from others influence the way people experience places. The spirit of place rooted in the past makes up the essence of the places despite the continuous
changes in their physical appearance and pattern of activities. The cultural expression strongly manifested in the items sold and the general atmosphere of the shopping streets particularly during festivals for each religious and ethnic groups. Hari Raya of Eid is a celebration for Muslims across culture after a month of fasting transforms the image of the shopping streets where costumes, specially made carpets, food and cakes occupied the trading spaces. Here, the Malays and the Indian Muslims celebrate the festival every year in accordance with the religious symbols and practices. The presence of shoppers and visitors intensified during this period. The Chinese New Year celebrated by the Chinese population and the spirit of the festival can be felt in JPwhile the Indians celebrate Depaavali festival (JMI). The traditional products that are distinct to the streets (JMI-TAR, JP) indicate the dominance of the community rooted in the early ethnic settlement. The Indian Muslims involved in the trading activities and occupied the premises along JMI-TAR. Their sense of socio-cultural bonding is evident in the interaction, transaction and religious practices.

DISCUSSION
Attachment to the shopping streets relates to various place meanings and levels of significance. The meanings associated with the places relate to personal as well as group experiences. The role of the diverse economic transactions is very important in supporting attachment while the socio-cultural interaction helps develop the sense of belonging to the trading communities and people from a similar ethnic background. The attachment is driven by the economic transaction, sequence of events, the people and local culture, memories of past experiences, history of place, streetscape elements (e.g. place markers, nodes) and distinct atmosphere. The shopping streets are significant due to their function as a center of economic and socio-cultural activities.

The functional, emotional and the social meanings evoked by the elements are the profound reasons that the places continue to be loved and found significant. This suggests that despite the influence of physical elements in the construction of meanings (Steadman, 2003), human experience and intention, social relationships, emotions and thoughts are important aspects influencing how meaning is developed (Ibid, 2003; Relph, 1976). The physical environment has an important role in providing images so that topophilia (the love of a place) has a concrete object of attachment (Tuan, 1974); however, in addition, the study discovered that the social and cultural relationship, memory and personal meanings contribute to the attachment.

It is evident that the Malay, Chinese and Indian Muslims through their ways of life and interactions that are rooted in the early days have formed the distinct character of the places. The places are important in their daily activities as individuals and as a member of the particular ethnic community. The streets are the rooted places of sustainable self and community identity. The sense of place rooted in the past is, therefore, what constitutes the essence of the place despite the continuous physical transformation. This indicates that the spirit of place (genius loci) involves particular significance deriving from past events and presents a situation that determines the identity of a place (Relph, 1976). Parallel to previous findings, in the case of a pluralistic society, the cultural principles play an important role in defining group identity, and, hence, influence the character and identity of the place they inhabit (Rapoport, 1977). This concurs with the idea that a strong sense of attachment to a particular place is influenced by racial and ethnic identity, and the culture of the people influences the environmental reaction towards a setting (Rose, 1995).

As the city experience changes in its physical image, the continuity of meaning and conception of the places transformed. However, the significance of the places will endure as long as the place can fulfill the psychological needs and aspiration of the users. In addition, there are other factors that have the potential to affect the development of place attachment. The findings suggest that repeated direct experience of a place is necessary for persons or groups to build attachment and meaning. Continued use promotes a sense of ownership and an extension of personal identity.
PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN IMPLICATION

According to Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020, the traditional district within the historic inner city zone will be developed as specialized shopping district. The need is to upgrade the streets to be attractive and comfortable to shoppers. The strategy includes preservation and conservation of the best of the city’s architectural, historical, townscape and cultural heritage to sustain distinctiveness of character and increase a sense of belonging to the city. It is to ensure that all development in the vicinity of the district is sympathetic in form, scale and character (DBKL, 2004)

It is important to rediscover the soul of the city and to reinvent places for people with total awareness of the limit of global influence in the urban development (Ruhaizan, 2005). The study suggests that any intervention project within the district should support the physical, economic, socio-cultural patterns that characterize the places. To understand the content of character and identity, place meaning and attachment dimensions should be integrated in urban planning and urban design intervention framework. Attachment to the qualities of a place will shape the sense of place. The need is to consider the dominant function of the place perceived by users and proven by the way they attached in the activities. The preservation of the physical heritage will support the sustainability of the social and cultural heritage. The continuity in meaning and attachment can be safeguarded by understanding how the locals attached to places.

For the traditional street, despite lacking in its physical qualities, the importance of the streets as a locus for trading activities of products suitable for a specific group of users (e.g. particular ethnic groups) strongly influenced the attachment. It differentiates this place from other similar places in the city center. Stronger place identity helps to increase place attraction to the shoppers, tourists and visitors. For example, the significant of the street vendors as a living component of the place contributes to the unique atmosphere of the traditional streets. In any development initiatives, it is imperative to take into consideration the perceptual and experiential qualities of the places. Thus, it should be considered in formulating the concept of any urban redevelopment program.

A place is perceived as familiar due to a longer period of engagement. If a place is richly embedded in its context, it is more likely to achieve deeper and more lasting meanings. Reinterpretation of tradition based on current needs should take into consideration the continuity of physical legacy and social values embedded in the meanings attached to the people’s life. The findings of the study indicate that the strength of the traditional shopping streets is associated with the cultural characteristics of the dominant ethnic group occupying the area. Thus, the local urban design strategy should aim at applying design concept appropriate to the ethnic community and reflect their identity. This will assist the intervention process involving various types of users occupying the business premises who regard the streets as significant in sustaining the economy and the local culture.

CONCLUSION

This study substantiates that meanings has an important contribution to the preservation of place identity. The historical and social significance of the traditional streets as the earliest shopping streets in Kuala Lumpur evoked emotional and functional meanings to the users and the social or ethnic groups associated therewith. The research is important in elevating the quality of life and the physical, as well as psychological well-being of the urban users in the traditional shopping streets. The need is to ensure that any form of intervention will not discourage their daily engagement and threaten their sense of attachment to the places. The framework used in the research integrates the psychological aspects in defining the significance of the traditional districts and its distinctive qualities. It integrates the aspect of meanings and attachment in the way places should be appraised and viewed without being confined by generalized perception of places.
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