

Street Markets: Cultural And Economic Corridors Of The City

Khalilah Zakariya

International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)



Street markets are one of Malaysia's visible spatial cultures. They temporarily transformed the streets into lively market spaces. Though street markets are not uncommon in other countries, this phenomenon occurs on a daily basis in Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur alone has four street markets that are popular among tourists, and 95 night markets that operate in other areas. Street markets redefine public spaces in the Asian context because their

temporality and informality have become embedded into the street culture of the cities. They contribute to the city's street life because most street markets operate outdoors on the streets, parking lots and public spaces. Street markets are the kind of space that have a certain degree of looseness and casualness that is different from the atmosphere in the shopping malls and formal retail shops. As street markets often operate on the city streets or back lanes, they offer a different atmosphere to other types of public spaces because they are cultural and commercial in nature.

sector. These street markets gradually become assimilated into the city life as cultural and commercial spaces. To the vendors, the street market is where they earn their income. To the visitors, the street market is where they can find a variety of local food and a range of merchandise at affordable prices, while experiencing a festive atmosphere. To the tourists, the street market is where they encounter local people and local products.


In Malaysia, a visitor can find a fusion of local and 'localized' products in the street markets. From a range of concoctions, fast food and local dishes, the collections of products in the street markets are valuable examples of the Malaysian culture that have been able to be kept alive alongside modernization and urbanization. The physical characteristics of the street markets may have gradually changed from temporary to semi-permanent over the years, from informal stalls to standardized designs. Nonetheless, the inherent characteristic of the street markets lies within the ingenuity of the vendors, the products and the chaotic atmosphere. The acculturation and localization of different elements into the street market operations produce a new form of local culture. In essence, this richness and complexity compose the cultural characteristics of the street markets.

As a form of 'local' place in the city, street markets are resilient and



The Chinatown 'Pasar Malam' (Night Market) in Melbourne, Australia operates in a laneway

The operations of street markets relies on borrowing existing public spaces, such as the streets, squares and parking lots. In Asia, street markets function primarily as a source of income for small-scale entrepreneurs. The country's recognition and institutionalization of street markets as temporary and periodic activities of the city act as a framework that supports the development and management of the informal



The night market in Lorong Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Kuala Lumpur is a street market that operates at the back lane

opportunistic. They thrive on specific enabling conditions, such as a strong contextual adjacency, accessibility, provision of public facilities and micro infrastructures. However, the development of street markets in Malaysia could not have progressed without the presence of a policy in the local authorities that allows street markets to operate alongside other public spaces and formal commercial spaces. The support and recognition from the local authorities have enabled street markets to expand into the emerging new models, such as the current trends of food truck markets, seasonal festive markets, and other temporary market events. The policy is an important platform that can accommodate urban street markets through the intermixing of land use.

Street markets operate differently than other types of commercial space because they usually operate in an outdoor public space. Due to their event-like nature, the street markets involve not only the public as the visitors, but a large group of vendors as the operators. This is unlike any other outdoor public space, where the majority of the users are primarily transient occupiers conducting leisure activities. Fellow researchers

that examine the operations of street markets have identified that among the challenges that arise are in terms of maintenance of the borrowed streets or public spaces, cleanliness during and after the event, and the crowd and traffic management of the areas involved. Since street markets involve various entities in the local authorities, vendor association and the individual vendors, they require different kinds of infrastructures and guidelines that can guide more flexibility and specificity to how urban street markets might be accommodated better. The policy is an empowering soft infrastructure that can allow street markets to continue to operate as part of the city in a sustainable way.

In meeting the needs of the present and the future, it is vital to understand that street markets will evolve physically, culturally and economically. Much so because as a public space that is commercial in nature, street markets are undoubtedly influenced by the trends and demands of consumerism. Nonetheless, we should be exceedingly concerned about preserving the 'local look' of the street markets merely for it to visually reflect our local identities. Their localness and characteristics are actually embedded in how they are

adapted to their site context, spatial appropriations, the interactions between the vendors and visitors, the range of products, and the activities that all combined to create the festive atmosphere. The blend of these components and activities to enliven streets and places is what planners and designers call placemaking. Although initially in Malaysia, the operations of street markets was not deliberate acts of placemaking, their assimilation into the local urban street culture actually shows the recognition by the city councils on meeting the needs of the public through informal commercial activities in our public spaces. The forms and appearances of most street markets were not designed to portray specific meanings or symbols. They were curated and adapted to their spatial contexts through ways that enabled them to function as temporary market spaces and to generate informal and festive atmosphere for the city. All these elements collectively shape their identities and meanings to the users. As such, the role of placemaking when it comes to public spaces such as the street markets is to stimulate or 'choreograph' these activities to occur, and gradually to let the process of time and influences mould the street market's cultures and distinctiveness. Sure, at a glance, some visitors might say that a street market in a non-Asian country such as Melbourne, Australia might look similar to a typical street market in Kuala Lumpur. But then again, once the visitors walk and navigate through the street market stalls, they will start to sense the qualities and ambience that give them a distinct experience, whether they realize it or not.