

## PTS and the Built Environment in George Town, Penang

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### ABSTRACT

Urban development is complex and contested. This complexity brings forward the realization that urban development's success is something that depends not only on the way it is designed but also stimulated by people's acceptance level as well as the government's commitment. Observation on the study area and its surrounding environment shows a unique landscape where buildings were ranged into several urban development classifications. In this case specifically, this paper adopts the view that '*...there is no distinct boundary between specific types of development [given that] the decisions on the location of the actual boundaries are frequently made quite arbitrarily*' (Zaremski, 2006 pp 315-316), between the study area and its surrounding environment. This paper investigates the complexities facing a range of key stakeholders groups in managing and developing George Town where the unique landscape suggests the presence of social, cultural and economic inequalities are still being literally instilled into George Town's development.

**Keywords:** Urban development, buildings and spaces, sense of belonging, self-othering and town management.

### 1.0 Introduction

Urban development is complex and contested. This complexity brings forward the realization that urban development's success is something that depends not only on the way it is designed but also stimulated by people's acceptance level as well as the government's commitment. Urban development classification can be encapsulated into the following categorizations, namely, mixed development, transit oriented development, high-rise development, low density development as well as service, warehouse and industrial development. This paper adopts the view that '*...there is no distinct boundary between specific types of development [given that] the decisions on the location of the actual boundaries are frequently made quite arbitrarily*' (Zaremski, 2006 pp 315-316). Thus, the interpretation of urban development often suggested in spatial economic disciplines and is a critical undertaking as its success can be its ultimate and unwitting demise. It is against this background that this paper is set. Drawing upon project work undertaken in Penang by senior Urban and Regional Planning students from Australia and Malaysia; this paper investigates the complexities facing a range of key stakeholders groups in managing and developing George Town. This process in return, will play as an important factor in determining the people's acceptance towards what has been, is being and to be done.

### 2.0 Problem Statement

The island of Penang is located off Malaysia's west coast. Proclaimed a British colonial possession in August 1786 by Capt. Francis Light, Penang's capital George Town became an import commercial port, rapidly becoming one of the prominent Straights Cities along with Malacca and Singapore. George Town has always been a multicultural city, with its diverse society having a significant impact upon George Town's built environment as well as urban development. From the perspective of this paper, urban development is portrayed as the process of adding improvements to a parcel of land such as grading, subdivisions, drainage, access, roads and utilities. Simply stated, urban development is the act of making some area of land more profitable, productive and useful. During the 2010 UniSA/USM collaborative field school, student-led research project has identified, investigated and highlighted issue of urban design and large-scale development in George Town. Mirroring other cities in SE Asian, Penang has been experiencing the emergence of large-scale, master-planned developments. Characterized by emblematic landscapes of power, shinning towers of glass and steel are not only indicators of the significant investment of global capital in local places, but reflect changing ways of living and lifestyle aspirations. However, flag-ship developments are more than just physical places; they are symbols of progress and affluence (see Bunnell 1999; Kong and Law 2002; Goh 2002).

It is learned that urban development, whether in the forms of planned or unplanned development (defined as '*...development that proceeds without any regards to the original development plan*' by Greg Shill, 2002 p 31), poses several impacts, of which, are broadly categorized in economic growth, changes in urban landscape,

lifestyle, environment and transportation. The difference(s) lies in the degree and significance of the impact. In this case, the Penang Times Square project undertaken by the Ivory Properties Group Berhad poses several impacts on, but not limited to, the surroundings' residents' quality of life, the urban design and the sense of belongings. Study by Gatti *et. al* (2010) concluded that Penang is keen on development that is McDonaldization-related where these developments exploit the local culture in order to attract the international capital investment. Large scale, western-style developments give the different vibes and are contradicting with the existing surrounding which contribute to what we called exclusionary and self-othering (Gatti *et al*, 2010). It is within this paper interest to study what kind of perceptions showed by the city of George Town's people towards the PTS project with regards to the before-mentioned issues and what can be done by Ivory Properties Group Berhad's PR personnel in dealing with such issues.

### 3.0 Study Methodology

The research presented by this paper is motivated by previous students' evaluation assignment, which was jointly conducted by senior Urban and Regional Planning Students from the University of South Australia (henceforth referred to as UniSA) of School of Natural and Built Environments and Universiti Sains Malaysia (henceforth referred to as USM) of School of Housing, Building and Planning (HBP). This evaluation assignment is designed, executed and presented within a two-week timeframe. It is done as a part of field school requirements and is held annually from the end of September to early of October, in Penang. The field school brings together a number of students to work in cross-cultural/institutional project groups on a range of planning issues. Working in close conjunction with academic supervisors from both UniSA and USM, the students employ a number of research methods to examine their study areas. The research methods employ can be described as mixed method approach where it consists of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Though quantitative and qualitative research methods have the same characteristics where both employ '*...scientific method, observation, hypothesis generation and hypothesis testing*' (Rich and Ginsburg, 1997 p 371), the validity of mixed method is emphasized by Mangan *et al* (2004, p 565) as a means to '*...provide a middle ground between the contrasting positivist and phenomenological paradigms and perspectives*'. Those specific research techniques employed to include, yet are not limited to questionnaire sampling, analysis of government statistical data, semi-structured interviews and a variety of deconstructive techniques such as textual and visual analysis and landscape deconstruction.

### 4.0 The Project : Penang Times Square

The Penang Times Square or else known as PTS, is a planned urban centre in George Town, of which, situated in the land of the former Escoc Smelting Company (Syed Imran, 2008). The PTS which located in the heart of George Town along Jalan Datok Keramat, is a massive development opened in October 2009. Divided into four phases, PTS is a mixed-component development encompassing Birch The Plaza (phase one completed in 2008 and launched in 2009: 417 residential units and 125 retail lots), Birch Regency (phase two completed in 2010 and launched in 2011: 360 residential units and 125 retail lots); world-class MICE centre with a cineplex (phase three) and commercial and retail space (phase four). The remaining phases are already under construction commencing 2012 and are expected to be completed within three-year time frame. The large-scale PTS development will be further furnished in a sense that the buildings of the three phases (phase two, phase three and phase four) will be interlinked with one another by covered bridges and extra wide corridors as well as beautifully landscaped walkways with sophisticated water features. The concept is characterized by its many open street connections, multiple event facilities, open space with water foundations and landscaping. In addition, the PTS will also be equipped with a public open plaza, called the Urban Square. The Urban Square is aimed to be the '*...focus of community gatherings and celebrations*' (REHDA, 2008). Interestingly, the PTS project was first designed with '*...a plan to include a monorail station, if ever the monorail is introduced to George Town*' (Tye, 2009). To Ivory Properties Group Berhad, the plan is an additional boost to promote the PTS on top of the strategic location, economic growth and vibrant history factors. Simply stated, through the PTS project, the Ivory Properties Group Berhad wishes '*to provide variety within the [George Town] development and thus create distinctive places that would match the world of difference marketing [strategy]*' (Lynch, 2002).

Equally to the rest of the property development projects undertaken by Ivory Properties Group Berhad, the PTS project is investigated, planned and designed in correspondence to the company's business model (Ivory Properties Group Berhad, 2008). By employing market focus strategy in the first phase, Ivory Properties Group Berhad investigates the sustainability of the PTS project. At this point, the following key factors such as market's demands and needs, development type and potential customers; are studied in order to secure a high return profit. Here, working in close conjunction with several other appointed bodies (for example the Penang State Planning Authority, the Ivory Properties Group Berhad's investors and share partners, mass communication bodies and transport planners), the company's PR personnel play an important role in establishing the PTS project's platform

within the market, by using a five-way approach (as detailed in Section 4.0). Location strategy is a phase when Ivory Properties Group Berhad getting engulfed in '*...maximizing business opportunities through the development of properties in strategic locations*' (Ivory Properties Group Berhad, 2008). To be more specific, market focus and location strategies are both done during the same time frame. The last stage involves the integrated responsibility of the capable in-house experts who are focused and committed in managing their task force to support the market focus strategy. The PR activities further strengthen the company's and the PTS project images, which in return, serves as the PTS promotion purpose.

### 5.0 Penang Times Square : Evaluation Assignment

Similar to many other urban developments constructed in Malaysia's states, urban developments undertaken within the city of George Town are obligated to comply with the requirements set by the planning authority, in this case, the Penang State Planning Authority. On top of that, developers are to make sure that the proposed project is in parallel strands with '*...the emergence of urban regeneration and sustainable development*' policy (Couch and Dennemann, 2000 p 137). According to Department of Town and Country Planning (2012), any proposed development project is to be in line with the Development Plans such as State's Structure Plan, Local Plan, Local District Plan and Special Specific Area Plan; which are prepared by the planning authority. Surprisingly, after many had been done, the dehumanizing developments are still at large within the city of George Town such as Scott Residences and Maritime Piazza, where both are residential development with height of 22 storeys (Penang Property Talk, 2012). Further, other than making sure that the proposed projects are according to the requirements set by the planning authority, the developers bear the responsibility of taking into accounts the people's opinions and suggestions, especially when it is related to the people's attachment on something. In this case, this refers to the people's sense of belonging and sense of place.

The student-led UniSA/USM collaborative research project has come to conclude that the PTS project does not face any setback in terms of execute according to the expected time frame and difficulties in delivering PTS to the potential customers (Tan, 2011). In other words, the PTS can be described as a successful project which responded to planning requirements and met the market's demands and needs, accordingly. The evaluation assignment, however, brings forward three issues with regards to the impacts of the PTS large-scale development on its surrounding area. Of clarification, this paper reviews these three issues namely the surroundings' residents' quality of life, the urban design and the sense of belongings as attitudinal-related issues. The rapid growth of massive-scale developments has raised concerns, whether is there any balance point between these developments and the existing George Town's landscape and cityscape.

A simple visual observation on the PTS project is enough to clarify and verify the differences exist between PTS and its surrounding development/environment. In addition to its development scale, the PTS stands out for its skyscraper status as well as its '*...comprehensive range of [urban village] development concept*' (Ivory Properties Group Berhad, 2008f). PTS is prompted as '*...the first new age urban centre on Penang Island in the 21st century... [and] is conceived to be a contemporary of the best public squares all over the world but offering an urban experience unique to its locality*' (Ivory Properties Group Berhad, 2008f). To this paper, the PTS project is a deliberate strategy to infuse the existing development of a sense of global prestige and connectivity. This, however, is a symbol of progress and affluence. It can be argued then that these landscapes of change represent a significant disjuncture between the historic landscape of the past and the progressive landscape of the future. Consequently, balancing development and conservation is a critical challenge facing George Town. Data collected using semi-structured interview method from several resources (Penang Heritage Trust, retailers from Prangin Mall and KOMTAR, the planning authority, locals and tourists) on their perception pertaining PTS showed that the PTS dehumanizing scale exhibits a threat to the city's World Heritage status. Exemplifying this, the city of George Town was proposed and inscribed on the following grounds: '*...George Town [is] still inhabited by people [which] are excellent examples living heritage town where ...in many different styles and cultural influences, can be found*' (Government of Malaysia, 2007 p 109).

Interestingly, results from visual analysis, landscape deconstruction and textual analysis methods exhibit similar findings where the PTS western-based design emphasizes what is called as self-othering. According to Arab American National Museum (2011), self-othering is a way of grouping people based on life experiences where '*othering reaches beyond defining the Self as superior and the Other as inferior*'. Although in earlier times self-othering is very much related to '*...logic to justify slavery and later segregation*' (Arab American National Museum, 2011), in today's environment, it is more towards describing the lack of sense of belongings. It is said that the PTS '*...is a place where the historical events of the past will be retold and future events will be unfold, and a place where [the] colonial outpost will relive its glorious past*' (JB Jurunilai Bersekutu Sdn Bhd, 2012). Unfortunately, the idea was not being well-conveyed seeing that locals and the surrounding residents claimed that

*'...the inner city communities are replaced almost overnight by foreigners and boutique business establishments'* (REHDA, 2010). Having said that, this paper adopts the view that it is undoubtedly that locals and the surrounding residents are being deprived from sense of belongings.

As mentioned in Section 5, the PTS project is said to be a centre place for people to undertake social activities such as gatherings and meetings through the public open plaza, Urban Square. In this light, it is of importance to emphasize that the possibility of people engaging in activities in a place is highly correlated with people's perception on that particular place, especially in relation to sense of place. In other words, the attitudinal characteristic of sense of belongings and the urban design characteristic of sense of place are the 'what' factors that influence people's acceptance to a subject, as regarded by Durrell (1969 p 156): *'...you begin to realize that the important determinant of any culture [on any subject] is after all the spirit of place'*. Further supported this is Jiven and Larkham's (2003, p 67) statement on the importance of sense of place: *'...urban designers in particular need to revisit the theoretical underpinnings of the terms and concepts that they employ, in order to fully understand the potential contributions of sense of place, authenticity and character'*. To be more specific, this paper concludes that it is very important to the people generally and for George Town's locals and residents especially to have a sense of place that is unique.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations for Penang Times Square

Conventional knowledge has that the quality of buildings and spaces have a strong influence upon the quality of people's lives. Decision about the design, planning and management of places can enhance or restrict a sense of belonging. They can increase or reduce feelings of security, stretch or limit boundaries, promote or reduce mobility, and improve or damage health. Buildings and spaces even hold the possibility of removing real and imagined barriers between communities and foster understanding and generosity of spirit. However, this is only achievable provided the community is equipped with an in-depth understanding on particular buildings and spaces, which in return, will influence the possibility of being accepted. This is based upon the fact that people experience the built environment differently according to who they are, which based on the following grounds: their social, cultural and economic background. In case of the PTS project, the western-based, large-scale development can be described as emphasizing the fact that people who are not within the high-end class are far more likely to have fewer chances of enjoying the excellent quality environment.

Within this paper knowledge, it is because social, cultural and economic inequalities are still being literally built into PTS project. Hence, this has brought forward the call for an urgent need of reconciliation. More importantly, this is to ensure the locals and the surrounding residents that they are not being deprived from their sense of belonging and sense of place. The ongoing challenge is to find ways in which the design and management of the built environment enhance the sense of belonging and sense of place. Thus, this paper adopts the view that such issues are best handled by the company's PR personnel given that the reconciliation does not only serve the purpose of conveying the message to the people that though the main objective of the PTS project is to serve the high-end customers, it also works hard in creating the PTS environment in a way that it is suitable for all types of society and environment. Further, at the heart of this rests the fact that the Ivory Properties Group Berhad is committed in their vision, which is, 'by giving back to the community is a means to pay the community back for their support'.

This paper proposes the following few solutions; however, this is strictly related to how to encourage people to accept PTS through influencing their attitudinal factors towards creating a positive and better perception:

1. Building communities that work: successfully integrated and cohesive communities can be achieved through a regeneration scheme that draws its investment boundaries along the same lines. According to Nedland (2001, p 2), an integrated community can be built through means of *'...willing investments of time, money and energy'* by emphasizing that though PTS project is built to serve the high-end customers, it is also served as an important platform to revitalize the whole neighborhood.
2. A space to enjoy: inclusive design is a process of designing, building, managing and populating spaces that ensure that they work for as many people as possible, not just some groups. Thus, the company's PR personnel and capable in-house experts are once again in need to collaborate in order to create and to turn the Urban Square into a place that can be accessed with dignity and a place that offers treatment with respect.
3. Places for all: an excellent space is a place that takes forward inclusive design provision. Rather than only plan to build for serving the active lifestyle, a place should take into accounts the people with disability.
4. Ontological security: a person foundational degree of security in the ongoing predictability and control over everyday life is highly correlated with the connection between place attachment and the

development of local connections. Thus, it is on the company's PR personnel to create an atmosphere that assures people that they do not lose their treasured place to urban development.

5. It is deemed best for the company's PR personnel to consider handling this issue by means of media monitoring. At this point, the PR personnel preparation will involve taking action in undertaking a thorough process of '*...scanning and monitoring [the] protocols for designating triggering events*' (Cloudman and Hallahan, 2006 p 368).
6. Community health facilities: the health of place terminology portrays a community's degree of cohesion and vitality. In other words, the term links health with sense of place and sense of community. Provided that the PTS project will be engaging in areas of health and well-being, it is wise to make sure that the health facilities are highly locally relevant.

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