

# **TRANSFORMING THE HISTORICAL URBAN VILLAGE OF KAMPONG BHARU INTO A NEW URBAN CENTRE IN KUALA LUMPUR**

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## ***Abstract***

Throughout Asia, many traditional urban villages have been replaced with modern high-rise buildings that in many cases don't match the lifestyles or meet the needs of their residents. This is in part because most of those residents were not involved in the process of deciding how redevelopment should proceed.

Kampung Bharu is a traditional Malay settlement in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It represents one of many efforts to establish a balance between the concerns of long-term inhabitants and the demands of modern urban development. This paper explores how stakeholders in Kampung Bharu have been involved in recent redevelopment efforts. Key stakeholders—including landowners, residents, village heads, and leaders of local associations—were interviewed, and their concerns and aspirations documented.

Those concerns focused on the impact of new development on land values, ways of taking into account the multiple and shared ownership of land, the adverse impact of new development on patterns of everyday life, and questions about who should make final decisions. The sustainability of an urban village depends in part on how people are informed about and engaged in the allocation of economic and social benefits. Giving greater voice to the people in such urban villages, especially in cities that are developing, could better align city redevelopment objectives with the interests and values of people living in traditional enclaves.

## ***Introduction***

The rapid pace of urbanization in Asian cities has transformed the physical and socio-economic landscapes of those cities. Throughout East Asia, the urbanization rate is 3 percent, and the rate of land expansion of major cities has reached 2.4 percent per year [1]. The impact of this expansion is evident in the disappearance of urban villages of historical significance. The demand for real estate development has turned many traditional villages into modern high-rise developments, that only inadequately meet the needs and lifestyles of existing inhabitants.

Malaysia has experienced this kind of rapid socio-economic development, and as of 2010, had the fourth-largest area of built-up land in East Asia. The Kuala Lumpur urban area is the eighth-largest in the region—larger than some megacity urban areas like Jakarta, Manila, and Seoul—despite its smaller population [2]. The city's expansion has affected existing urban villages in both incremental and drastic ways, and the ongoing pressure for economic development continues to shape urban development plans.

The transformation of Malaysian cities, including Kuala Lumpur, has also given rise to a radical change in the social structure of urban areas [3]. The Kuala Lumpur City Structure Plan 2020 aspires to optimise the use of land and to promote *bumiputera* participation in the city's economy.<sup>1</sup> The increase in the size and density of development in the city centre has transformed major parts of the city, and is symbolised by the Petronas Twin Towers: the pride of the nation. Planning for the land reserved for the Malays—commonly referred to as MRA land, and comprising both traditional urban villages and new villages in the city—aims at improving housing quality and upgrading infrastructure and public facilities [4]. With rising land values, many of these areas have been replaced by new real estate development, including the displacement of existing communities to new housing areas.

This paper focuses on redevelopment issues in Kampong Bharu, a 223-acre Malay Agricultural Settlement located in Kuala Lumpur, and the only remaining urban village in the heart of the city. This Malay urban enclave is transforming at a much slower pace due to its unique land status and multiple land ownership, which make it difficult to completely turn over the land to interested parties for redevelopment. This restriction, however, has not dampened the interest of developers in planning for the redevelopment of the area.

This paper addresses how key stakeholders in Kampong Bharu have been involved (or not involved) with recent redevelopment efforts. Their concerns and aspirations may shed light on how the proposed redevelopment plan would impact their everyday life, and what they want for the future of Kampong Bharu. This process serves as an illuminating case study of people trying to strike a balance between the concerns of long-term inhabitants and the demands of redevelopment.

## ***Literature review***

### ***Kampong Bharu as a Malay agriculture settlement***

The story of Kampong Bharu begins in the early 1900s. His Royal Highness, the Sultan of Selangor, granted the land to the Malays under a special condition that only the Malays could own the land and reside in the area. "Malay" means a person belonging to any Malay race who habitually speaks the language, professes the Muslim religion and practises its customs, and is approved by the Board of Management of the Settlement

as Malay [5]. A “kampong” or “kampung” is defined as “a Malay hamlet or village in a Malay-speaking country, determined as a locality with 10,000 or fewer people.” A Malay village comes under the leadership of a Penghulu or Ketua Kampong (Village Chief), who has the power to hear civil matters in his village [6]. The terms of the special status of Kampong Bharu as Malay Agriculture Land (MAS) has made this area somewhat protected against development [7].

Kampong Bharu houses 5,300 registered landowners owning 890 small parcels of land [8]. The total population of Kampong Bharu (formed by seven villages) as of 2010 was approximately 18,000 people. The key challenges in developing the area are the land ownership status and the lack of infrastructure and community facilities to support large-scale development [8]. Despite piecemeal development and additions to buildings and houses, the kampong looks much as it did years ago. Traditional Malay houses, micro-scale businesses, and local food and delicacies have shaped its unique character. As Kuala Lumpur develops, the 116-year-old kampong is now surrounded by skyscrapers, modern high-rise residential towers, and office buildings. Meanwhile, with only 35 percent of the original residents remaining, the area has become a hybrid community. The arrival of local people from other parts of Malaysia, as well as foreign migrants, has resulted in the emergence of a transient (therefore unstable) community, with a potentially weaker sense of place. The enclave has already been subjected to incremental and unregulated development, with very little effort made to protect the character of the kampong.



**Figure 1.** View of a traditional house and its compound



**Figure 2.** A residential area in Kampong Bharu

Rising land values have led to development proposals aimed at maximizing the economic potential of the properties. Over the past four decades, however, a number of these redevelopment plans have been blocked due to issues of multiple land ownership, disparity in land prices, outdated rules of law, and resistance from the residents and landowners [9][11][26]. These factors continue have a direct bearing on Kampong Bharu, with regards to new redevelopment initiatives.

With a strong commitment from the Malaysian government, an initiative to redevelop the land resurfaced in 2012. Under Parliamentary Act 733, the Kampong Bharu Development Corporation (PKB) was established to facilitate the development of the area. A Comprehensive Development Master Plan was prepared in 2014, and the planning process was initiated. PKB has sought agreement from the Kampong Bharu community members regarding the redevelopment proposal [8]. As an initial step, PKB has attempted to resolve the multiple land ownership issue, to allow the assembly of larger tracts of land for development—without which large-scale developments will not be possible.

### *The Malay enclave as a social setting*

The sense of place of Kampong Bharu is defined not only by its physical fabric, but also by its socio-cultural characteristics. The “kampongness” of the place, in other words, goes well beyond its modest traditional low-rise buildings/houses and narrow streets. Bunnell, in “Kampung Rules” [12], referred to “kampung” as a place of “traditional values, high morality, a space of resistance to the often alienating project of modernization, a space of community and support, neighborliness, and pride in one’s community” [7]. These qualities reflect the unity of the Malays as a social and political entity.



These strong social and traditional values have been eroded due to the impact of globalisation and modern living. Mohamed (2000) claimed that only 30 percent of the original kampong residents (mainly the older people) remained in the kampong [10], while the rest of the former inhabitants had resettled elsewhere, many in areas close to the city that provided them with more comfortable homes. Several old traditional Malay houses are well-preserved and maintained. Others, though, are poorly maintained. Still others are gone entirely—replaced by the kinds of low-rise flats inhabited by immigrants in search of cheaper rents.

This transient migrant community has weakened the original character of the Malay kampong, which was based on the Malay cultural touchstones of tolerance and consensus [12]. Meanwhile, the declining image of the enclave—seemingly dilapidated and declining—is used to justify the need for redevelopment. Ironically, despite being part of the kampong ecosystem, existing immigrants and renters are largely excluded from the current redevelopment planning process, and the plans that are emerging from that process.

#### *The impact of redevelopment*

Redevelopment involves changes and transformations that affect people and the environment. As cities are redeveloped, people are compelled to adapt to changes that may well undermine their physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. Ideally, though, urban transformation should reflect a “significant and fundamental positive change” in the structure of a place that supports social progress and equality [13]—an outcome that could be achieved by acknowledging local conditions, constraints, and opportunities in order to devise more sustainable policies [14]. Sustainability is a key concept. Sustainable city development initiatives provide for both equitable development and a positive social life. The effort is to improve the physical, environmental, social, and economic qualities of cities for the benefit of the city’s inhabitants.

In the current context of neoliberalism, the allocation of spatial, political and economic resources tends to favor economic growth, rather than embracing social benefits that are widely shared [15][16]. A study on redevelopment strategies for squatter housing in Ankara [17], for example, demonstrated that physical redevelopment did not necessarily translate into socio-economic and socio-cultural improvement for these households. This “failure of translation”—and others like it—argue that the impact of a proposed urban redevelopment on both the place and the existing inhabitants should be examined and evaluated in the earliest stages of an intervention.

For example: The development could socially impact lifestyle (social interaction), culture (customs and beliefs), community (social engagement and cohesion), quality of life (belonging, aspirations, perceptions) and health (happiness and wellbeing) [18]. To manage these

potential changes, the inhabitants should be part of the process of deciding what works for them. Toward that end, the key stakeholders at the location have to be identified and engaged. And because landowners and residents are almost always at or near the top of lists of key stakeholders, they should be a starting point and main reference for redevelopment strategies.

### *Public involvement*

To summarize: In any redevelopment initiative, sustainability of the neighbourhood is more likely to be achieved through the involvement of the community in the transformation process [19]. There have been cases in which the citizens were not against the redevelopment *per se*, as long as they were allowed to participate in project development and contracting [16].

In the planning process, inequity is often associated with lower-income and minority groups that have not been included at the public consultation stage [21]. Development projects often favour the developers, while the benefits of the development are not made transparent to the existing community. This may create a sense of distrust and complicate the initiative for agreement between parties.

In many cases, this argues for a well organized and well informed community organisation that can help the community exercise its power as a unified group in the face of proposed developments [20].

### *Methods*

The qualitative research method is designed to elicit responses to the proposed redevelopment from key stakeholders. Research into values and perceptions is inherently subjective in nature. A qualitative case study approach is recommended when dealing with specific socio-cultural contexts, and to consider the relevance of the samples to the research concern, rather than their representativeness [23].

The methods of inquiry in this study included analyzing the content of secondary resources related to Kampong Bharu, including online resources, government reports and guidelines, journal articles, and books. The recent Master Plan of Kampong Bharu Development [8] provided an understanding of planning and development strategies of the area. In addition, semi-structured interviews guided by a list of questions were conducted with key sources from the community: i.e., people who are “privileged witnesses, or people who, because of their position, activities or responsibilities, have a good understanding of the problem to be explored” [24]. Fifteen key interviewees were identified—including local authority (PKB), village heads, leaders of the local association, and residents of Kampong Bharu—in part using a “snowballing” technique, in which one source led to the next. The researcher noted that some key interviewees hold multiple roles in the community. For example, one

developer who was interviewed is also a landowner and concurrently appointed as the leader of a local association. In such cases, this overlap allowed the discussion to be extended beyond a single aspect of concern in the study.

## ***Results and discussion***

### ***A roadmap to transformation***

The Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH) drafted the first development plan for Kampong Bharu in 1971, and launched that plan in 1975. It was not until 2008, however, that the planning strategy for Special Areas, including Kampong Bharu, was integrated into the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020. At that point, however, the plans for the village did not materialise. The residents were unhappy with the plan, because it did not focus on preserving the settlement's identity and heritage, and because of the proposed resolution of the land acquisition issue [25]. Within the new development plan, Malays would retain the sole right to own land in Kampong Bharu, and therefore, only Malay developers would profit through the new development [7].

The ensuing tug-of-war over compensation has eaten up two decades. As of May 2010, developers were refusing to compensate residents based on city-centre land values, and residents' opposition to renewal plans remained firm [26]. That opposition was based on their belief that the development plans had unclear redevelopment objectives, unfair compensation distribution, and posed a threat to Malay identity. These factors have delayed the planning process, and the road to transforming the area remains uncertain.

Under Parliamentary Act 733, the PKB was established to facilitate the development of the area, and in 2014, a Comprehensive Development Master Plan was prepared by the PKB that established a framework for future development of the area. The vision of the PKB is "to develop and to transform real estate in creating a better-living standard while balancing the requirement of preserving its historical values, culture and legacy." With a mission that "no landowner or heir of the land will be left behind in this development beyond 2020" [8], the plan is expected to create a new economic and cultural enclave for the city. Inspired by the Malay and Islamic culture, the Master Plan was designed "to ensure holistic, inclusive and balanced planning that gives positive impact to the key stakeholders in Kampong Bharu," indicating the importance of preserving Kampong Bharu's identity and recognizing that the landowners and inhabitants are an integral part of the development process.

The government foresees Kampong Bharu becoming a new Malay urban center, which could increase the social and economic status of the Malays. The Prime Minister emphasised this point in a speech:

"I want the Malays in Kampong Bharu to have economic and social status that we can be proud of, because the concept behind the

development of Kampong Bharu is that the Malays are not excluded from mainstream national development.” [28]

Dato’ Zahari Affendi, chairman of the PKB, addressed the challenges in transforming the urban village. His observations indicated that things weren’t necessarily going according to plan:

“We have started this process and talking to several local developers to see how they can help the Kampong Bharu people to unlock the value of the land. This is not easy, as there are many lots with multiple owners” [29].

The extent of the proposed changes were well described in the following statement:

“After more than a century stuck in time, Kampong Bharu is set for dramatic changes that will see several ambitious projects coming up in the Malay enclave in the next 10 to 20 years. Skyscrapers and pocket parks are among highlights of the town facelift” [30].

Besides the main quest to develop a comprehensive development for Kampong Bharu beyond 2020, the PKB is also undertaking “Quick Win” projects focusing on upgrading certain areas to improve the village’s image and identity. This effort is seen as crucial in attracting the owners, beneficiaries and investors to invest in the development of Kampong Bharu [31].

The PKB’s Deputy Director of Urban Planning, Encik Zamri Mohd Saharin, made the argument that the redevelopment would be a virtuous circle, fueling itself for the benefit of all stakeholders. The negative image and perception of the village as a “slum” would soon be changed, thanks to modern and high-density developments surrounding the area. The landowners and residents would enjoy great economic benefit, due to the rising value of their properties and potential development opportunities.

#### *Development strategies and the master plan*

The initiative to redevelop the area is well defined in the recent Kampong Bharu Comprehensive Master Plan, developed by the PKB, which grows out of a larger vision for Kuala Lumpur—that is, a vision of a world-class city aimed that defends and improves the quality of life of its residents, while protecting the urban environment [4]. The Comprehensive Master Plan indicates that the development of Kampong Bharu will be pursued in seven geographic districts that include Kampong Bharu Central Business District (KBCC), North Precinct, Corporate District Precinct, Marketplace Precinct, Urban Neighborhood Precinct, East Precinct, and South Precinct [8]. New commercial and residential buildings will be integrated within green infrastructure and central recreational parks, with a high degree of accessibility to the main focal centre. Several historical buildings, such as the Sultan Sulaiman Club and Jamek Mosque, will be preserved.



The Comprehensive Master Plan indicates that Kampong Bharu will be transformed into an urban centre on a massive scale, and that this transformation has been conceived with social, cultural, and economic sustainability in mind. The Marketplace Precinct, for example, is envisioned as a new Malay cultural centre, with integrated developments including an Urban Recreational Park, a Center for Culture and Art, a Convention Center, a Grand Bazaar, and a resource called “Creative Industries” [8].

Given such a comprehensive redevelopment scheme, it is expected that the kampong will be transformed far beyond a simple “face-lift.” In fact, the anticipated total restructuring of buildings and spaces will fundamentally redefine the way people live. Given that fact, and given that the kampong is prime land in the city center of Kuala Lumpur, landowners believe strongly that the redevelopment should maximize its economic potential. This belief has led them to oppose having a lake placed in the central area of the proposed redevelopment (as part of a recreational park). The landowners feel strongly that the proposal is unjustifiable, given that Kuala Lumpur already has recreational facilities close to this area. Instead, they assert, the development should focus on creating economic opportunities for the Malay to thrive in the new development.

In fact, the development takes full advantage of the Plot Area Ratio (PAR) (1:10 PAR) that allows the construction of larger-footprint and high-rise structures; and there is a threat that the footprint of the historic enclave will disappear completely. Preserving the local identity could be an enormous challenge for developers: how can could the “kampongness” of Kampong Bharu prevail in the new development? Will the new development meet the socio-cultural needs and behaviours of the inhabitants? Many of the informants raised concerns about how the new development could preserve the identity of Kampong Bharu and the opportunity for the Malays as Muslims to practise their culture in daily life. Could the Malays be part of the development? What concept and model of development would work in upholding the uniqueness of the Malay enclave? A draft guideline—“Garis Panduan Senibina Melayu Islam Kampong Bharu” (Guideline on Malay Islamic Architecture of Kampong Bharu)—was prepared recently to ensure that the heritage and historical identity of the kampong is appropriately translated into the future development.



Figure 3. Master Plan of Kampong Bharu proposed redevelopment [8]



Figure 4. Artist's impression of the proposed Kampong Bharu City Center (KBCC)

### *Community participation and involvement*

According to the Master Plan report, dialogue sessions, interviews, questionnaire surveys, and discussions were held with landowners, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders to ensure the comprehensiveness of the plan and the feasibility of its implementation. To obtain stakeholders' feedback, a program called "Turun Padang" (TUPA) was organised by the PKB in 2013 to allow for meetings with community members in the seven villages of Kampong Bharu.

During those sessions, detailed presentations and explanations were made to landowners and beneficiaries regarding the development potential of Kampong Bharu, as well as the financial initiatives and services that would be made available [8]. Survey forms were prepared for the attendees to respond to the proposed redevelopment, state their preferred method of development, indicate their degree of agreement with the Master Plan components, and outline particulars on land ownership. According to the PKB report, 2,388 landowners (56 percent of the total registered landowners and beneficiaries) attended the program. The majority (88 percent) agreed to the development of the land.

An Open Day and exhibition were also organised to present the Master Plan to the wider population of Kampong Bharu. The PKB stated that the majority (78 percent) of stakeholders who participated in the Open Day agreed to the proposal. According to the PKB, the 22 percent of attendees who voted against the proposal were people with little understanding of the proposal, those settled and attached to the place and the memory of the place, elderly residents, people with a fear that future rental rates would not be similar to the current ones, and those concerned about the lack of parking spaces and worsening traffic congestion as a result of the increase in density [8].

Those were the official numbers. But based on interviews conducted during this inquiry, the majority of landowners and beneficiaries contested the level of agreement claimed by the authority. This was based on their knowledge that the numbers were based on attendees at the meetings, and therefore, might not represent the opinions of actual landowners and beneficiaries. Thus—they argued—the proposal did not win the approval of the majority of landowners.

Getting the landowners to support the development is clearly important to the future success of the project. It is therefore suggested that face-to-face interactions—in the form of focus groups and interviews—take place, aimed at uncovering issues and concerns and reducing ambiguity in the process.

Clearly, the redevelopment plan has been the subject of discussion and argument amongst members of the community. The village heads and leaders of the relevant neighbourhood associations acknowledge that they were well briefed about the development proposal, through exhibitions and sessions arranged by the PKB, and that they had informed knowledge of

the proposed Master Plan and alternative strategies for redevelopment. Also, guidelines for real estate development for Kampong Bharu were drafted and made available on the PKB website for parties interested in developing the land. Through the web, business models of development were presented as a guide for landowners to determine the model that they might want to endorse, the options being developer, corporate, and non-corporate [32].

The landowners interviewed in the current study are adamant, regarding their rights over the land. One of the village heads affirmed that the original beneficiaries of the land should be regarded as the agents of change, because they have the authority to shape the future of the kampong:

“This is the only land left for the Malays, the Malay icon, the only Malay settlement remaining in the city. In the future, who could develop this place the way it should be? They should be the original people of Kampong Bharu. This means those people whose fathers are the original landowners that have the name of their grandparents in the register of the Malay Agricultural Settlement” (Village Head).

Understanding the key stakeholders’ concerns regarding the benefit and value of the development, together with their aspirations for the future of the village, may highlight what matters most to the community for them to willingly engage in the redevelopment initiative. The PKB realises that little can be done without the trust of the landowners and the residents. Greater involvement with the key representatives and leaders of the community is not just an option, but also a necessity.

“It is going to be more than iconic,” as the chairman of the PKB recently put it. “We want Kampong Bharu folks to see that something is moving here before the big guns come in. We hope to inspire the residents to have some trust in the PKB by then” [30]. Toward that end, plans have been drawn up for a catalyst project, which, if successful, might help persuade skeptical landowners to embrace the redevelopment effort [8].

#### *Voices on redevelopment*

My research uncovered a number of complementary—and sometimes contradictory—perspectives. I present some of those perspectives here, in their own voices.

For example: the Deputy Director of Urban Planning at PKB believes that the proposed changes will benefit the community economically and socially:

“Viewed from the context of benefit, real estate development will provide a high return to the owners. The physical condition of Kampong Bharu, which is now like a slum, will be more modern after it’s been developed, equipped with infrastructure, info-structure, and modern



amenities. So when all that can be developed, owners, heirs, and residents will certainly enjoy."

All of our interviewees agreed that landowners embrace the idea of change and redevelopment—as long as it conforms to the needs and aspirations of the Malay people. "We never rejected development," said one village head, "but we want it to be in line with the political, social, religious requirements for a future and not detrimental to the Malay race... If we build, beautiful tower like KLCC, but if the Malays are not part of it, what is the meaning?"

The landowners recognize the need to improve the socio-economic status of the Malays who reside in Kampong Bharu, which is relatively low to medium [27]. Some, however, raised concerns about whether or not the proposed redevelopment would actually benefit the group. The chairman of the Secretariat of Traders and Businesses—who is also a landowner and resident—expressed both his hopes for redevelopment and his concern that the Malays will be sidelined in the new development:

"We need to consider it [the project] from an economic and development standpoint, from the social, environmental, cultural, and religious terms. These aspects must be established as the basis for development... If we have the high-rises... who will be the occupants later? We are afraid that they are not the Malays anymore."

By contrast, a Malay developer (who is also a leader of a local association and a landowner) was confident that the development will generate higher economic return that will transform the lives of landowners and residents of Kampong Bharu. He stressed the need for an effective and transparent business model, together with a viable and attractive development concept. He emphasized that the landowners should be brave enough to venture into developing their land, and becoming involved in the process. Pointing to his own ongoing residential and commercial projects in Kampong Bharu, he says that he is making these investments to prove that the larger initiative could be fruitful, and could become the catalyst for the rest of the Kampong Bharu development:

"I'm doing it to show that it can be done. Nothing is impossible. We should encourage the government agencies to invest in the development. What's wrong in redeveloping the place? What's wrong in developing a hotel in Kampong Bharu? We cannot run away from the market."

This perspective was seconded by a professional architect, who is also a landowner. "The challenge now is to convince the landowners so that the potential of the redevelopment in Kampong Bharu can be achieved," he said. "They have to be united to overcome this. So now I'm trying to convince some of the landowners who control the majority of the parcels to take the lead."

The multiple and shared land ownership challenge not only makes development far more difficult; it also complicates the process of valuing



the land, and sharing the benefits of development. The PKB is now facilitating settlements related to land ownership, encouraging the amalgamation process envisioned in the Master Plan. As explained by PKB representative Encik Zamri:

“There are about 1,300 lots owned by more than 5,300 people. On average, there are approximately five owners per plot of land. The highest we have ever identified is 208 landowners. There are cases where the owners could not be traced, and who stay outside the area. If we do not solve this issue, of course, development cannot be carried out.”

The subject of land value was frequently mentioned throughout the inquiries. The landowners—who were offered less than others had received for surrounding properties—now sought to avoid being taken advantage of. Many feel that their land value should be priced comparably to land prices of adjacent developments, including, for example, Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC), which commanded RM3000 per sq. ft. As one landowner and resident put it, “What is supposed to be the price of the land? If the government is trying to help the Malays, change the title to a commercial agriculture title, then equate the value of this land to the value of land just across the area [referring to KLCC area].”

“If [the PKB] wants to help the people of Kampong Bharu,” observed one landowner and resident who is also an architect, “the best thing is to apply the Build, Operate, and Transfer [BOT] contract, where we will stay on the land, and our grandchildren will benefit from the development.”

The idea of leasing is not widely accepted by the landowners, despite it being regarded as an option for a business model for development that would not disadvantage them. In particular, landowners are uncompromising in their opposition to the idea of leasing property to non-Malays. These concerns may argue for an agreement between the landowners and developers to protect both parties against unexpected events and outcomes in the future. Such a contingency-based contract could help foster an agreement in this case, which involves differing expectations about the future [32]. Lowering the risk of loss on the part of the landowners, in particular, would reduce the fear of manipulations of land ownership rights and land values.

#### *Social sustainability of Kampong Bharu*

“Social sustainability” means a socially cohesive and physically integrated urban unit, relating to society and the individual and personal aspects of life [33]. In the case of the Malay enclave, the existing architecture allows for shared spaces among neighbours and informal transactions along the smaller streets. The charm of the kampong sustains the sense of place, generating cohesiveness and informality.

But these characteristics tend to be fragile: “The formalisation of space and the market-savvy that will come with the redevelopment of the

village will be accompanied by a palpable assault on the social–spatial character of the neighborhood” [7]. In light of the Comprehensive Master Plan development concept, this assessment is likely to be accurate: the redevelopment of the enclave is likely to make Kampong Bharu much more like other new centres in Malaysia. Absent effective countermeasures, the uniqueness of the kampong will be lost, and the project will be “blinded by money-making real estate development” [9]. For example: the proposed floor area ratio (at ten) will transform the informal and human-scaled pattern of the Malay kampong into another “Manhattan” in the city.

This could be avoided if planners and designers redefine “kampongness.” This will necessitate interpreting the kampong as a unique resource that upholds Malay culture, traditions, and customs, even with a modern expression of forms, spaces, and material details. The challenge is enormous, but so are the potential rewards.

The sustainability of a place is based on an effective interrelation of three dimensions: the place (fact, identity and behaviour), the temporal (permanence, transformation) and the person (happiness, wellbeing, attachment) [35]. The traditional lifestyles of the enclave are strongly evident in how the community engages in social and religious practices. The Malays identify themselves as a social group through gatherings, traditional weddings, and religious events, which reflect the social attachment that continues to be practised even now. Thus, any form of intervention should be culturally oriented, and should naturally embrace the aspirations of the inhabitants.

Despite the difficulty in redeveloping reserved areas such as the enclave, a gradual process of transformation seems appropriate, and even inevitable [4]. But the authorities need to explain clearly how the redevelopment scheme will benefit the stakeholders, in part by engaging with them effectively. It is clear from this inquiry that the landowners, leaders of associations, and residents have established a firm stance toward the proposed redevelopment effort. Their feedback could provide vital information for a sustainable future of the place.

Kampong Bharu is likely to be transformed on a huge scale, as the development pressure continues to intensify. Many regard this likely outcome as an opportunity to increase the socio-economic status of the Malays. But while the redevelopment is designed for social and economic sustainability, it may, in the end, benefit few. Without collective agreement from an engaged community, the roadmap to a sustainable future for Kampong Bharu remains uncertain.

### ***Conclusions***

The meaning of “kampong” needs to be reinterpreted in light of the needs of the present. Particularly among the older landowners and residents, there is an understandable temptation to remain trapped in the

past—that is, to sustain the kampong as a “Malay bastion.” Many hoped that the original people of the kampong would unite and bring about change in the area, in a way that would protect the rights and ownership of the Malays for the benefit of beneficiaries and future generations.

This hope was probably unrealistic, but certainly understandable. The continuity of place has a profound relationship with the local culture, way of life, and the physical and psychological health of residents. In other words, a sustainable transformation of an urban village hinges upon adapting to change, while still securing the economic and socio-cultural values of the people in the place. An understanding the *place* as a specific expression of culture must be considered concurrently with an understanding of globally influenced economic progress.

As developing Asian countries seek economic growth and stability, they must also plan for an equitable sharing of the social and economic benefits derived from that growth. The special conditions and aspirations of the community must be understood—through engagement and shared information—and the rights of that community must be respected. Giving greater voice to urban-village dwellers will better align city redevelopment objectives with the interests and values of *all* the city’s residents.

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## **NOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> The *bumiputera* are Malays and aboriginal people, who first received preferential treatment in the country's New Economic Policy, promulgated in the early 1970s.