

**PHYSICAL QUALITIES AND ACTIVITIES PATTERNS ASSOCIATED WITH  
STREET'S IDENTITY, A CASE STUDY JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN-  
KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The rapid growth of most of the cities around the world have been influenced greatly by the economic boom as manifested in the urban spaces such as streets which previously had their own image as places of interaction that has been exploited and slowly vanishing. The result is where the character of the street has no coherent sense of place. This paper examined the identity of place in terms of the physical characteristics and the activities that determine the distinctive features of the place; by using the street of Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman of Kuala Lumpur city center, Malaysia as a case study. The study adopted the qualitative method in data collection and analysis with quantitative data as supporting evidence. The data collected by the survey are the people's description of the appearance and distinctiveness of the street. The qualitative approach adopted three techniques namely mental map, photo recognition interview and visual survey. The paper discusses the physical characteristics and the activities associated with street identity that generate the sense of the place.

**Keywords:** Street, Image, Identity, Physical Characteristics, Activities, Distinctiveness, Sense of Place.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Most cities lose their identities to economic boom. This period of economic development is characterized by population shifts (demographic in balance); infrastructural reconstructions; and high socialization. The street is the melting point of most these human efforts. Malaysian street identity of pedestrian interaction is fast transforming. Therefore there is a need to evaluate the transforming characters physically and functionally as occasioned by incoherent lackluster imagery.

“The rapid growth of towns and cities in Malaysia has created a frightening trend towards the public spaces. Eventually the whole existing street network was destroyed in the name of progress where fast traffic takes priority (Bashri and Shuhana, from PUMIO, 2001)”.

All these factors influenced the street character of Malaysian towns and cities. However, they failed to project a coherent image that reflects the unique quality of the place. According to Greene, 1992“Identity denotes a visual image of the environment that reflects unique qualities” (Greene, 1992). The Director General of the Federal Department of Town and Country Planning was cited to buttress this

view in which he declared that the country's urban spaces were characterized as lackluster, devoid of identity, thereby unable to denote a visual image of the environment that reflects unique its qualities (Structure Plan of K.L 2020).

The paper intends to highlight the identity of place in terms of this problem; in urban street of city center. The chosen place of study of this problem is Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, which is one of the major streets in Kuala Lumpur's city center. The scope was limited to the city center, because it is considered to be the essence of the character of most cities and is the focus of civic identity, expressing the essence of what each city is and how it is different from another (Worskett, 1969 from Shuhana, 1997). The paper evaluated the physical qualities and social (activities) of urban street, and their effects on street identity. According to Schulz (1980) place is totally made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour. Together, these things determine the "environmental character", which is the essence of place. In general, a place is given as such a character or "atmosphere". A place is, therefore, a qualitative, "total" phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationships, without losing its concrete nature out of sight (Schulz, 1980). He argued that the a relationship of physical and non

physical aspects in inducing a character of place (Schulz, 1980). In parallel Canter (1977) states that a place is the result of relationships between activities, conceptions, and physical attributes (Canter, 1977).



**Figure 1: Old and new buildings in urban context of the street**



**Figure 2: Historical building as distinctive features of the street**



## **CONCEPT OF IDENTITY**

Discussions on the Identity in this paper revolves around the definition given by Lynch (1960) that is “ the extent to which a person can recognize or recall a place as being distinct from other places-as having a vivid, or unique, or at least a particular, character of its own” (Lynch, 1960,p.131). If this definition is taken, then it can be presumed that the people can recall or recognize the place by the distinctive features, on an other hand the identity of the new town is measured by the ability of the people to identify the design features used in creating the identity of the new town such as skylines, colours, landscape features, design motifs and others. Therefore, identity of place was measured in previous research by identifying the amount of meanings attached to a place. “Individual identity is associated with

'recognizable', the putting of a distinctive stamp on one's environment (Carmona, 2003. p.98)".

Kaplan (1982) suggested that 'coherence', 'legibility', 'complexity', and 'mystery' as 'informational' qualities of environments that contribute to people's preference for particular physical environments (Kaplan, 1982). Physical form and appearance are the characteristics of the physical environment, especially buildings, which are distinctive and easily recalled (Rappoport 1977). Rappoport (1977) suggested that also differences must be noticed by the perceiver. Physical differences according to him identified as follows: shape, size, height, colour, materials, texture, details, location and movement (Rappoport, 1977. p 229).

Activities tend to play a secondary role as qualities associated with street identity and are more apparent if the physical characteristics are less distinctive. Activities both outdoor and indoor assist in support the physical appearance to be more remembered and recognized. Pocock (1978) argued that the attributes of physical form are more meaningful when they reinforce usage or activity patterns. He suggested that the congruence between form and activity is important in terms of general orientation and comfort. Canter (1977) saw places as function of 'activities' plus 'physical attributes' plus 'conceptions' (Canter, 1977).

Montgomery (2001) argued that all good cities have distinctive identities and characters. Cities stimulate all senses and therefore an active street life ensures that city centres are patronized and remembered by people (Montgomery, 2001). Successful places typically have animation and vitality, Jacobs (1993) argued that bringing people onto the street created animation and the vitality (Jacobs, 1993). According to Rapoport (1977), activity in any given setting is primarily culturally based in that it is the result of unwritten rules, customs, traditions, habits, and the prevailing lifestyle and definition of activities appropriate to that setting. In many cases, places are known because of certain activities which occur on the street.

## **2. METHODOLOGY (How to Study the Identity of Place)**

It has already been established that the concept of identity of place relates more to the distinctiveness of the quality of the environment as the people can

recognize and recall the place. This concept must be fully appreciated in the design of urban areas to create a sense of place. The way in which identity of place can be understood is to understand the characteristics that make a place distinct as opposed to others. These characteristics can be fully understood by examining the local context and culture of inhabitants of a place. This paper, hopes to establish the physical characteristic and the activities pattern that contribute to the street identity of the city centre. The street selected is Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman which is Major Street of the capital city of Malaysia and located in the city center.

The approach adopted to identifying the distinctive features of the street is to understand the key factors that generate its street identity. The key factors are as follows.

### **I. Physical Qualities Associated With the Identity of the Street**

From the survey, the in depth questionnaire, photo recognition task and sketch map tasks, it was established that the physical qualities that were mentioned in recalling and recognizing the distinctive physical elements were grouped into one category, namely appearance (see Table 1).

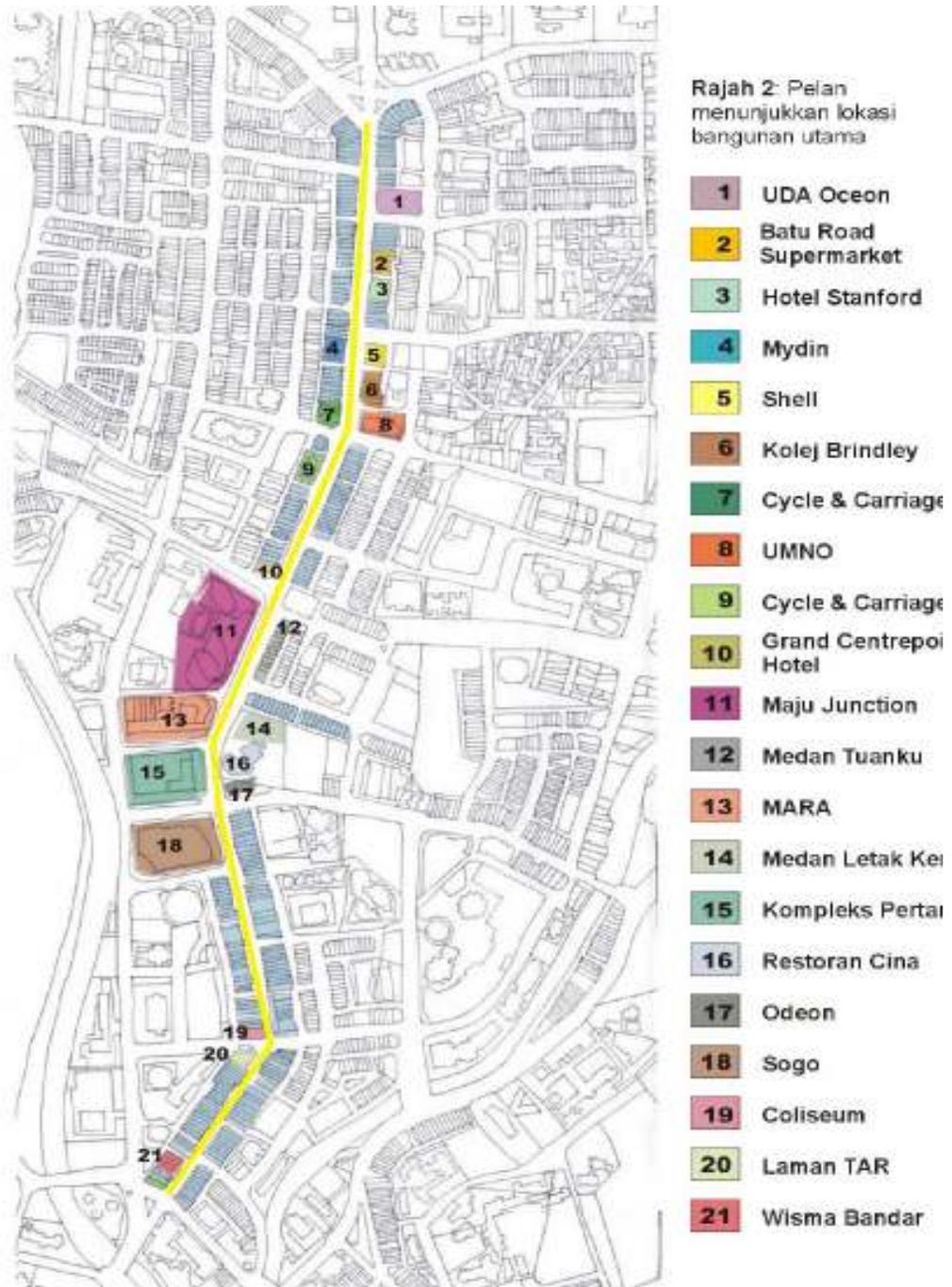


Diagram1: Diagram showing location of the main buildings on Jalan T.A.R

**Table 1: PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTIC AND ACTIVITIES PATTERN ASSOCIATED WITH THE STREET'S IDENTITY (SOURCE: SKETCH AND PHOTO RECOGNITION TASKS, FIELD WORK)**

Elements	Physical Characteristics				Activities	
	Appearance	Location in context	Quality of Views	Orientation	Indoor (Building use)	Outdoor (Building use)
Pertama complex	*	*	*	*	*	*
Sogo	*	*	*	*	*	
Maju Junction	*	*	*	*	*	
Old shop houses	*	*	*	*		*
Coliseum	*	*	*	*		
Maiden complex	*	*			*	
Monorail station	*	*				
Bus station	*	*				
Kamdar	*	*	*		*	

The appearance of the physical elements, especially buildings played an important role in recognition by the people. It was obvious that appearance is the physical component that influences imageability. It was established that there were eight features relating to the appearance of buildings that are used to recognize a building. These features were the, architectural style, history of the building, setting, height and size, colour, decorations and façade.

The buildings located along the street became a feature influencing their distinctiveness. It was also observed that description of the appearance does not only relate to the major buildings but also of the surrounding structures. Based on the questionnaire survey, buildings were considered to be unique by the respondents for a variety of reasons (see Table 2).

**Table 2: UNIQUENESS OF BUILDING**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Facade	9	5.8	5.8
Decoration/ Ornamentation	9	5.8	11.5
Size	9	5.8	17.3
Architectural style	69	44.2	61.5
Setting	21	13.5	75.0
Building use (internal)	9	5.8	80.8
Building use (external)	1	.6	81.4
Colours	9	5.8	87.2
History of building	20	12.8	100.0
Total	156	100.0	

The highest percentage of respondents (44.2 %) mentioned architectural style, setting and history of building was considered unique or distinctive. This suggests its importance in influencing the uniqueness of buildings as seen many the respondents. This was followed by setting which covered (13.5 %) of respondent's answers and history of building (12.8 %) decoration and ornamentation, façade, size, building use (internal) and colour were motioned by (5.8%) of the respondents respectively. It was apparent that the appearance of a building was most important than other factors. From survey, these reasons were further elaborated by the respondents in explaining why certain elements were considered to be distinctive. It was clear that the Architectural style, setting and history of building were the most common characteristics mentioned which influenced the people to recall buildings.

## **II. The Activities of the Street Associated with the Identity**

From the survey findings activities were mentioned as elements associated with the identity of the street. And at same time, they played an important role in determining why certain physical elements were noticed. The highest number of respondents that is 36.5 % of the respondents used activities as reasons why the place is considered unique. The other 5.8% of the respondents quoted activities as contributing to why buildings were considered unique. There were two types of activities associated with the identity of place; these are activities which occurred within a building and activities that occurred outdoor or on the street.

**Table 3: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Monorail station	41	26.3	26.3
Row of old shophouses	31	19.9	46.2
Market place	15	9.6	55.8
Activities a long the street	68	43.6	99.4
Bus station	1	.6	100.0
Total	156	100.0	

In the case of activities, indoor activities which are related to building use were more frequently mentioned than outdoor activities. However, compared to physical qualities, activities played a second role in street's identity. Activities were used to describe both the old and the new buildings. Nevertheless, the old shophouses were seen to be more distinctive because it had more outdoor activities compared to the new buildings. The non-physical qualities of identity were present more in the old shop houses. This was probably due to its historical significance and the familiarity of the people with its environment.

Retailing activities were noted as common features of the street. It was noted that the types of buildings used and the wares sold in them. These stalls were purpose built permanent structures especially those near of Chow Kit market. However, they are still due to their design and retail activities. The shop-house is a common feature in Malaysia town center and incorporates both retail units on ground floor and residential accommodation on the upper floors. The shop houses were mentioned because of their concentration in a particular area.

The stalls in the street reflect the major activities as confirmed by photo recognition. It was also evident that the type of goods sold or the nature of trade engaged enabled a respondent to identify a street. In addition to that, places which specialized in selling certain types of goods were easily recognized. From site observation, the leisure related to the dominant buildings such as the Sogo, Pertama Complex and Maju Junction, it observed that the people used these places for leisure; people could be seen, sitting, meeting and walking in these places. They

all maintain significant features of modernization hard and soft landscape, and dose relationship between the indoor and outdoor activities. This applies to establish the relationships between the distinctive buildings and functional characteristics of the street

### **3. Conclusion**

The characteristics of elements that are distinctive to the people were assumed to be qualities associated with the street's identity. There are two basic qualities of identity. These are physical characteristics, as well as and activities.

The physical appearance and form was the most frequently quoted as a distinctive character of the street. Thus, it is concluded that the qualities associated with identity are strongly influenced by the physical appearance of the street, namely its buildings. The attributes of buildings that were discovered are architectural style, size, setting, colour, material, historical significant façade and decoration and building form. Finally, historic value of buildings such as shop-houses emerged as role as distinctive elements associated with street's identity. This suggests that the historic buildings of the street were valued for their meanings to the people. Hence, these attributes of elements were enabling to be noticed and recalled by the people.

It suggested that the old shophouses were associated with 'identity' and therefore, is distinctive to the people. From the sample survey, there was high percentage of historic buildings on the street, as such needs to be retained. This implies that it is of utmost importance to designate the area covered by the old buildings as a conservation zone, encompassing the existing character, complete with its affiliated activities. The distinctive characteristics of the street were clarity of its appearance, namely buildings, such as shopping complexes, and activities qualities such as retailing, shopping and leisure. Thus, policies on conservation should cover all these aspects and future development should not subdue the distinctive characteristics of the old buildings such as shop-houses. The historic buildings could be models for the design of future city center in Malaysia in terms of its architectural and townscape qualities.

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