



THE EVOLUTION OF HISTORIC WATERFRONT: A CASE STUDY OF GEORGE TOWN, PENANG

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Abstract

Waterfront development emerged as one of the important issues of urban design and planning since it provides an opportunity to improve social well-being, economic development and physical setting of a city. In recent decades, many waterfronts have experienced reorientation from brownfield to commercial, residential and recreational areas. Many early cities are located close to water bodies due to water being a form of transportation. However, the advancement of modern infrastructures such as roadways and increased modes of transportation has moved the central business district into inner lands. This has left many old city centres suffering economic depression, losing their local identity as people moved to other places, and eventually facing abandonment. In this case, tourism is seen as a panacea to help revitalizing those areas. This paper seeks to address the evolution of historic waterfront at World Heritage Sites in Malaysia, from the perspective of tourism development. By using evolutionary analysis based on previous resources and maps, it demonstrates that government development agencies and tourism development have been the key agents of change in influencing waterfront redevelopment.

Keywords: waterfront development, waterfront revitalization, tourism development, World Heritage Site, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

In defining waterfront, there are several definitions and interpretations based on the characteristics of sites and cities (Dong, 2004). Waterfront acts as an interaction zone between urban development and water bodies (Md Yassin, Bond, & McDonagh, 2011). Zhang (2002) on the other hand, defined waterfront as a place that integrates land with water and having a natural attraction to people. In the context of towns and cities, waterfront can be defined as areas that are in direct contact with the water bodies. However, most of the waterfront development in Malaysia adopt the definition issued by the Department of Irrigation and Drainage (2018) that stated waterfront development as an area within 50 metres or two lots of building from the bank where water is noticeable. Breen (1996) in Shamsuddin et al. (2010) suggested that waterfront development can be classified into six types, which includes heritage waterfront, recreational waterfront, education, commercial, cultural, environment and transportation waterfront. Historic waterfronts are usually redeveloped as a maritime conservation and initiate adaptive reuse of heritage buildings where such developments can bring economic improvement to the locals and help in revitalizing the areas.

In the context of the study, Georgetown Waterfront is seen as an urban heritage waterfront. The advancement of modern urban infrastructures such as modes of transportation and roadways has moved central business districts, often located near the waterfront into inner lands. The shift of inner heritage areas has left many old city centres suffering economic depression, losing their local identity as people moved to other places, and eventually facing abandonment. The decline of port cities has triggered the idea to revitalize the development along the waterfront areas. With respect to economic development, tourism is usually the primary objective behind most of the waterfront revitalization. In order to understand urban heritage waterfront evolution from the perspective of tourism development, this research aims to evaluate the change of use of Georgetown Waterfront by evaluating its changes before the World Heritage Site (WHS) recognition and after WHS recognition.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Development of Waterfront

In Malaysia, rivers make a huge contribution in terms social interaction, primary source of transportation, element of cultures and traditions (Md Yassin et al., 2011). Waterfront is the origin of human culture and economic development. In most developed countries, land adjacent to the water bodies was developed earlier than the inland areas. Many settlements and civilisations in the world, including Malaysia, began from the riverbanks. For example, many cities in Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Terengganu and Melaka were established closed to waterfront.

The rise and fall of many cities were related to transportation. During the early days, the villages expanded and became a port of trade among locals. In the industrial era, the trade ports became container ports. The old ports became the new waterfront appearance. Such development represents the diversity of waterfront uses and its importance to waterfront community and commercial activities (Chen, 2015). Due to the advancements during the Industrial Revolution, many industrial cities were located near the sea. Chen (2015) revealed that waterfront redevelopment is driven by the industry transformation, where the port cities served as centres to export resources and as sites for industrial manufacturing.

Waterfront ports and service centres began to emerge in Southeast Asia in the coastal areas and river mouth locations (Khan & Idid, 2016). As time goes by, some were transformed into successful cities while others have declined. Han and Beisi (2016) discovered that development of waterfronts can be divided into four stages in chronological order (Figure 1). During the emerging period, early cities near the coastal and river locations established due to the foreign trading between Western and East Asian regions. During this period, the cities were located between two ancient civilizations, namely China and India. These cities witnessed the land use changes and exchange of commodities. Ports, markets, warehouses and whole settlements became hierarchically distributed from the coastline.

During the early colonial period, the waterfronts functioned as international trade and attracted European traders. The prosperous colonial described the colonial administrative buildings were usually based in a fort. The modern or transitional period has been an era of independence. Most of historical buildings have been transformed into commercial structures. Some have been demolished and lost their former activities, while others have been transformed into modern commercial buildings.

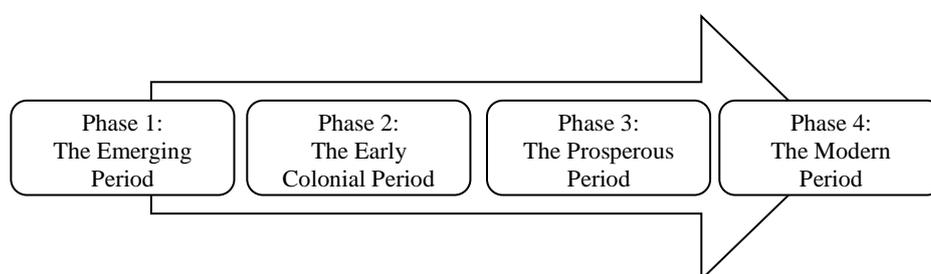


Figure 1: Four phases of waterfront development
Source: Han & Beisi (2016)

Since the decline of waterfront in post-industrial cities, the idea of waterfront redevelopment has become a global trend (Chen, 2015; Hussein, 2006; Xie & Gu, 2015). Waterfront redevelopment started to emerge in 1960s, where waterfronts acted as a planning tool that consisted of different plans and processes aimed to transform abandoned areas of post-industrial cities. According to Kostopoulou (2013), there have been intense efforts to redesign abandoned waterfront in the second half of the 20th century. The redevelopment of waterfront has become the symbol of significant transformation, economic growth, and great potential to attract foreign investment and improve declining local economies. Many waterfront cities nowadays are motivated by the idea of bringing back the water to cities and creating a high-quality environment with vibrant mix of activities and buildings. Responding to widespread deindustrialisation, expansion of service economy and perception of tourism as a panacea to revitalise urban cores, many different port cities progressively incorporated tourism activities in their waterfront redevelopment projects. Some good examples can be observed at Tokyo Waterfront City (Japan) (Jinnai, 2016), Singapore Waterfront (Chang & Huang, 2005), Baltimore Waterfront (United States) (Kostopoulou, 2013) and many others.

Tourism as a Tool for Waterfront Redevelopment

In the latter half of the 20th century, waterfront started to become recognised as an important feature of urban development and revitalization. At the time, most of the cities had to experience consequences due to the economic growth and fast development of technology, resulting to a decline of waterfront (Adamietz, 2012). Rather than abandoning the waterfronts to decay and neglect, some countries have taken extra measure to preserve and suggest adaptive reuse of the waterfronts. The growth of service economy and the perspective that tourism would result in urban revitalization, have driven different port cities to integrate tourism activities into historic waterfront redevelopment (Kostopoulou, 2013; Xie & Gu, 2011). The increasing competition between cities improved the urban image as many cities rebranded their image of post-industrial cities on waterfronts. The intervention of tourism on waterfronts became an opportunity to improve the physical, social and economic condition of a city.

In Singapore for example, the initiative by its former prime minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew in 1977 to initiate a clean-up of Singapore river to be developed as a tourism focal point has made its waterfront setting a liveable one. The river used to face environmental hazard due to squatter activities (Goh, 2007). The process of improvement and cleaning up the river took 10 years and had cost the government \$170 million (Choo, 2014). Revitalization project of the river provided alternative places for the people who live at the river bank as the Ministry of Environment in Singapore resettled around 26,000 families into residential flats, more than 2,800 industrial enterprises into industrial state built

and a total of 4,926 street hawkers into hawker centres (Goh, 2007; National Environment Agency, 2011). The river restoration project was hugely successful that Singapore waterfront now is equipped with mixed land uses including commercial, hotel, residential and institutional uses. The mixed-use activities have become a new characteristic of Singapore waterfront. While maintaining the heritage buildings, the government also allows change of building use to increase their viability. At the same time, modern buildings have also been constructed for commercial and residential purposes.

Another fine example of successful waterfront revitalization project can be seen at Melaka Historic Waterfront. Previously, the sewage system of the houses along the waterfront was not systematic and wastes from the houses were directly thrown into the river. As a result, the water quality of the river was bad. Shortly after Malaysia achieved independence, Melaka State Government initiated an extensive reclamation of seashore area near the Melaka waterfront. The land reclamation has changed the city profile, where the overall setting of the historic city changed to riverfront city (Salim & Mohamed, 2018). The revitalization project was a successful one and attracted many visitors to the waterfront area. Besides that, creative pedestrian ways along the river has attracted tourists to enjoy the view of the river. Furthermore, several murals and wall paintings along the river add scenic view for the tourists. The colourful sight along the Melaka River is an initiative by the State Government in 2010 to liven up the view along the river. Other murals that are popular among tourists are the Keihl's Mural, initiated by Keihl's Malaysia and The Orangutan House mural (Figure 2) near the Jonker Street as a support to preserve heritage buildings. The creative murals attract many tourists to the place and at the same time, help in spreading awareness among tourists on the importance of heritage preservation.



Figure 2: The Orang Utan mural near Jonker Street
Source: Salim & Mohamed (2018)

Successful waterfront developments remarkably generate local economy, improve quality of life and provide business opportunities for festivals, restaurants, heritage attractions and outdoor recreation (Lagarensen & Walansendow, 2015). Besides improving local economy and quality of social life, tourism activities also caused physical changes to the waterfront areas. Certainly, the increase of commercial buildings along or near the waterfront area is one of the impacts of tourism activities. With the increasing potential of tourism industry, there has been a change of building use from residential to commercial uses. Many heritage buildings have been refurbished into boutique hotels, cafes, galleries, museums, guest houses and many other businesses to accommodate the increasing number of tourists. Plus, waterfront development has contributed to the expansion of new land, since waterfront development is an ongoing process that can create remarkable changes. In Boston for example, conflicts occurred over the waterfront facilities where new lands were created by filling in the harbour. Barnes, Forrester and Leone (2013) mentioned that many developed cities view their waterfronts as a vehicle for economic growth and as a mean of generating private investment of surrounding areas. Therefore, there should be some efforts to combine and balance the economic benefits and environmental risks through planning and implementation process.

METHODOLOGY

Background of Study Area

In 7th July 2008, George Town and Melaka were inscribed as World Heritage Sites. Both cities highlights to the world a rare example of multiculturalism from the Malay Archipelago, China, India and influence of European colonial. Year 2018 marks the 10th year anniversary of the World Heritage Site Inscription. Due to the world heritage inscription, tourism development in George Town has skyrocketed and improved the growth of local economy. For the purpose of this article, George Town Waterfront was selected as the study area. The boundary of the site covers areas of Weld Quay (from Clan Jetties to Victoria Tower). The aim is to observe the evolution along the waterfront and how the intervention of tourism gradually change the physical aspect of built environment, social fabric and economic activities within the study area.

Research Method

This paper employed qualitative approach to investigate how tourism intervenes in the development of waterfront. Primary and secondary data were used to obtain the appropriate outcome of the study. Primary data were obtained through field observation and secondary data were derived from various references such as historical books, journals, government documents as well as proceedings to determine the evolution of waterfront development in the study area.

For field observation, direct observation is employed and any changes in urban tourism planning on the streets and heritage buildings at the waterfront area are studied. Building inventory consists of building use is recorded to identify the variation of urban forms. Meanwhile, pictorial data were derived from various references such as historical books, journals, government documents, collections from related agencies and then compared with the current development. This step is important to see the development changes and also to identify the change of building use.

ANALYSIS

The presentation of research findings begins with a brief introduction of waterfront evolution along the Weld Quay and how its development slowly changed the urban form of the waterfront. It then continues with the identification of impacts of commodification based on the literature review mentioned earlier in this paper. This process is important to evaluate how tourism development have affected the facade and use of the adjacent buildings.

Evolution of the Waterfront

Evolution of George Town began in 1786, where the development of George Town was focused along the Weld Quay waterfront. Since water was the main transportation mode, port activities were busy, and the waterfront was a well-known trading centre for regional and international merchants. During 1811 until 1820, there was no major change along the waterfront area. The development of shophouses, residential areas, Masjid Lebu Acheh and administrative buildings created an urban form of George Town. In 1821, the urbanization of George Town continued to spread towards the inner city as more administrative buildings were built. In late 19th century, George Town experienced a scarcity of land for development. This situation had led to the idea of large-scale land reclamation that pushed the shoreline outward, creating a new land for construction of godowns between Beach Street and Weld Quay. Godowns were probably the first buildings seen along the coastline looking from the ship to the shore. The godowns were designed to speed up godown work and reduce as much as possible the human workload. Nowadays, some of the remaining godowns have been transformed into creative hubs such as café, residence home as well as community hall.

Early Development of the Waterfront (1786-1811)

Fort Cornwallis was built, and street networks were full of people from different races. Back in 1800, the development of George Town grew inwards the city and settlement area known as Lebu Acheh. The first Masjid Acheh was built near the Malay settlement and the distribution of the settlement took place when the late Francis Light began to introduce the village for international trading

activities. Due to the trading activities, many settlements began to be developed and distributed along Lebuah Aceh. The British were being supportive since the trading activities had brought positive economic growth to George Town that the port even became one of the busiest ports in South East Asia. Establishment of new settlements near Lebuah Aceh have triggered development of new streets towards the south area. Plan of Fort Cornwallis, created by Popham in 1798, showed the early settlements and topography of George Town at that time (Figure 2). From the plan, it can be described that the city was built on land previously of wild plantations. The border was not marked but centred on roads and intersections. During this era, land transportation along the Weld Quay waterfront was slowly developed and gain importance.

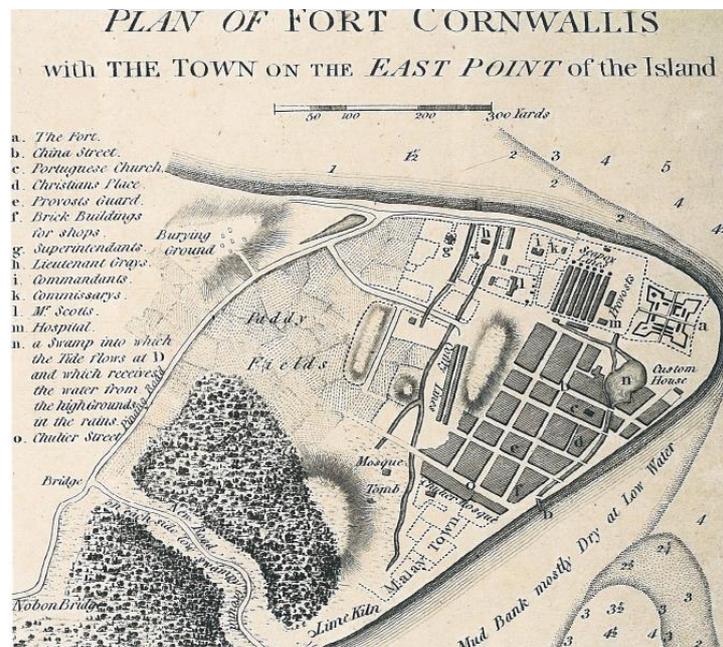


Figure 3: Land use distribution of George Town (1786-1811)
 Source: George Town World Heritage Incorporated (2016)

Change of Urban Form (1811-1960)

During 1811 until 1820, there was no major change along the waterfront area. In 1821, the urbanization of George Town continued to spread towards the inner city. Furthermore, streets like Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling became the pillars to support the development along the waterfront area. Cultural practices by different ethnic groups have created an impact on urban form and development, especially on the development of religious buildings. The Chinese, for instance, practiced the 'feng shui' in choosing their business location. The main building would face

towards the waterfront.

In 1901, both main land and water transportation system were improved. The road networks were developed by Light from Fort Cornwallis towards the inner city. The streets vary from 30 to 40-foot-wide facing building lots that were deep and narrow. Most of the buildings at that time were generally 15 feet wide by 40 to 100 feet deep to allow for maximum number of property ownership along the waterfront (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). During this period, the development of road networks slowly changed the urban form of George Town, which initially focused on the Weld Quay waterfront, into the inner city.

The Clan Jetties along the waterfront was the only Chinese settlement on the sea shore. Nowadays, the clan jetty has been gazetted as heritage village and being preserved by the State Government. The main city centre, which was enclosed by Light Street, Beach Street, Chulia Street and Pitt Street, acted as the main commercial area or central business district (CBD) in George Town. The city later expanded inwards the inner city. The reclamation project along the waterfront has caused the development directed towards Weld Quay waterfront.

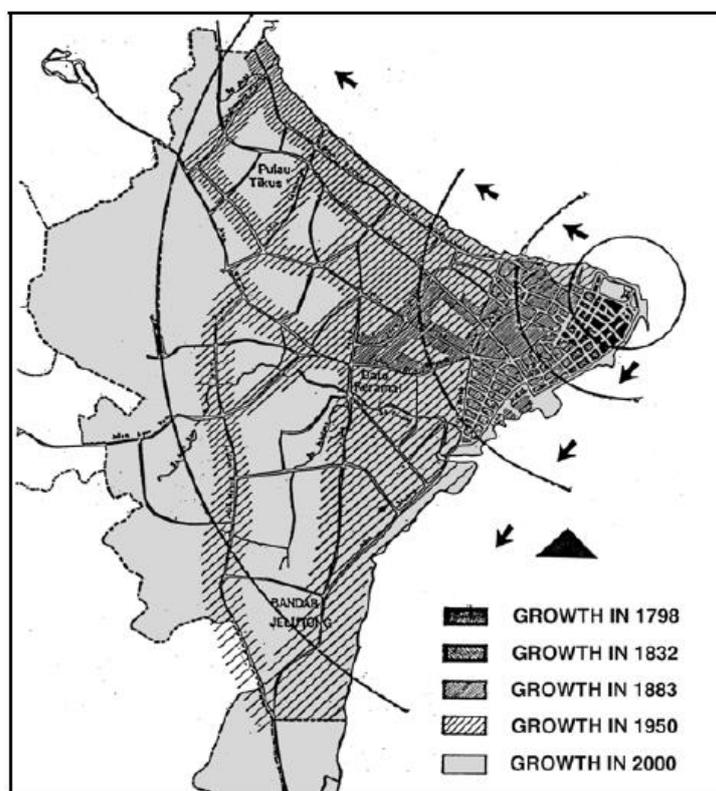


Figure 4: Urbanization of George Town waterfront move inwards the inner city
Source: Zubir & Sulaiman (2004)



Figure 5: Heritage zoning areas of George Town
Source: George Town World Heritage Incorporated (2016)

In 1920, the development of George Town was distributed away from the waterfront as a result of major improvement in land transportation. The function of water transportation became less important during the period except for port and trading activities.

Tourism Came into the Picture (1960-2008)

In 1960s, tourism industry began to be promoted in Malaysia. Many Malaysians travelled to Singapore. The most significant international travel among the Malay Muslims during this period was pilgrimage to Mecca. The departures took place at Port Klang and Penang Port where relatives and friends bid the pilgrims goodbye for the three months journey by ship. At that time, ship being the only transportation to bring pilgrim to Mecca. Commercial air travel to Mecca was introduced 20 years later. According to Malik bin Hussin, who used to manage the welfare of pilgrims to Mecca back in 1950s, Hajj season was the busiest season at the time where Muslims across the region will arrive and depart to Mecca. He was quoted (translated from Musa, 2015):

“Pilgrims from the north part of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand shall depart to Mecca through Penang Port. The Hajj season is indeed a blessing season for business traders along the Penang Port. Penang status as a free port trade centre at the time made the sellable goods much cheaper. Business traders from Penang Bazaar and Campbell Street will sell their goods along the port and Padang Kota”.



Figure 6: Cruise ship named ‘*Malaysia Kita*’ was one of the ships that bring pilgrims to Mecca

Source: Musa (2015)

Decline of the Waterfront (1960-2008)

Revocation of free port status in the 1960s has given a tremendous impact to the waterfront development. The state suffered economic decline and immense unemployment.

The Impacts of Tourism Development

Previously, George Town waterfront was the busiest trading centre and a free duty port. However, some parts of the waterfront have been reclaimed to develop parking space and bus terminal. The waterfront has not changed much with many previous activities such as port, ferry terminal, the clan jetty and Fort Cornwallis remain the same at the original site. However, the function of some heritage buildings have changed over time (Figure 7 & Figure 8).

The inscription into WHS of both Melaka and George Town in 2008 has given a new direction to tourism industry. As for George Town, the WHS status has caused tourism commodification on built heritage environment and economy of its surrounding area. One of the impacts of tourism commodification can be

seen from the aspect of building use and business activities. Before Melaka and George Town are gazetted as WHS, some of the building façades at the heritage area were modified to cater development needs. However, after inscription of WHS, all heritage buildings have been preserved, and any changes are restricted under UNESCO's conservation law. Since the Clan Jetties fall under Building Category 2, any planning for change of use, increase in height, extension of building, construction of new structures or buildings are permitted as long as it complies with the National Heritage Act and does not change the façade of the buildings. Some villagers take the initiative in beautifying their home walls into something creative to attract tourists (Figure 9). These creative wall paintings have been attracting many visitors to the place, and at the same time, help in instilling awareness among tourists. This initiative is seen as an effort by the locals to preserve heritage buildings.



Figure 7: The buildings facing the waterfront, previously were used by European trading companies, have different functions now. (Left: before was a vacant property; Right: now the Royale Bintang Hotel).

Source: Su Nin (2016)



Figure 8: Some houses were turned into café and decorated to attract visitors to Chew Jetty

Source: Google.com



Figure 9: Walls are decorated to attract visitors to Chew Jetty

Source: Field observation

CONCLUSION

Although George Town World Heritage Site has become one of the most developed cities in Malaysia, the heritage waterfront still remain the same with water transportation activities. Since the waterfront is separated by the main transportation road, the waterfront received less development compared to other

parts of the heritage city. At the same time, most of the incentives and development plans significantly focus on the development of the city centre. The waterfront still remain detached from the development of city centre. Therefore, strategic guidelines and effective development strategies are needed to help redevelop the historic waterfront. One of the important strategies to develop the waterfront is to include public participation during decision-making process and seeking authentic heritage roots.

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