

# H-Net Reviews

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**Richard Baxstrom.** *Houses in Motion: the Experience of Place and the Problem of Belief in Urban Malaysia.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. ix + 283 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5891-8.

**Ross King.** *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia.* Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with University of Hawaii Press, 2008. xxviii + 321 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-3318-3.

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## Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and CyberJaya: Malaysian Cities and Societies in Transition

The urban arena of Kuala Lumpur, like many contemporary Asian urban spaces, is a mixture of new clean lines of skyscraper modernity with its highly ordered spaces and the haphazard chaotic sprawl of less developed and older communal sections. The latter are continuously being redeveloped to renegotiate them into the larger vision and trajectory of city planners. The political and religious ethos of the country may sometimes test the geographical and cultural limits of the historic city, and a resulting development would be the creation of another completely new urban space; in this context, Putrajaya, which is an indigenous and Islamic urban identity. Even so, such expansions may not be adequate or congruent with other simultaneous conceptual directions and further developments typically followed; in another particular instance, Cyberjaya, which is the physical manifestation of Malaysia's conceptualized frame of techno-media imagined space, the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Typical of newly industrialized economies, the pace of such urban renewal and development often exceeds the capacities of local communities to accommodate such rapid changes within their cultural memory, and sweeping physical and material changes of the landscape are often more jarring and dislocating rather than being simply inconvenient. The Indian neighborhood of Kuala Lumpur's suburban Brickfields is a prime example, as residents responded in a variety of ways to accept, accommodate, negotiate, reform, or even reject outright the morphological changes and physical disruption to their everyday experiences. These intrusions were often viewed as an assault on their past collective memories of their conceptual identities of home and place. *Houses in Motion* records these challenges and the humanistic re-

sponses to such encroachments within the historical and multicultural interstices of Brickfields's populace. Likewise, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya*, albeit through an architectural and urban studies perspective, sieves the dynamics of history, politics, race, and religion in the growth and design of Malaysia's most vibrant urban centers. Both works establish the connection between societies and their places of work, home, and everyday living, and provide the reader with a better understanding of the residents' adaptation to their changing domains as well as a conceptual framework of spatial and architectural evolution of Malaysia's urban landscapes.

In *Houses in Motion*, the bulk and core of Baxstrom's study focuses on the ethnographic fieldwork among Brickfield's residents over a spread of fourteen months which was done over two periods of residencies. His findings were not only culled from ninety ethnographic interviews with fifty-three people ranging from one to nine hours, but also from less formal participation in public activities and frequent casual conversations. These nonetheless provided localized access to often sensitive but yet open discussions that gave a more intimate connection to his subjects. Despite the general view that Brickfields is an Indian enclave, the population pool is less homogeneous and more diverse, and the author's interviewees included Chinese, Malays, and even Pakistanis from wide-ranging socioeconomic backgrounds. The book itself is divided into two broad areas covering the history of Brickfields and the daily living experiences of its residents. The first half of chapter 1, "The Founding of Brickfields," and chapter 2, "The Malayan Emergency," explain the historical context and the origins of Brickfields. In the second half of chapter 3, "Law, Justice, Dis-

appearance,” chapter 4, “Strangers, Counterfeiters, and Gangsters,” and chapter 5, “Ambivalent Encounters in the City,” the focus is on the legal process, concepts of justice, and everyday experiences in Brickfields between 2000-02. As the author notes, the purpose of the book is to study how the residents engaged and defined themselves even though many were excluded from the processes of the policies that governed their neighborhood.

King’s *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* also involves groundwork which literally led him to the streets but this is a smaller contribution to his study. Having access to interviews with city planners, academics, architects (the author’s profession), and corporate executives contributed to a more sweeping vista of the changing and transitory nature of urban landscapes. The author’s analysis and interpretation of historical forces as well as more recent political and religious/ethnic development amongst the *bumiputras* (sons of the soil) or indigenous Malays, provides an awareness of the tensions and angst that still pervade the cities’ atmospheres today, especially on issues of race. These together with his trained observations of the designs and architecture of the grandiose public monuments plus the spatial layout of the land and cityscapes, tease multiple themes and symbolisms of various cultural forces that have shaped the evolution of these two cities.

The book is divided into five parts: chapter 1, “The Phenomenal City,” reflects on the diversity and fluidity of Kuala Lumpur where multiple meanings and tensions could be read in its architecture and urban spaces; chapter 2, “The Contested City,” discusses in greater detail the politics of race relations in the social production of urban space where the hegemony of Chinese capitalism in Kuala Lumpur is a constant concern to the indigenous but less urbanized Malays; chapter 3, “The Imagined City,” sees the creation of a unique Malay urban sphere, Putrajaya, and the participation of Malaysia in technomedia industries in the development of Cyberjaya and the Multimedia Super Corridor; chapter 4, “The Forgotten City,” debates the preference toward a Middle East orientation in Putrajaya’s creation at the expense of earlier and more localized Malay culture; and chapter 5, “The Metamorphic City,” witnesses the ongoing evolution of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya and the different forces that are still contesting for influence and space. As the author notes, their final products are incomplete and it remains to be seen whether pluralistic Kuala Lumpur or Malay-Islamic Putrajaya will represent the future of Malaysia.

A common theme in both works is the pivotal role

of Islam in shaping the identity of the emerging modern Malay state. Noting of its urban origins, Baxstrom refers to the *dakwah* movement as “an assemblage of ideas, trends, activities, and organization that seek to promote Islam” (p. 73). Heralding a return to the golden age of Islam, this renaissance movement adhered to the Arab model of Islam over local religious institutions and *adat* (customs). However, then Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir also played an increasingly active role in Malay-Muslim identity by announcing the historical legacy of Islam in Malaysia and its relevancy to not just matters of faith, but also in areas of science, economy, and technology. Citing his 1986 discourse on Islam, *The Challenge* and the earlier 1970 *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahathir asserted that true Islamic observances should preside over indigenous *adat* of polytheistic origins. The government’s active debate and focus on Islam’s role in Malaysian society nonetheless made non-Muslim and non-Malay communities like Brickfields more wary of articulating a substantial stake in local governance.

King’s interpretation of the role of Islam centers more on historical forces of race, particularly on what is seen as the invasive threat of the Chinese immigrants and their economic domination. Also citing heavily from Mahathir’s *The Malay Dilemma*, and the implications of a racially divided society, King observes that the economic clout of the Chinese and their historical and current dominion over Kuala Lumpur are challenged and countered in the spatial development of the new urban spaces. The Chinese capital accumulation and entrenched positions as captains of industry have financially enabled them to claim Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, as a predominantly Chinese hold. This spatial control prompted the Malays to assert themselves as a unifying *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race) that is synonymous with the *negara* (nation).

A point worth noting is that this assertion of Malay identity and race is fundamentally flawed. As argued in Benedict Anderson’s and Edward Said’s works, “imagined communities” of nations and races are constructions of European cultural imaginations in the nineteenth century.[1] Historical sources point otherwise that the Malay Peninsula people are actually made up of Minangkabaus, Bugis, Achehnese, Banjarese, and others. In the aftermath of the 1969 racial riots, public monuments symbolizing Malay nationalism became urgent and, inspired by the earlier Muzium Negara (National Museum), more modernist but Malay-influenced architecture took root; the Dayabumi Complex and Menara Maybank were exemplary. This Malayization of public monuments was further expanded to sprawling Shah Alam which was seen as an idyllic escape from the more

congested Chinese-dominated Kuala Lumpur. There, the ornamental lake and the Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah Mosque would demonstrate how not just public monuments but urban space themselves could be claimed by the Malay Muslims.

However as the author notes, Kuala Lumpur itself is not strictly Chinese as contrasted with Putrajaya which has defined itself as Malay-Islamic. Kuala Lumpur is more open in bringing the races together, especially in her shopping malls. There are churches, mosques, and Chinese and Indian temples scattered throughout the city. Such inclusiveness could also be seen in Brickfields. The large Chinese communities which have established themselves since colonial times, albeit in their ethnic quarters, have a common identity problem with the Indians as they are also viewed for their “otherness” as non-*bumiputras*. This persistent “otherness” typically views the Malay-controlled authorities such as Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) or City Hall and Public Works Department (PWD) as intrusive and not serving the overall interest of the predominantly non-Malay residents of Brickfields.

In the “The Imagined City” (chapter 3), King notes that the vision for the future of Malaysia’s cities broaches both the pragmatic and the ideal. Mahathir’s and Anwar’s insistence on Malaysia being a major player in the Information Age saw the creation of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), a Silicon Valley-type business region, and its urban center Cyberjaya. At the same time, an increased awareness of Malay-Muslim identity both politicizes and imagines Putrajaya toward a Middle East identification. This Islamic bent, as the author points, is sadly nothing Malayan in origin, but a result of religious identification with the Arab world. Even then, the Islamic geometries found in the buildings can also be partly traced to the American Art Deco revival of the 1980s.

In the next chapter “The Forgotten City,” King explains how the selective process of Malaysia’s reinterpretation of the past serves only to mesh with Mahathir’s own interpretation of history which focuses heavily on Malay identification with Islamic culture. Pre-Islamic indigenous practices such as animistic worship or even Hindu rituals are conveniently excluded in the architecture and landscaping of Putrajaya. Unlike Kuala Lumpur’s edifices, earlier non-Islamic or non-Malay influences such as Victorian, Buddhist, Indian, or Chinese historical roles would also not be retained or remembered. This is not true however of the more recent Western influences. Putrajaya’s architecture renders a confluence of Islamic origins as well as Western modernism. It

is both Middle Eastern and Western in conceptualization and this is reflective of the nation’s institutional insecurity of its own origins.

Despite the efforts of the authorities to control and frame religious practices and daily living as desired by the Islamic-leaning authorities, the urban spaces are frequently appropriated by the local communities to represent their own daily needs and aspirations. In Brickfields, Baxstrom notes the Hindu community’s reform efforts that replicate many of the state ideals of correct citizenship, even if they are not Islamic. The Sri Murugan’s Centre combines *bhakti* (worship) practice with secular educational activities (chapter 5). These tutorial programs reinforce the notion that the Hindu community is not simply an “other” to Malaysian citizenry, and also assert the more pluralistic outlook that the educated Malaysian subject is also a spiritual subject.

Even then, the divine and the supernatural of temple deities cannot be ignored when even the state’s Kuala Lumpur Monorail agency had to confer with the local religious authorities over a reported accident involving ghostly forces! Such non-legal engagement reflects the gravity in which the state views the role of spiritual intervention in modern urban planning. Such engagement often works in favor of the temples to select a more auspicious time for relocation as well as extract a substantial compensatory settlement. However in Baxstrom’s study, belief itself is not limited to the divine sphere or religious institutions. Belief is more a conviction of one’s rightful place and relationship to the immediate world. Brickfield’s residents may have little influence in the formal legal process of municipal planning, but their grassroots engagements suggest that they invariably define and create a world they can live and believe in.

In the “The Metamorphic City” (chapter 5), King points that the daily economics of living transforms Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya into a more diverse reality of multiple worlds than the ordered spaces envisioned by the government. Even then, conflict among the authorities could be seen in the perpetual rivalry for Islamic legitimacy between the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS). Both parties champion and constantly clash over their projected views of Islamic identity. However, larger international forces are at play, and Islamic revivalism from the Middle East to Indonesia is redefining Islamic discourse in Malaysia. Everyday life in the real spaces of Kuala Lumpur, diverse street cultures still operate and challenge the notion of a perfect Islamic world. The bars and night clubs of Jalan P. Ramlee, Bukit Bintang, and Chi-

natown are spreading and even Malay Muslim women are observed to have consumed alcoholic beverages. The wide availability of pirated DVDs and VCDs of pornographic and other dubious content are easily found in the back alley stalls. As King points out, such spaces are more Chinese-controlled and also venues for global market commodities rather than Malay Muslim-inspired. Such diversity is further asserted by carnivals and other religious festivals. The annual Hindu Thaipusam festival and the spectacle of the *kavadi* carriers fascinate the public imagination. The raucous cacophony of Chinese New Year celebrations and the Formula-1 Grand Prix, plus the inclusive Malay Muslim Hari Raya festivities suggest the appropriation of public space by other forces than the state.

However, it is the spaces of the shopping malls that point to the power of modern consumption in shaping the future of Malaysian society. The ephemeral and fluid nature of globalist trends from afar, and also demand for the newest and perpetual changes, create an amorphous space that transcends race and religion. Suria-Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), the Mines, and Mid-Valley Megamall are cases in point. The communities have been brought together to these and other shopping malls in an environment of modern consumption. King refers to such markets of global commodities as “post-modern hypespace” where the superficial simulation of places from afar creates a sense of disconnectedness with no anchor to an actual place or home.

Such placelessness is further exacerbated by the promotion of Cyberjaya and the cyberspace world where even whole temples have been demolished and recreated in virtual forms. In conjunction with the MSC discourse, there has been a proliferation of private colleges and schools in both information and creative technologies using shopping malls as premises. This, plus the relocation of leading multicomunal institutes such as Limkokwing University College of Creative Technology (LCIT) to Cyberjaya, will likely change the more ordered Muslim landscape of Cyberjaya-Putrajaya. Despite this potential, it is the city of Kuala Lumpur on which the author pins his hopes for the discourse of a new Malaysian society that has divided itself since independence. Largely because of her history and inherently transgressive representations of space and practices, rather than the imag-

ined spaces of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, Kuala Lumpur may provide the antidote to the repressed discourse of ethnic minorities and ultimately unite the country.

Baxstrom’s *Houses in Motion* is a revised version of his dissertation in which his field research is the core foundation of the study. The narrow geographical focus of the research belies the origins of the project but the broader ethnographic study of culture and politics in urban redevelopment is its main contribution. Readers interested in issues of race, governance, and the transformation of Malaysia’s urban landscapes will find Baxstrom’s work relevant to the growing body of Malaysian urban studies. Similarly, King’s *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* falls within the same scholarly field, and draws partially from his earlier article “Re-writing the City: Putrajaya as Representation” (2007), with a critical analysis of recent political and social developments. Despite its juxtaposition to Putrajaya, Cyberjaya is minimally covered in a dozen pages or less that seem inadequate to the larger role that Cyberjaya and the MSC plays in Malaysia’s quest for modernity.[2] There is also the architectural critique of the cities’ more significant edifices and landscapes where there is an element of subjectivity in the aesthetic interpretation of some of the buildings. However, such subjectivity is intrinsic in such aesthetic perception and it does not take away the impressive scope of this work and the author’s apparent feel for the pulse of the Malaysian people. In the larger picture, both works draw from critical historical studies and social theories and provide an invaluable contribution to the field of Malaysian urban studies, politics, and society.[3]

#### Notes

[1]. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991); and Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

[2]. For a more comprehensive study of Cyberjaya and the MSC, readers may want to check Tim Bunnell’s *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Corridor* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[3]. Readers may also want to check Goh Beng Lan’s *Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cultural Production and the Cityscape in Contemporary Urban Penang, Malaysia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2002) for a similar study on another Malaysia city with a large Chinese population.

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