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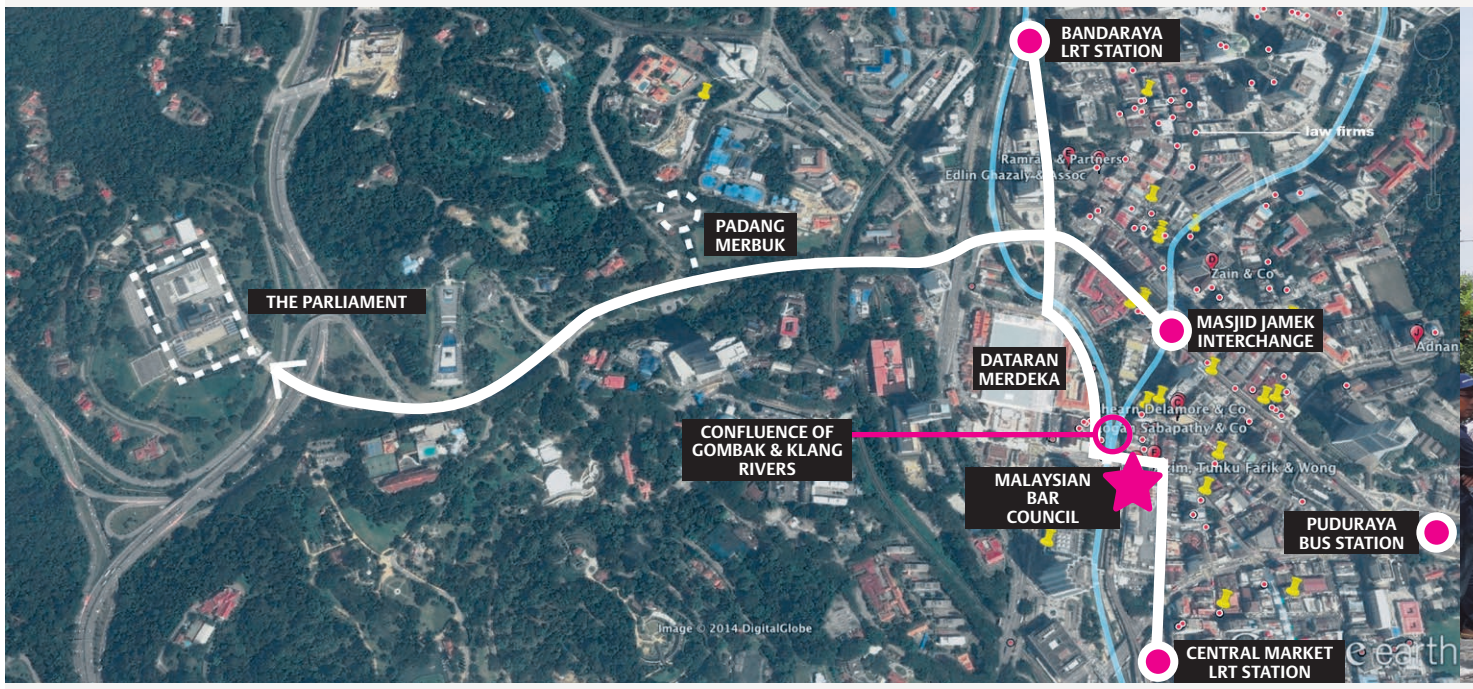
Protest and public space in Kuala Lumpur

‘Mansuh! Mansuh! Akta Hasutan!’ (Repeal! Repeal! The Sedition Act!) chanted the lawyers marching towards the Parliament in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 16 October 2014. This protest, organised by the Bar Council, was one of the latest events since the 2007 Bersih rally kick-started a renewed protest culture in Malaysia. Most of these protests happened in the streets of Kuala Lumpur, even though since 1998, most government functions have moved twenty-five kilometres away to Putrajaya, a purpose-built administrative capital built in the heyday of the mega-projects of the 1990s. Despite this, the wide boulevards of Putrajaya remain relatively bereft of public claim-making acts, save for a few protests now and then.

Nurul Azlan



Above left: A map illustrating the lawyers’ Walk of Freedom on 16 October 2014, in Kuala Lumpur. Note how close the Parliament building is to the city centre.

Above right: The lawyers in front of the Malaysian Parliament building. Post-independence structure of national importance adopted Modernist architecture free from referencing other cultures. Putrajaya later reverted by referencing Middle Eastern architecture to portray Islam.

The world’s first Intelligent Garden City

Political protests aimed clearly at particular authorities customarily take place where the authorities in question are. This is why protests take place in front of the White House or No. 10 Downing Street. In the Netherlands, which also has two ‘capitals’ like Malaysia, protests happen equally in The Hague, the seat of government and also in Amsterdam, the commercial capital, depending on the cause. Not so in Malaysia, where Putrajaya hardly ever invites those wishing to demonstrate. In this instance, the case of Putrajaya is more similar to that of Brasilia, the capital Brazil designed and built from scratch. Protests in Brazil also happen mostly in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paolo, and not in the Modernist capital of Brasilia.

An instant city built over the span of ten years, Putrajaya prides itself as the world’s first Intelligent Garden City, claiming on its website that it advances Ebenezer Howard’s concept of the ‘garden city’. Just like Brasilia, Putrajaya is typically Modernist: the programs are separated accordingly in different precincts, and as an antidote to the notorious congestion of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya was planned with ease of driving (but not mass transit) in mind, hence a network of wide roads connecting the precincts. The centre of Putrajaya, a hundred metre wide boulevard, is lined with grand buildings which house ministries and government departments. A series of squares, or nodes, are placed intermittently along this strong axis, marking the importance of the Palace of Justice, the Ministry of Finance and finally the Prime Minister’s Office Complex, which is preceded by Dataran Putra (Putra Square). An overcrowded mall, away from the boulevard, becomes a focal point of convergence for those living in Putrajaya, and the public transport interchange is situated on the outskirts of the city, serving both Putrajaya and its equally desolate neighbour Cyberjaya, once envisioned to be Malaysia’s version of the Silicon Valley.

Activists and protesters in Malaysia informed me that even though the government sits there, Putrajaya is not the preferred location for protest because of the lack of accessibility, the single use of government functions, and also the coarse urban fabric of huge and ill-defined open spaces, made worse by the lack of shady trees. Dataran Putra is not really a square in the conventional sense, as its perimeters and form are not defined by the structures enclosing it, unlike Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) in Kuala Lumpur which functions more like an outdoor room. The huge square, with its intricate Middle Eastern patterns, is best appreciated from above, but the quality of urban spaces is better measured at pedestrian level. A huge volume of people would be needed to fill in the spaces for the image to be impactful, and the logistics of moving a huge number of people to a place not accessible by public transportation is problematic, not to mention conspicuous. The single use program also means that before and after protest, protesters would not have anywhere to go for respite and refreshments. During protest, should a clash happen, the big wide spaces make it more difficult to escape and hide from the authorities.

The difficulty to protest there, and the fact that Putrajaya claims to be an Intelligent City, brings us to the current debate of the Smart Cities concept, where the drive to be efficient should not turn us into an Orwellian society. This analysis of high-tech surveillance to anticipate and avoid public disorder, however, does not apply to Putrajaya, which has managed to do it through town planning and with low-tech means.

Kuala Lumpur, the old capital

On the other hand, out-of-town protesters could take the night bus to Kuala Lumpur, arrive the next morning, do other activities while melting into the city crowd, attend the protest, get refreshments post-protest, and then take the night bus back to wherever they came from. Or they could stay in one of the many hotels in central KL. Thus, the organisers are free to focus all their attention on the running of the rally itself. This is all possible due to the accessibility; the bus station is within the protest area, and central KL is well-served by rail and town bus transports; the mix of programs allowing for other activities before and after protest; the tight urban form allowing easy walking distance and the maze of backstreets for escape.

Kuala Lumpur grew organically from a mining town founded in the mid-19th century into the capital of Malaysia. The centre of activities in the early days was at the confluence of Gombak and Klang Rivers, and it was from these river banks the city grew. Its tight urban form was shaped by the fine-grained blocks of mixed-use shop-houses, and this was matched by the imposing British administrative buildings arranged around the Padang, a staid rectangular square, made all the more imposing due to the contrast with the narrow streets of old Kuala Lumpur. The Padang, renamed Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square), is one of the contested spaces of protest in Kuala Lumpur, along with other spaces of national importance such as Stadium Merdeka (Independence Stadium) and the Parliament, where the recent Sedition Act protest took place.

This is despite the speedy rate at which shopping malls have taken over as ‘public spaces’ (I am using the term very loosely here) for people living in Malaysian main cities (on the ExpatgoMalaysia website you will find a list of top twenty shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur). In the controlled pseudo-urban environs of Publika, one of the newer shopping malls (it is on the list), you can even sample a slice of vibrant ‘public space’, albeit without the mess and friction you would get on a real street. But protest in a shopping mall, no matter how much it looks like your bog standard public space, is almost impossible due to the private nature of the place. In 2011, protesters who gathered in Suria KLCC, the shopping mall at the base of the Petronas twin towers (once the world’s tallest building between 1998 and 2004, the towers are also part of the mega-projects of the 1990s) were met with threats of legal action by the management of the shopping mall, citing that the protest disrupted the business operations of their tenants. Ironically, the protest, called Kill the Bill, was about the Peaceful Assembly Act, which as the name suggests, regulates public gatherings in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, in addition to serving as the theatre of dissent for political protests, the urban spaces of old Kuala Lumpur continue to thrive as new immigrants use them as public spaces. The socio-spatial patterns of Kuala Lumpur have changed, and in doing so, it remains unchanged by delivering its historic functions of hosting new immigrants.

Public space, public life

Prior to protesting in front of the Parliament in October 2014, the lawyers had held a similar protest in Putrajaya in 2007. The busses carrying them were blocked by the police a few kilometres away from the centre, and as a result, the lawyers had had to walk longer to reach the Palace of Justice. Compare this to the 2014 event, the meeting place at Padang Merbuk was only one kilometre away from both the Parliament and the closest rail station, and the Bar Council office and many law firms are in this area. In Malaysia’s often scorching heat, this difference is crucial for a good turnout. During my fieldwork, I alighted at the Masjid Jamek LRT (Light Rail Transit) Station at 10am, and joined the black and white throng heading towards Padang Merbuk. Shortly before 3pm, I took the LRT to Suria KLCC, for another meeting.

Accessibility, mixed-use programs, and well-defined and comfortable urban spaces are also criteria that define a good public space, although the discourse on liveability is normally framed in the perpetuity of everyday life; living, working, playing, and shopping. The notion that the ideal space for protest is the same ideal space for other urban activities, further cements the role of protest as an integral part of public life. One might argue about the effectiveness of treating protest as a day-outing, as those in Kuala Lumpur seem to do, but the point of a political protest is to broadcast grievances via disruption of the everyday, hence gaining the attention of the authorities in question, and also to instil awareness and hopefully gain support from those watching on the side. Being able to do this is part of public life, and as it also has the same spatial requirements of other urban activities, should be treated as such. The availability of high quality urban spaces, where public roles could be played, should take precedence over the proliferation of shopping malls. Perhaps by going to the streets to protest, the trend of substituting public space for shopping malls will start to reverse, and hence, the role of the public will change again from being consumers to citizens. Perhaps, the picturesque and ‘intelligent’ urban spaces of Putrajaya will also become actual public spaces.

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