



Thick Crust City: Kuala Lumpur

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ABSTRACT

The *Kueh Lapis* or, Layered Cake provides the metaphor for the hypothesis of the thick crust city. The hypothesis suggests that the meaningful city is one that is built up from layers of its past. The layers reveal themselves at the present moment, frozen in time. The layers are mainly physical encrustation that the city inherits from the past. Metaphysical layers could be deduced, or speculated from the physical layers, such as the forms of life that once existed for each layer. It is like excavating the layers to find the underlying evidence of the past and their meanings to complete the narrative of the present. Richness of experience, fulfilment of the senses and opportunities for creativity are part of what makes a thick crust city other than the physical make-up of the city. Time is a factor for the make-up of the thick crust city. Highly-planned new cities need time to become a thick crust city as the city needs changes as one layer is built over another and different forms of life need to inhabit the city over time. A thick crust city requires diversity in activities, cultures and people of different tribes, coming together to provide richness in diversity, prompting high-density interactions. The feed-back loops between different people enhances creativity and tolerance, as well as knowledge. Cities of endearment are thick crust cities and the major cities of the world, which are much spoken about are thick crust cities. Kuala Lumpur is such a city and the paper provides the contents that support the suggestion.

Introduction

Worldviews are based on the way minds work, which is through symbols and patterns, and through this, purposes and meanings are sought. This is a peculiarly human proclivity.

Even modern-day advancements are built up of patterns, the latest being the marvel and bemusements at Artificial Intelligence (AI) and soon, the coming out-of-trajectory Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) where humans are conjectured to lose control of the future because AGI might overpower humankind as AGI machines could reach levels of intelligence that far surpass human capacity due to inherent biological limits.

All of these originated with the manipulation of symbols, like numbers and algorithms. Symbols of these sort enable the discovery of the world of possibilities, hence with numbers, various scientific theories were propositioned and then verified through experiments. Famously, the General Theory of Relativity was at first just numbers and equations which was later verified in an experiment.

However, architecture has to do with the real and the tangible, and it is an everyday human construct. Unlike numbers and algorithms, which are based on logic, the average human, applying to the vast majority, think and communicate rhetorically and in polemics.

The generic way of human thinking was long recognized and picked up by Aristotle (384-322 BC). Aristotle's renditions of logic, syllogisms and categories have been expounded by philosophers of science. However, Aristotle also expounded on the idea of *nous* as part of the human mental condition. *Nous* was variably interpreted as 'insight', 'intuition' and 'intelligence'. Robin Smith of Stanford University interpreted *nous* as 'familiar', which is a process of becoming wise¹. In this interpretation, posterior-knowing has a reliance on sense perception of things rather than logic.

Urban planning is a methodical process and building is methodical as well as technical, however, architecture has more to do with culture, society, humanities, economics and the state of the human condition. Architecture is sometimes style, sometimes shelter and sometimes, vanity projects. At the end, scholars provide narratives to architecture with subjective level of historical accuracy as every explanation is subject to beliefs, education, geography and cultural influences. The architectural narrator is a story-teller with observation and sense-perception are fundamental to the weaving of the story.

In the modern era, scholars like to quote from René Descartes, his well quoted proposition, "I think, therefore I am"² in 1637, inferring that the mind is objective and it is independent of the body and the sense perception that comes with the body.

Later, one of the twentieth century's most insightful philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein would state that "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" in 1922, inferring exactly how our worldview is determine by the limits of our mental capacity as shown by the use of language: in essence, our capacity is limited by our ability to manipulate symbols.

The idea of the "Thick Crust City" for Kuala Lumpur follows the tradition of providing narratives to describe architecture based on observations, sense-perception, memories, historical records and interviews.

It is based on the hypothetical premise that Kuala Lumpur has organic uniqueness, it grew randomly, it wasn't planned by single individuals or groups of designers. Like organisms, it has cycles of life and decay and revivals. Like most other cities, it has seen economic booms and busts and the architecture that were built during these periods were signifiers of intermittent hopes and prosperity.

The styles of architecture suggest the periods they were built, and observers can then use the architecture to mark the periods of each layer of time.

The hallmark of the city lies beneath the architectural appearances, to the forms of life that once dwelled among the spaces and the activities that had once taken place.

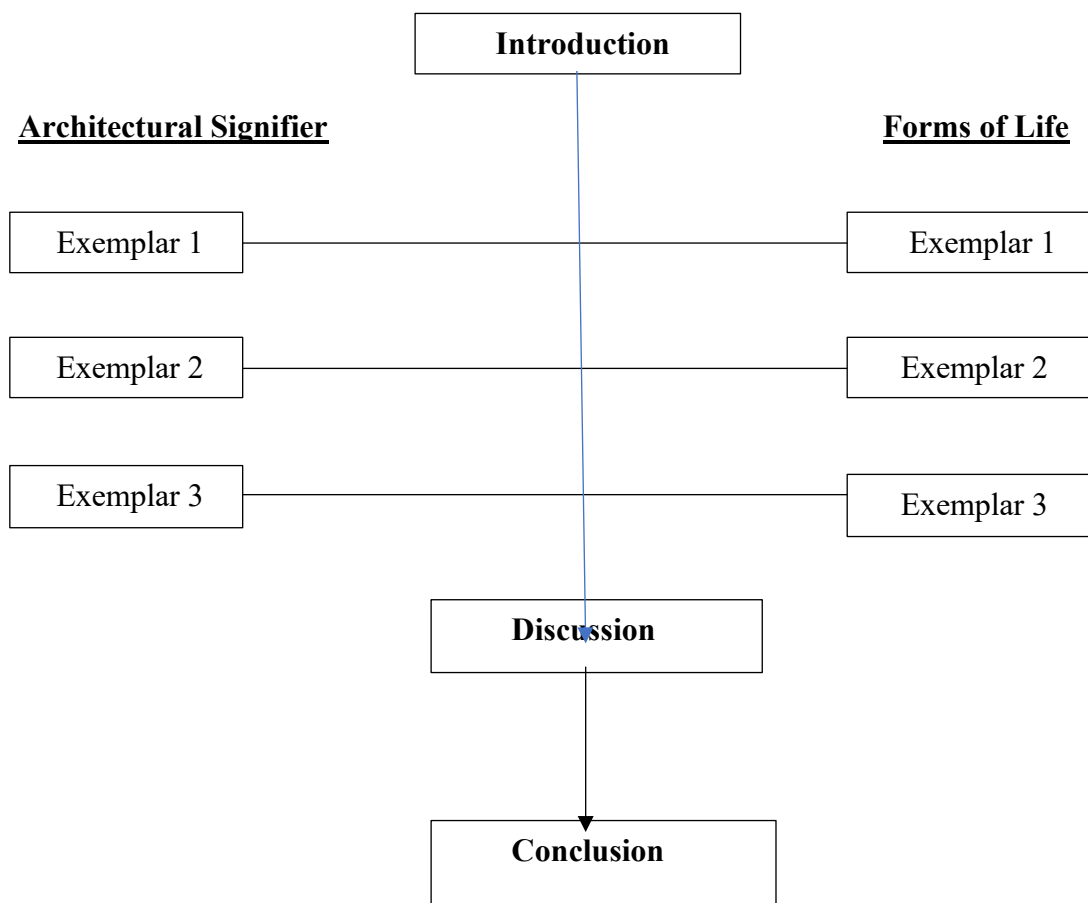
The city is enabled by life forms or, otherwise it would not have existed. The interest of the city is in its forms of life.

The characteristics of the life forms of Kuala Lumpur lie in its diversity, the different tones of human beings, the diversity of dialects they speak, the energy and the spirit of life they exude as well as the range of experiences. The emergence of one culture after another and the wax and wane of different ethnic groups.

It is a compact microcosm of a particular kind of world where laissez-faire activities overrule permanent order. A tough world that was built on wits and adaptability so that another day would be lived, and another generation would be given hope to flourish.

This city would have space for the stroller, the lounge, or the loafer, or, in French, the *flâneur*. Every city would have these dwellers who are overlooked as they occupy spaces of anonymity.

Methodology



In methodology we would be looking at the contemporary layer of the metaphorical thick crust. Three energy centres provide the contents to support the thesis.

Exemplar 1: Central Market

Exemplar 2: RexKL

Exemplar 3: Merdeka 118

Architectural Signifier

Exemplar 1: Central Market - Interviews with Nani Kahar 2024

Nani Kahar was involved with bringing into fruition Publika's ambition as "the country's first creative retail centre, integrating art and culture with urban shopping and dining"¹. In 2021, towards the end of the Covid 19 pandemic, when the country re-opened after a series of nation-wide lockdowns, she was invited to revitalize Central Market Kuala Lumpur.

In 2024, Central Market was reopened with new retail strategies, directed towards attracting retailers with innovative ideas in modernized spaces that included a new lighting system that brightens up the retail interiors, increases visibility for products as well as achieving an improved perception of safety.

The outdoor lanes have become part of retail programmes so that the retail hub reached out to the city. The choice of retailers resonates better with younger crowds, hence drawing in new energy to the building.

Nani Kahar expressed that cues were taken from the similar revitalisation programmes like Covent Garden Market in London when, in the 1970s was converted from an unkempt, derelict wet market which was on commercial freefall, into a trendy, gregarious and vibrant, creative social place.

Forms of Life

Exemplar : Central Market

Before the recent transformation, even before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in intermittent lockdowns between 2020 and 2021, Central Market was on a commercial downward spiral, being part of the problem which was collectively felt along with other areas of downtown KL.

When businesses began to reopen in 2022, a renewed sentiment for nostalgia emerged with downtown being a beneficiary of this. Properties at downtown have passed on to younger generations who are connected to new media with instantaneous information such as the various social media. Properties had also been changing hands as the prices of properties in downtown had been low due to age and neglect. The new buyers would have had commercial ambition for the properties they had bought. Several purchasers were based in Singapore who had found the properties relatively cheap.

The succeeding generations have travelled or are living abroad and would be aware of successful urban regenerations elsewhere. Indeed, urban regenerations were happening at neighbouring countries like Singapore where many of these people lived or work. The regeneration of Clark Quay and Robertson Quay together with Mohamad Sultan Street are first-hand, tangible evidences of the commercial success and popularity of urban regeneration.

Other examples can be found in China, for example, Zhuhai in southern China, and many more in just the Greater Bay Area alone. In neighbouring countries in South-east Asia, urban regeneration programmes are likewise found in Thailand (example, Bangkok) and Indonesia (example, Solo (Surakarta)).

The end of Covid-19 pandemic lockdown was the watershed period for the turn of events for downtown KL. It started with opening of Warong Old China along Jalan Tun H S Lee, a café started by the owners of Old China Café, already established at the southern end of the same street. Meanwhile, diagonally opposite to Warong Old China, renovation was going on to a landmark building, the Lee Rubber Building designed by Arthur Colman to the Art-Deco style in the 1930s. In 2023, the Lee Rubber Building would open as Else Hotel, with a modern yet nostalgic interior. The new hotel, designed by Studio Bikin.

Diagonally across, at the intersection between Jalan Tun H S Lee and Jalan Pudu within sight of Warong Old China is the Central Market itself. When Warong Old China opened at the end of 2021, Central Market at the background was a picture of decay in tandem with the decaying sight of the shophouse frontages between the two buildings.

Renovation was carried out to Central Market for most of 2023, and when it reopened at the end of 2023, downtown KL experienced in upturn of activities with several other new mainly food outlets having opened along with Else Hotel.

A major signifier is the noticeable increase of road traffic with congestion throughout the day compared to the time before the pandemic. During the weekends there would be queues of cars coming into downtown along the feeder roads from the late mornings to mid-afternoons. The pavements would likewise bustle with pedestrian traffic. There is a noticeable increase of transient visitors with increased number of foreign tourists.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, the deteriorating conditions of downtown caused an emptying out of downtown of its local population and traders, for newer premises at the fringe of the city. Car ownership was problematic for residents as the streets were not designed to cater to car ownership. The MRT stop at Pasar Seni train station was completed just in 2017 which enabled better

public transport connection with other areas of Greater KL, however car ownership remained essential to local population for overall mobility.

During the decaying years up to the pandemic lock-down, downtown attracted an influx of transient working migrants and refugees. Several previous living habitats were turned into dormitories for the transient workers. Several more had become budget hotels for backpackers.

Masjid Jamek Station, located near to the origin of the city, where the Klang and Gombak rivers converge had become the central public transport interchange for downtown. With the tapestry of buildings at different scales around the station, along with a rich variety of cuisines, where ordinary commerce was conducted alongside passing vagrants, students and wanderers. With its rich tapestry of forms and life, this part of the city has become a curiosity and a source of lore for the keen observer. In the early decades since the beginning of the Kuala Lumpur during the later nineteenth century, the bank of the Klang River between where Masjid Jamek station is located and Central Market, was a docking area for goods arriving at and departing from the early frontier town.

The original local inhabitants had left the noise and bustle for the countryside, which was usually walking distance away. The dock area most likely felt unsafe to the local population with the arrival of the new settlers, who were mainly men, later to be joined by their women. Gambling dens and clan centres were the social hubs.

The Central Market, being the new town's wet market was the place the town's inhabitants gathered for replenishments. The original wet market was built in 1888 from perishable materials. The Art-Deco version which replaced the original was built in 1937, and continued to function as a wet market until it was saved from demolishment by conservationists and rehabilitated into a cultural centre in 1986.

It lost its shine and appeal over the years, and was on a downward spiral towards dereliction. Its post-Covid period turn-around resonated with the rest of downtown, which experienced pockets of revival, encapsulating another layer in the crust of time.

Architectural Signifier

Exemplar 2: REXKL - Interviews with Shin Tseng and Shin Chang, 2024

Shin Tseng and Shin Chang are both trained as architects with separate offices but have come together to revive an old derelict cinema which was once, one of KL's iconic landmarks. They are responsible for its latest transformation into a new energy centre for the city. The building decline as a cinema began in the 1980s as cassette type home videos replaced the cinema for visual entertainment and video game centres began sprouting around the city. The phenomenon had a worldwide effect and the Rex Cinema were among those that fell on the wayside.

In the 1990s compact discs replaced the VHS cassettes and home viewing became even more popular. Large shopping malls began to appear at around the time, including the largest in Asia when One Utama Mall opened at the outskirts of KL. All of these malls included multiple-screen cinemas as part of the overall one-stop mall experiences. The independent cinemas like the Rex KL became an anomaly and all these cinemas declined.

The original Rex Cinema (REX Theatre) was designed by James Robert Vethavanam and officially opened in 1947. It was operated by Shaw Brothers, then Hong Kong's largest film makers and distributor.

It caught fire in 1972, and rehabilitated. The Rex Cinema would cease operation as a cinema in 2002² after another fire. It was then turned into a backpackers' hostel and migrants' transit. A third fire happened in 2007. It was again rehabilitated and operations continued.

In 2017 Shin Tseng and Shin Chang were approached by the landlord to revitalise the building so as to bring back a crowd with the view towards commercial viability. At 60,000 sq. ft. of building space, it would set to become a major cultural hub at the centre of downtown.

When it opened in 2019, it became a cultural centre with various eateries and shops. The retention of the old structure, as well as much of the interior, including worn-out tiles and chipped plasters, carried the narrative of freezing time while introducing a layer of new insertions.

This resonated with the young adult crowd as it filled the expectation of making memories a part of the experience. The understated aesthetics, with unfinished and unpolished appearances exuded dare and rebelliousness, along with non-traditional event programmes appealed to the young creative class.

The building and maintenance were designed to budget and this was expressed in the outcomes, which was accepted as the alternative to the polished commercial malls.

Forms of Life

Exemplar 2: REXKL

When the cinema was opened in 1947, just after the end of WWII. It marked optimism for rejuvenation after a period of suffering and shortages during the barren war years. Over the three and a half years of Japanese occupation of the country between early 1942 and later 1945, the sparks of life of the city were extinguished for modes of survival. The brutality of the period has been well recorded elsewhere.

The bustling of Kuala Lumpur after the war was fuelled by investments as exemplified by the Kong Kong media company, Shaw Brothers. Besides the Rex Cinema, they opened The Bukit Bintang Amusement Park in 1947. Downtown was the commercial hub of Kuala Lumpur, which was to later spread towards Jalan Ampang (“The Golden Mile”), while Bukit Bintang was the entertainment precinct.

Bukit Bintang was within walking distance from downtown, with light industry, agriculture and scattered residences located in between. When Rex Cinema was opened in 1947, the urban morphology and forms of life was already established with work, habitation, schooling and recreation closely packed together within a radius of a mile from the confluence of the river.

When Shaw Brothers opened the Bukit Bintang Amusement Park and the Rex Cinema (then, REX Theatre) in 1947, these were the second layer of entertainment hub. An earlier layer of entertainment centres was built in the 1930s, probably planned during the boom years of the 1920s. and built in the 1930s. BB Park was built in the 1930s. located were Low Yat Plaza now stands. The Bukit Bintang Amusement Park is now Sungai Wang Plaza – both are now malls.

Prior to the Rex Cinema, along the back-lanes behind the cinema, once stood Madras Theatre, which was built in the 1930s. It was demolished in 1978 after a fire. Madras Theatre was named after Madras Lane which has been a wet market since its early days, and has now become a food hub as well. Also operated by Shaw Brothers, the Madras Theatre served the entertainment needs of the local Chinese community. To the local community, the cinema was called Chung Hwa Cinema Hall. Travelling troupes from China were known to have performed in the theatre to entertain the community.

One of the early China troupes to perform there was the then famous Meihua Song and Dance Troupe from Shanghai, drawing patrons from other states in the country. They were to perform for several weeks³. The local troupe that used to perform in the theatre was the Pu Chuangchun Troupe, which was made up of performers from the local community.

At different times, Madras Theatre featured films mainly from Hong Kong that were distributed by Shaw Brothers and the films were nearly always Chinese-speaking. Rex Cinema on the other hand featured mainly English-speaking films. In the hey days of independent cinemas, long queues were recorded to snake around the Rex Cinema, crowding the pavement of the road at the front on the opening days of blockbuster films.

Being one of the main cinemas of Kuala Lumpur, Rex Cinema, more than any other cinemas in the city, due to its locality and context was the iconic cinema of the city although several other cinemas were larger.

The captive forms of life of REXKL today encapsulate the changing life forms of the city. Downtown today is no longer the domain of just the Chinese community but other communities have an equally strong presence. The demography has changed over the years and due to improved public transport, all kinds of people now occupy the streets in downtown.

International visitors now make up a large proportion of transient visitors, making up a conspicuous number at any time of the day. In 2023 Kuala Lumpur was ranked as the sixth most visited city in the world with 13.79 million annual visitors. Being the oldest historical part of the city, and its most colourful, downtown is a popular destination⁴.

Architectural Signifier

Exemplar 3: Merdeka 118 - Interviews with Farid Baharuddin

Farid Baharuddin has been involved with the Merdeka 118 project since PNB Bhd replaced UEM as the custodian of the project. The design began in 2010 with Melbourne-based Fender Katsalidis as the design architect and RSP as the project architect. Farid Baharuddin led the team together with Hud Abu Bakar at RSP.

The anchor of the project, the Merdeka 118 tower rose to the height of 678.9 meters or 2,337 feet with 118 floors due to the requirement to achieve a large gross floor area. The tower is just one of several facets of the development which would also include a hotel, residential and other commercial edifices.

When the large development was first conceived right at the edge of downtown KL. On a hill that also housed the iconic Merdeka Stadium where Independence was declared in 1957, as well as where Stadium Negara and Chin Woo Stadium were located. There were dissenting voices that the development would have adverse effect on the historical Petaling Hill site.

Political ambition meant that the project would have had been near impossible to stop. The conception of the development coincided with several other highly ambitious property projects around Kuala Lumpur, like Tun Razak Exchange, Bandar Tun Razak and Pavilion KL.

The luxury mall, Pavilion KL, which was completed in 2007 caused the relocation of the high-achieving girl's school, BBGS to the outskirts of the city, to be replaced by another mall. The Tun Razak Exchange and the Bandar Tun Razak are both expansive ground-scraping projects, so, they belong to another narrative.

The Merdeka 118 and Pavilion KL both lie at the edge of bustling old urban areas with long timelines. The Bukit Bintang area which Pavilion KL feeds upon continues to renew itself with layers of memories and different structures over time, and its popularity has not ebbed.

Downtown KL however, is seeing a revival of fortune with new businesses replacing the old together with design interventions on the old structures. In retaining its original urban morphology, the population of downtown would have changed little.

However, when the Merdeka 118 is completed, with its hotel and high density residential along with the Merdeka 118 Tower, the resulting population would be much higher than the current downtown. Would it then be a new layer over the existing downtown or, would it compete with downtown? Historically, Petaling Hill upon which Merdeka 118 is located was originally an appendage of downtown as it was once a local Chinese cemetery, then a colonial golf course, then a sports precinct with the three sports stadia (Chin Woo Stadium, Merdeka Stadium and Stadium Negara) within touching distances apart. The hill used to act like the green lung of the congested downtown.

Forms of Life

Exemplar 3: Merdeka 118

More than any other parts Kuala Lumpur, downtown now with Merdeka 118 on Petaling Hill at the fringe provides an abbreviated perspective of Kuala Lumpur. At the opposite ends of the arrow of time, downtown KL has its origin at the blunt feathered end, and the latest personification of the city at the arrowhead.

The way different periods of architecture are revealed in the various styles suggest that nearly anything to do with architecture can happen at downtown. This part of the city is a crowd of colours, scales and life forms. not just in the appearances but also deeply, in the way different cultures thrive side by side.

For example, along Jalan Tun H S Lee, sits the oldest Hindu temple in Kuala Lumpur: the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple which was founded in 1873. In front of it is the Chinese Taoist Guandi Temple, which was founded in 1887. Both sides of the street are lined with shophouses of different periodic styles.

It is conceivable that in antiquated cities in parts of the world, the Merdeka 118 project beside the most historical part of the city would not have been accepted. However, Kuala Lumpur had always been a city that accepts oddity, the historical random chaotic nature makes the city tolerant of all-comers.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, downtown was where immigrant workers and refugees descended to recreate on their days off, during weekends. Alongside the dilapidated decaying buildings at the backdrop, downtown seem like a natural convergence for the downtrodden side of humanity. No less visible then were the streetwalkers from similar countries of origin. Downtown felt and looked dystopic in the years before the pandemic.

However, after the pandemic, the city turned around, as if by tacit agreement among the locals that they would once again retake possession of the city, especially with the departure of the immigrant workers during the pandemic.

Discussion

The above exemplars suggest that the Thick Crust City is a metaphor of an organic city, one that is not hemmed by strict planning rules, or, even if the rules may try to persist, they are circumvented or overwhelmed by circumstances, needs, economic or political ambitions. This could be more prevalent in developing economies, with many equivalent examples in Asia, most of the time, driven by enterprise rather than politics.

Shenzhen as an example, grew quickly from a village to become a global economic powerhouse within a few decades. Other cities along the Pearl River followed similar suits. Older cities like Beijing in China changed due mainly to economic momentum and the old fabric gave way to towers and motorways.

Kuala Lumpur is a relatively young city, just around 150 years old, yet it has built a mythical reputation equivalent to an eventful old Asian city. It has undergone cycles of changes – physical as well as demography, ethnicity and economic cycles. Since the origin of the city is located at its downtown, this would be the part of the city that encapsulates the city's Thick Crust of Time.

The polar opposite to the Thick Crust City would be "The Thin Crust City". While the Thick Crust City is an organic one that has experienced a thick crust of events; the Thin Crust City would be a planned city with little accidental surprises.

On the Thick Crust City, rules are made and modified over time to make the city manageable and habitable, and to mitigate dangers and to improve living conditions. Experiences, increased knowledge as well as lessons learnt over time contribute to improved layers topping over the old.

By contrast, the Thin Crust City is prescriptive from the beginning, with the lines of the city already drawn up, setting up fixed patterns for growth with given solutions for future growth, including future projections with growth numbers.

The planned thin crust city typically set up zones of activities, including separating residential from industrial areas, separating places of work from home.

Under current processes of urban design, it is not possible to design a thick crust city. The thick crust city happens over time, with newer narratives laid over older ones. Some of the layers of time are accidental and could have once had ignoble motives but over time these layers become part of the thick crust city.

The thin crust city is often the overly planned, prescriptive cities like Canberra, Brasilia and our own Putrajaya. These cities are usually prescribed with pleasantries like parks and waterways, with working zones kept away from the habitable ones, with administrative zones in between. Planned on paper, there are usually large distances between places, and commuting is usually by cars or other mechanized vehicles. The roads are wide, lined with foliage, and safe, with little surprises.

The under-privileged are usually zoned away from the executive class, and the gulf between economies compel unconscious planning decisions. Spontaneity may happen over time as rigidity loosens. The creative class, preferring spontaneity and thick experiences are not usually attracted to the thin crust city.

For example, despite the offer of better air and healthier living conditions, overwhelming majority of the creative class prefer to dwell in Kuala Lumpur and less commonly in overly planned places like Putrajaya.

What then are the characteristics of the thick crust city?

There is diversity in the urban structures as well as the people who inhabit and work there.

There is a sense of risk due to parts of urban decay.

There is unpredictability due to unexpected changes and the random nature of organic growth.

There is a tapestry of scales and colours due to varieties of usage by variety of different people.

Experimental cuisines for the adventurous who tend to congregate at the thick crust city.

Variety of event spaces for variety of events.

People in the thick crust city are unpredictable as all sorts will pass through.

There will be more international visitors compared to the thin crust city.

The presence of more young adults due to the variety of events and the gregarious nature of the compact city.

The creative class will converge at the thick crust city through psychological association.

Activities in the thick crust city goes on to late at night.

There will be more criminal activities compared to a thin crust city.

It has a bustling night-time economy.

What are the characteristics of a thin crust city?

Lack of diversity on the urban structures and people.

The thin crust city feels safe, especially in the early years.

There is predictability due to planning.

The scale of buildings and infrastructure lack variety due to administrative control.

The cuisines are predictable (not all the time) due to conservative nature of customers.

Lack of variety of event spaces due to lack of demand.

People are predictable in the thin crust city and the cultural environment expects that.

There will not be many international visitors except for organized tours to iconic places.

The young adults will frequently seek entertainment elsewhere.
The creative class is less likely to live in a thin crust city.
There will be little activity after working hours.

Kuala Lumpur has all the characteristics of a thick crust city as outlined in the Discussion. Due to the extreme diversity in its structures, infrastructures, scale and people, it does personify the thick crust city. Its diversity is unplanned as the city began with different people of different origins making their living in close proximity.

There is a sense of adventure about the city from the beginning. Even when the British administrators decided to make Kuala Lumpur the capital of the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896, it chose to build the administrative buildings with adventurous abandonment.

A.B. Hubback, an architect at the Public Works Department, who was posted to the department in the mid-1890s who later became a senior architect at the turn of the century, were one of those creating flamboyant architectural landmarks around the city in the Moghul style.

The administrative buildings around the Merdeka Square were unique and picture postcards adopted the building to exemplify Kuala Lumpur. Together with A.C. Norman and R.A.J. Bidwell they designed and completed the Sultan Abdul Samad in 1897 which was as flamboyant as anything built by the British throughout the empire.

He would then complete the FMS Railway Offices in 1905, just across the road from the Sultan Abdul Samad building in similar style in 1905. The Masjid Jamek was completed in 1909 and it was considered a masterpiece and endeared by worshippers and visitors as a masterclass in tropical architecture for its spatial appropriateness to the climate and context, close to the spot where KL originated.

The Railway Station and the Railway Headquarters were completed in 1915, after Hubback had left the country to enlist to fight in World War 1 (1914-1918). The floating parasol roofs (copied from northern Indian architecture) that silhouetted against the skyline were a sight to behold and popularly appeared in postcards and postage stamps.

These works as well as others by Hubback and his contemporaries form a layer of crust that makes up the thick crust of historical narratives. The works of Hubback exemplified the laissez-faire nature of the city where even the architecture by the ruling power appeared less imperial and more playful in a context of bravado and adventure.

Hubback and his cohorts would have had their drinks and social meetings across the field in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, which later became Merdeka Square. During this time, it would just be called the Padang or the Selangor Padang. The building looking across the field where they would recreate was the Royal Selangor Club, completed in 1884 to the Tudor style.

The club would witness its own forms of life, in a casual setting where the ruling class converge. It would be a stopover for the planters and administrators from out of town. Someone would bring her pet dalmatian to the club and the frequent sight of the spotted dog would give the club its nickname, "The Spotted Dog".

The ruling imperial class and the locals did not mix. Behind the Sultan Abdul Samad building, which started as the "Government Offices" were where the local people inhabit, work and recreate. It was messy and unruly, with docking of goods carried out at the river banks behind the government offices, sub-ruled by local leaders appointed by the British. These local leaders were known generically as Kapitan Cina, and they were proficient at keeping order.

Fast forward to the 21st century, many layers of life had come and then dissipated. Buildings had been torn down and rebuilt. Towers are spotted at intermittent areas and gaps between rows of buildings have appeared. Parts of the rows of buildings have become decrepit and other parts have been refilled with modernity.

International brands have put up their signboards to mark the advent of the global city. The main fast-food chains are here, just as they are in most major cities of the world. Signages propagating international fashion houses have lighted up the streets and their vicinities.

Restaurants and cafes continue to change hands and the old names are just lost in time. Several tea houses have remained for over a century. The original post office is now a restaurant, old habitats have become clubs and the old funeral parlor has become another restaurant.

The once powerful comprador corporate headquarters is now a trend-setting hotel. The gambling dens are gone and comfort houses have been rehabilitated. People have changed, urban perception of the good life have changed and past urban values are no longer remembered. The tough, cantankerous immigrants are replaced by soft new urbanity.

The streets were once filled with shouting, loud urban voices. Today the people whispers and yet they are still heard. It gets even softer as more and more peer at their smart phones to send messages rather than speak their thoughts.

The air of the thick crust city is heavy, as the air is filled with history and lost memories. Generations who passed by have dissipated, fast forward to several generations to the future, only archaeological layers remain.

The thick crust city is a human urban narrative. It is an authentic form of that story, of a life form that once inhabited a tiny part of the universe.

The value to architecture of the narrative is to envisage architecture beyond practice and projects to be part of the metaphysical universe that is not limited by utility. For example, despite the brutish nature of life during the palaeolithic age (2.6 million years ago to 10,000 B.C.), humans made room in their lives for art, as exemplified by the discovery of cave art.

The renowned cave paintings at Chauvet Cave, Ardèche, France, which influenced Picasso, was dated to 30,000 to 28,000 B.C.¹. The artists left these indelible marks on the walls of the cave, but the traces of the human community have long disappeared. These paintings have remained over time for our benefit only because of the protected environment of the cave. The art that has been lost over time would be lost forever.

Cave art is also found throughout Southeast Asia. Archaeologists seem less able to trace the age of these paintings but could only suggest that they would have been done after the arrival of humanity to these parts, at around 35,000 years ago². These works of art suggest that from time immemorial, stories and narratives form an intrinsic part of the human condition and architecture like art, need narratives to contribute to the things that make us human.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the modern era, circa seventeenth century, the educated class gradually adopted a systemized approach to thought processes, including the way things are observed and in the making of things. Most of science and formal scholarship are carried out in systemized manner. The tendency to categorize things dominated the way forward so that information could be packaged, understood, remembered, recorded and propagated.

Likewise, architecture and urban planning are taught in systematic manners and when architecture is described, it is necessarily done systematically or packaged into categories. When large-scale planning is practiced, it is done through systems of recognizable patterns where requirements are fitted into definitive packages, which often are zones of activities.

Most¹ planned city is done this way, as typified by grid-iron plans such as New York, Chicago or Melbourne as with many other new cities. Otherwise, planned cities have recognizable patterns, often centred around features like lakes and axes. In authoritarian regimes, the parade axis and central squares are main features.

The 1911 masterplan for Canberra by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin was notably artistic but as expected the plan was an arrangement of axes and grids, and large bodies of water. Putrajaya, planned eight decades later in 1993 was cohered by a central axis that formed the literal spine of the city centre, over vast bodies of water.

Canberra and Putrajaya are Thin Crust Cities, with just a thin layer of forms of life due to rigid rules and regulations, and both are government administrative cities, with strong bureaucratic reach. The priority was to create a city filled with life pleasures, without surprises and without risks, especially security risks. In Putrajaya, it was thought that architectural icons and recreation areas like parks were points of interests rather than the forms of life.

New York, Chicago and Melbourne are fundamentally grid cities. The grid in these cities provide the essential order for many layers of forms of life to be laid one over another over time, with old buildings replaced by newer ones and the *laissez faire* nature of the economy encourage change.² The power of systems is not to be under-estimated as scientific and technological progress are entirely propped up by systems. We could say that the progress of mathematics and artificial intelligence (AI) are based on mastering refined systems, where often, perpetrators would master the systems without fully understanding the fundamentals. It comes to the point that in 2024, at the time this paper is written, the founders of large language models which has catapulted modern AI warn of their existential threat to mankind.³ This is largely due to the unlimited self-learning capacity of the systems that could run away from human control.⁴

Following mainstream acceptance that current civilisation is around 6,000 years old with the advent of writing at around 4,000 B.C., the modern ways of knowledge advancement at around 400 years-old is only 6.6% of the time of current civilisation. The major growth of human civilisation over most of the 6,000 years were based on narratives and stories.

All of the structures of civilisation like law, faiths and morals were built upon narratives and stories. During the palaeolithic period of simple existence, from 2.6 million to 10,000 years ago, knowledge, culture and traditions were passed down orally between generations. The underlying human intelligence, quite different from today were built upon the capacity to remember accurately whole chunks of stories and narratives.

For most of human civilisation, cities grew organically based on natural growth and needs over long periods of time. They were not instantaneous, nor was there systems of planning. Most of these cities grew from river banks or entrepôts. The older cities would go through crisis after crisis, and would change over time, building physical layers, one over another. For the older cities, modern archaeologists would find old lost cities beneath current ones, such as London, or Rome.

Although not nearly as old, Kuala Lumpur which grew from the bank of a river is such a city.

This paper encourages the percipient to re-examine an alternative way of making a city. One that is based on narratives and allow for organic growth, accepting surprises and risks. Real life has all of these. The probable ways this could be done is the subject of another paper, which will be a push-back of the systems way of doing things.

References and Notes 1

1. Smith, R. (2000 rev. 2022) *Aristotle's Logic* Stanford University: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 22 Nov 2022
2. Original in French was "Cogito, ergo sum" from the book, "je pense, donc je suis", published in 1637. Author: René Descartes
3. Wittgenstein, L. (1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* London and New York: Routledge Classics (2001) S 5.6, P 68

References and Notes 2

1. 'Editor' *Sunrise Malaysia's first-of-its kind creative retail centre* Kuala Lumpur: The Edge, 1 May 2010
2. Mah, K. (2019) *Repurposing a Chinatown Icon: From Rex Cinema to REXKL* Kuala Lumpur: Malay Mail, 3 April 2019
3. Reference: The Petaling Street Heritage House, 196 Jalan Tun H S Lee.
4. Reference: Citizens Journal, January 2024

References and Notes 3

1. Marchant, J. *The Journey to the Oldest Cave Paintings in the World* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Magazine, January 2016
2. (Ditto)

Notes and References 4

1. There are some exceptions like those planned in the style of “New Urbanism” as exemplified by the works of Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk in 1980’s in the US. Leon Krier and Prince Charles’ Poundbury in Dorset, England, also planned in the 1980’s share similar planning style.
2. In 2021, the Chicago magazine stated that: “the grid enabled Chicago to become the fastest-growing city in the nation in the 19th century”. Ref: McClelland, E., *Why Chicago’s Grid Is a Model of Perfect Urban Order* Chicago: Chicago Magazine 17 June 2021.
3. Elon Musk warned about the existential threat back in 2014 at MIT: “I think we have to be very careful about artificial intelligence. With artificial intelligence, we are summoning the demon” Ref: The New York Times, *Elon Musk Ramps Up AI Efforts, Even as He Warns of Dangers* 27 April 2023
4. Geoffrey Hinton, often referred to as the “Godfather” of AI, reiterated AI danger after receiving his Nobel Prize in Physics for 2024: “If you look around, there are very few examples of more intelligent things being controlled by less intelligent things, which makes you wonder whether when AI gets smarter than us, it’s going to take over control”. Ref: Coates, J. *Geoffrey Hinton warns of AI’s growing danger after Nobel Prize win* Independent: 9 October 2024