

# The Morphological History of the Malaysian Urban Form

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**Abstract.** Malaysia has an interesting socio geographical and cultural history which includes historical sites and old towns that bear witness to the rich form and evolution of the urban tapestry. Historical studies have found that urban form characteristics in the Malay Peninsula dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century may be classified into four categories; namely the Melaka Sultanate settlements, the Malay Forts, Early Malay Towns built by the Malay Rulers; and Colonial Towns. Such categorization has enabled the urbanization morphology and settlement history to be chronicled. This paper discusses the planning history, thoughts and influences that existed in the early towns of Peninsular Malaysia.

**Keywords:** History, Urban form, Morphology, Early town.

## 1. Introduction

Old towns in Malaysia have a treasure trove of unique heritages in terms of history, architecture, identity, and culture including urban morphology. These old towns have stories of events and folklore which are visible via physical evidences that still stood the test of time. Old towns of the day still carry past memories that tell their own tales of the history they have seen. These visual evidences include buildings and architecture, monuments, old sites, roads, plots and landscapes. For the purpose of this paper, old towns within the scope of this study include those that existed during the Malay Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula. The term 'town' during those days was more synonymous with 'fort'. The term 'fort' however, has various meanings depending on the sentence and the context of use (Nasir, 1993). 'Fort' may be taken to mean a city or a city state. It may also mean a fortification or a stockade and was the administrative centre for the Malay rulers during the splendor of the Malay Kingdom traditional rule. Evidence of town planning in the Malay Peninsula started in Melaka in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During this century, Melaka was a thriving port of international trade. Early settlements during those days were along land, riverine and coastal routes. The Melaka city landscape changed in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century with the construction of fortifications and forts by the Portuguese and Dutch colonialists. Medieval era fortified cities built by the Portuguese in 1511 turned Melaka into a colonial city replete with town planning characteristics. Melaka continued to undergo series of cityscape changes during the Dutch colonial era in 1641. The Dutch introduced urban forms through interesting architecture and urban elements.

## 2. Melaka Sultanate

In the early 14th century, Melaka emerged as a great Malay kingdom. According to the Malay Annals, Melaka was founded by Parameswara, a Palembang prince. He was a member of the royal family of the Sailendra Kings which once ruled the Srivijaya Kingdom. Parameswara came to Melaka in 1400 when it was just a small fishing village. Ezrin Arbi (1986) theorized that among the factors that may have influenced Parameswara to choose that particular location to set up the seat of his kingdom was because Melaka possessed various advantages being located at the river estuary, thus a good location in terms of trade possibilities from the Straits of Melaka. In fact this location has very good potential for centralized residence, defense and agriculture due to it having adequate water resources, sited close to strategic hilly areas and surrounded by wide expanses of fertile plains. Under Parameswara's rule, Melaka swiftly became renowned as an entreport city and centre for trading of goods. To ensure Melaka's security, Parameswara built his

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palace on a hill overlooking the Bertam River estuary. This made it easier for him to monitor trade activities on the Straits of Melaka.

For the more than a century of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka's sovereign rule in Melaka, there was never a single account in any record recounting the activities of the Melaka sultans in the traditions of fort or settlement construction. This could be because the Melaka rulers never moved away but continued using the Melaka Palace on the Melaka Hill as the seat of their kingdom. There were too little accurate accounts on the Melaka urban morphology during the Sultan's' rule. In the Malay Annals written by Tun Sri Lanang (1612), there was an eulogy 'And from below the wind to above the wind, such was the fame of Melaka the great city, the kings of which had sprung from the lineage of Sultan Iskandar Dzul-Karnain'; but nothing had been written about urban layout. The Malay Annals also recounted that the city of Melaka was divided by the Melaka River into two sections joined by a timber bridge. The river functioned as a 'major highway' plied by boats and sampans which, on the one hand connected the city with the inner areas; and on the other hand with the large ships and vessels berthed on the sea coast not far from the river estuary. This account of the Melaka urban form relied heavily on records by the Portuguese and by Chinese traders from China such as Ma Huang who was on Cheng Ho's voyage in 1413 – 1415 and 1421 which narrated on an administrative centre built on hill slopes at the Melaka River bank. Ma Huang wrote that the Melaka River flowed in front of the palace before flowing on to the sea. He also emphasized the importance of Melaka Port as a Chinese sea port, depot for trading goods and shipyard. During Ma Huang's visit to Melaka, there were more than twenty ships plying Melaka River bearing various trading goods. Tom Pires, the first ambassador to the Imperial Court of China, wrote in *Suma Orientalist* (1512-16) that Melaka "was at the end of the monsoon and the beginning of others". Melaka has always been depicted as a busy port of call for traders from all over the world. The various trade records identified that the Melaka built form and urban morphology during the Sultanate was more coastal type city/port where settlements were centered on port areas and along the river banks.

In 1511, the Portuguese conquered Melaka which dynamically impacted the Melaka city landscape. Alfonso d'Albuquerque then built a defense fort known as A Famosa. The construction of this fort was completed in 1512, making Melaka a city resembling the medieval era walled cities of Europe. A Famosa was constructed stretching from a location at the foothills down to the river and sea side, making Melaka a walled coastal city. The Portuguese conquest ended when Melaka was overcome by the Dutch in 1641. The Dutch administration (1641-1795) moved the urban structure from the walled section to the north-western suburb, now known as Melaka City. The Dutch introduced a systematic urban development plan for the city of Melaka, which included roads and transport facilities. The Dutch spent most of their efforts rebuilding the city of Melaka and strengthening it as a military base. The most impressive relic of the Dutch period is the creation of a fragment of a Netherland town in the form of an architectural and urban element. The first building to be built was the Stadthuys in 1650s. The Stadthuys served as the administrative centre and home of the Governor of Melaka. Other components of the city which were built later was Christ Church (1753) and the clock tower which was placed in the town square. In 1806, under William Farquhar, the British demolished the Portuguese fortress which included the bastions of Middelburg. During the British era, physical town planning flourished specifically in the states of Melaka, Penang and Singapore which were then known as the Straits Settlement.

The glorious era of the Malay Sultanate of Melaka ended with Portuguese rule for 130 years (1511-1641). Archeological findings of fort remains throughout the Malay Peninsula revealed that in comparison with the other Malay states, Melaka did not have any fort apart from the palace grounds built on the hilltop. Moreover, since the Portuguese conquest, the entire city of Melaka became the defence territories for the Portuguese. Geographically, the Portuguese conquest did not expand to the entire peninsula as at the time, Melaka was a relatively large state. During the Portuguese conquest, other Malay states such as Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu, Pahang and Selangor were also undergoing political upheavals of their own. The Malay kings and states went to war amongst themselves which indirectly led to the founding of new forts and cities.

### **3. Malay Forts**

In terms of written materials and historical records, not much can be gleaned about the Malay cities before the advent of Melaka. Historical accounts on the Malay kings touched heavily on government systems and socio cultural aspects. Early physical design or urban construction were more tailored towards the royal institution and were known as forts or fortifications. The difference between these two terms is in terms of construction functions. Fortifications are used only for defense purposes while forts are seats of administration and royal residence, but may also be concurrently used for defense. The functions of a fort may be categorized according to the following characteristics:

Functions	Characteristics
Defense Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surrounded by moats</li> <li>• Driven with stakes/objects to obstruct enemies</li> <li>• Patrolled by armed sentries</li> </ul>
Ruling/Administrative Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equipped with a main building and a few administrative buildings</li> <li>• Assembly area for the king's subjects</li> <li>• Place for public trials</li> <li>• Place for religious activities</li> <li>• Armoury</li> <li>• Food stockpile</li> </ul>
Royal Residence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Palace with Audience Hall, Main Hall and Assembly Hall</li> <li>• Buildings owned by the king including the royal gardens</li> </ul>

Fort construction by the Malay kings began since the 7<sup>th</sup> century and ended in early 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British colonials subdued the states in the Malay colonies. The construction of the Malay forts was closely related to various issues in the traditional rule of the Malay rulers and ministers. Fort construction whether as a defense centre, administrative centre or in the traditional style reflect the hierarchy of the Malay genealogy and greatness. Fort construction may be seen as a tradition of the rulers of the Malay states which evolved with changes in governments and rulers and the opening of new regions or new states. When a Malay Ruler opens a state, His Majesty will instruct his subjects to construct a fort palace complete with Audience Hall, Main Hall, Assembly Hall and an assortment of royal buildings sited within a fenced compound known as palace with fort such as the *Istana Balai Besar* (Palace of the Large Audience Hall) in Kelantan. Besides the royal traditions, the tradition of fort construction was also undertaken by the state's ministers or prominent figures such as the Ngah Ibrahim Fort and the Long Jaafar Fort in Taiping, Perak.

The design and construction of Malay forts underwent changes in terms of building materials concurrent with the Malay rulers' era. Malay forts were usually fenced with wooden or bamboo stakes, earth walls, rocks and rocky walls (Nasir, 1993). Forts in the Old Malay kingdoms such as in Kedah and Perak were in the shape of forts formed by high earth bunds while Malay forts in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were built using hard rock arranged carefully. The pinnacle of Malay fort construction greatness was the construction of fort walls using red bonded bricks and plastered with an adhesive material akin to cement. The architecture of Malay forts was very simple with square shapes surrounded by moats. The sites and locations of the Malay forts were close to rivers with some being located on high grounds. Forts built near rivers (river estuaries) were usually due to the river being the main communication and transportation routes as well as entry points for trade. Meanwhile, forts located on the hills such as Kota Lukut, Kota Raja Mahadi and Kota Malawati had vantage positions enabling sentries and ministers to have unobstructed views of shipping traffic plying the nearby sea besides guaranteeing the city's security. Malay forts and fortifications built throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century mostly had defence characteristics because during this period, Malay kingdoms were under serious enemy threats specifically from Siam and Portuguese. Besides being moated, fort walls were also built double layered and cannons were installed all around the fort walls.

#### 4. Malay Towns

The growth of Malay cities originated from the *kampungs* or villages but locational factors of being close to the rivers make them strategic for transportation routes and water resources supply including increased port and trading activities; hence augmenting the position of these riverine cities as city centres. Among cities that grew from river estuary locations are Kota Bharu, Kuala Trengganu, Alor Setar, Johor Lama,

Pekan, Kuala Dungun, Bandar Maharani, Kelang and Kuala Selangor. These towns and cities are also known as '*Bandar Kuala*' (estuaries town) due to their locations at the river estuaries. These towns and cities were founded by the Malay rulers and some of these estuary towns are also esteemed as Royal towns such as Kuala Kangsar and Pekan. The urban morphology and figure-ground of estuary towns in the Malay states have almost identical characteristics. Urban elements such as buildings and space were arranged as if according to town planning principles. Almost all these estuary towns were built circa 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and town planning influences brought in by the colonialists may have influenced the building site layouts. Islamic influences were also discernible for example in the East Coast states such as Kelantan and Trengganu which had accepted Islam since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This Islamic influence can be clearly seen in the construction of mosques as important landmarks in the city centres. Mosques were used not only for *solah* (prayers) but also for religious study classes and discussions on administrative matters.

As compared to Malay forts and the city of Melaka whereby their urban forms were more contained with walled characteristics, estuary towns selected urban forms and morphology with planning characteristics. The morphology of estuary towns has geographical similarities in terms of being located at the river estuaries, and significance as communication and transport routes. Besides being located on riverine areas, the existence of wide expanses of fertile plains further encouraged urban growth starting with the construction of a royal palace for the ruling king. The royal institution during the Malay Sultanate no doubt had a great influence on the urban planning and urban morphology. The royal institution may be seen as an agent of urban morphology and this was proven with the construction of buildings and settlements around the palace grounds as well as from other urban elements that were planned and laid out in such meaningful patterns. Palaces as centres of governance were built overlooking wide open spaces or squares. Located close to the palaces were mosques, buildings for ministerial use, buildings for the ruling institution (government buildings) such as court houses and district offices, market and commercial stores and public dwellings.

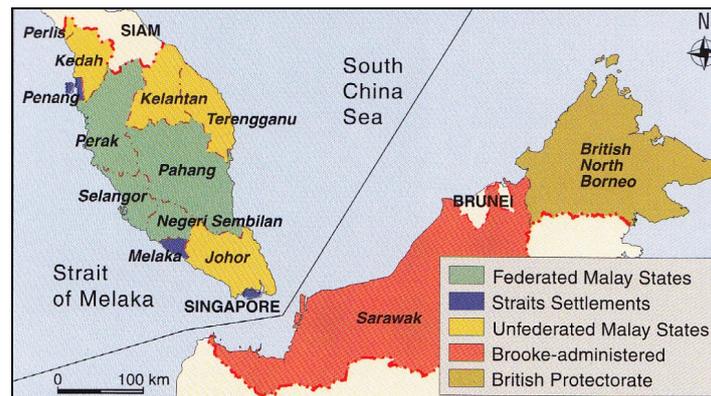
Estuary towns went through more interesting evolution during the British occupation specifically towns that were Unfederated Malay States' city states. Estuary towns such as Kota Bharu, Alor Star, Kuala Trengganu and Johor Baharu had already expanded and formed the early urbanisation of the Malay Peninsula and were referred to as Early Malay Towns in Malaysia (Rajoo, S., 1998). Their status now remain as city states and conserved as heritage cities in Malaysia. These cities are valuable historically, culturally, socio economically and also in terms of unique building architecture and morphology for buildings such as palaces, mosques and traditional Malay houses.

## **5. Colonial Towns**

Western colonialisation left an indelible impact and remains a big influence on the urban formation of cities in the Malay Peninsula in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Portuguese, the Dutch and the British played important roles in terms of historical continuity, physical evolution and urban geography. Buildings which were western legacies or known as colonial buildings have unique building architectural styles besides building layouts that formed early urban design. During four centuries of western occupation of the Malay Peninsula, the Portuguese, Dutch and British had planned and implemented town planning basis and principles according to their own ways. The British was the most influential western colonialists and left the highest number of historical relics throughout Malaysia. British occupation began in 1786 until Malaysia achieved independence in 1957. The earliest British settlement was in Penang which quickly became the base for the British to expand their colony. British colonialisation instilled more systematic planning activities on towns opened to fulfill the locals' and the colonists' needs. Early physical town planning activities have commenced since 1801 with the setting up of a Committee of Assessors in Penang and George Town which was the first city to have proper planning including the construction of roads and drains throughout the city; and having well planned administrative institutional buildings.

During British colonial rule (1786-1957), the Malay Peninsula was divided into three administrative divisions: Penang and Melaka including Singapore were known as the Straits Settlements; Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan were known as the Federated Malay States while Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu and Johor were known as Unfederated Malay States, see figure 1. The urban characters for all three state zones possess a lot of similarities despite being located at different locations. Penang, Melaka and Singapore

were the earliest British administered states to be formed in 1826, and known as the Straits Settlements having similarities in terms of history, architecture and town planning.



Source: The Encyclopedia of Malaysia: Government and Politics, 2006.

Fig 1 : Malay Peninsular (1786-1957)

Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan formed the Federated Malay States which were each administered by a British Resident under full authority of the British Empire. These Federated Malay States were rich with the natural resources of tin and iron ore. The mining activities indirectly led to the opening of more lands and towns in the Federated Malay States such as Kuala Lumpur in Selangor; Ipoh, Taiping and Batu Gajah in Perak and Sungai Lembing and Kuala Lipis in Pahang. All these towns and cities were known as tin towns. Increased economic status through tin and rubber trading helped pave the way for infrastructural development. Infrastructure development became more brisk in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when road constructions were undertaken to connect city centres with mining areas specifically along the west coast of the Peninsula. This ongoing scenario was a factor in the encouraging physical development of these towns.

The urbanisation and settlement characteristics of the Unfederated Malay States of Kelantan, Trengganu, Kedah and Johor were governed by the kings' or Sultans' decree. Even though these states were placed under the British Empire patronage, matters pertaining to the Islamic religion and Malay customs were still governed by the Sultan. The urban form and urban elements of these towns and cities are as detailed out under the chapter Malay Towns. The city states (state capitals) of the Unfederated Malay States were the first towns to have proper planning and became the identity of the states ruled by the Malay Rulers. The two main features of these early towns were the royal courts and the trading centres of merchants. As compared to other Early Malay Towns like Kuala Kangsar, Kuala Selangor, Pekan and Kuala Dungun, Malay Towns in the Unfederated Malay States remain as state capitals and main city centres until today; namely Kota Bharu in Kelantan, Alor Setar in Kedah, Kuala Trengganu in Trengganu and Johor Baharu in Johor.

In reference to the discussion on urban forms during British rule, the characteristics of urban forms developed by the British may be presented as follows: main centres are government buildings consisting of large buildings with awe-inspiring architectural style emphasising the ruler's power. Some of the buildings built during colonial times are the Sultan Abdul Samad building (1897), Penang City Council building (1879) and the Taiping City Council building (1879). In front of the government buildings, there is a grassy area or usually called the *padang* (field). The *padang* is the venue for official events involving crowds such as army parades, government sponsored festivals and sporting events specifically cricket and football. A short distance away from the *padang* will be constructed the club house; an example is the Selangor Club House which is still in use today. The club house was used by the British nobility and officers to rest after taking part in sports events. At the third part of the *padang* there will be a chapel and at the fourth part there was a commercial area. The main buildings of this area were banks and large commercial stores. From the visualisation of the urban morphology during the British rule, it may be summarised that urban formation happened through building layouts and not through land use classification. Whelty and Sandu (1983) postulated that colonial era urban design was aimed at creating a political power environment for the ruling colonial masters through British administrative rules, building construction prowess and community social organisation; all of which were amalgamated via urban architectural presentation. Kuala Lumpur, George

Town, Ipoh, Taiping, Johor Bharu, Seremban and Kuching are among cities that still have relics of the British colonial era urban form characteristics and architecture.

## 6. Conclusion

Geographical location, settlement formations and the natural resources of Early Malay Towns and Estuary Towns in the Malay Peninsula have attracted outside influences which left significant impact on early urbanisation process in Malaysia. Throughout the glorious Malay Sultanate era up to the fall to western powers, the peoples of the Malay Peninsula were exposed to various urban forms and architectural influences. As a result of these assaults on the Malay Peninsula history and culture, Malaysia today is enriched with historical heritages that still remain for posterity and have become sources of reference for the current and future generations. Old towns that are still standing today are proofs of the phases of the evolution of the rich Malaysian history, besides showing forth differing and varied identities of urban form through morphology history. The materials documented in this paper are historical heritages that deserve to be conserved and disseminated for the use of the current and future generations.

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