



## The value of reviving the urban identity of Downtown Kulim, Kedah

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### Abstract

Urban identity can be defined as an interaction with places, where people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place. In this study, reviving the identity and image of Downtown Kulim was identified with making it authentic by enhancing its local physical characters which emphasize on the function of open spaces, systematic street linkages and conservation of historic features. The primary data which were gathered through field observations and recording were synthesized to determine the potential segments to be developed and preserved. The design ideas of physical transformation and of creating open spaces were inspired by "The history of *Pattani* architecture, community and culture". The spaces were designed to be more functional, systematic street linkages, incorporating conservation of historic features. These strategies were to make the place retain its authentic local identity in facing the 2020 modernism. Bringing back the nostalgic value, meaning and identity of Downtown Kulim as the first starting settlement of the Malay, *Pattani* era would give it an excellent and memorable experiential journey.

**Keywords:** historical features, open spaces, place conservation, revival of place identity, sense of place, urban identity

### Introduction

The identity of urban areas is influenced by human perception, meaning and experience in relation to the physical environment and space function itself. The weakness of urban character will affect the overall physical setting, and the context of the city is also an experience to be gained. In the contemporary cities, the weakening of identity is facilitated by the uniform concepts of planning and development together with the co-modification of places that have led to the loss of local identity (Saleh, 1998). According to Arefi (1999) cited in Ujang (2010) urban identity is associated with the notion of non-place. He added that there was a lack of connectivity of physical landscapes within broader physical, cultural and emotional context. Sustaining the meanings and identity of the urban elements is important because they contribute to self-identity, sense of community and sense of place (Hull, Lam, & Vigo, 1994).

In general, a strong identity in the cities is focused on the significant value of the local urban character that will encourage the contribution of local people in urban activities. The Urban character should be emphasized in the physical environment where it can affect directly on human behavior and feel the sense of belonging to that place. Indirectly, the value of urban identity can become a main attraction of the downtown itself. Urban identity in this study context will be emphasized on the local physical character that is divided into three approaches in three potential areas of urban spaces include open spaces, systematic street linkages and conservation historical features.

## Literature review

According to Priest (1996), revival is the rededication of believers; it is also the awakening, or quickening or impartation of spiritual life to the unregenerate. In the urban context, reviving are efforts to improve and rejuvenate the urban areas to be more systematic and efficient in terms of urban characterization, physical planning, and spatial distribution. While urban identity can be defined as a process by which through interaction with places, where people describe themselves in terms of belonging to a specific place (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). The concept of urban identity has a more common term in physical planning, social culture, and the environment. It has been described as the "uniqueness" of the space design and function from very different perspectives and purposes such as place identity, ethnic identity, and social identity. The concept of urban identity is as the expression of people feeling to experience the place and also feel unique to it. Urban identity is a set of meaning and also depends on the history formed in a city by the first human settlement. As the time passes, the physical setting will change the social life and thinking of the city. Thus, the concept of urban identity is such a changing process that affects the urban character. The character of cities is acquired with their original characters, but with the passing of the time, some cities lose their original architecture and urban characters, thus the settlement fall into a confusion of identity.

Historical cities have a high identity value that needs to be preserved. It wills an archive reflecting the memories of the urban dweller, while the historical and cultural heritages create the core value of urban identity. Therefore, cultural and historical background also will be the memory of the city that evokes the sense of belonging to the city. The concept of identity is felt more in ancient cities, but historical towns are being oppressed by the new function with the danger of losing their identity. These are the factors that give a threat or can change the character of the city from time to time. When the historic town is well-preserved and articulated to the city development process, the city can protect the concept of urban memory and urban identity (Kutsal, 2012).

Globalization or modernity is one of the factors that alter the true identity of a city. The new transformation was blended with cultural change, and this situation caused a physical transformation process in the cities. The process of globalization will influence and lead the development of the city and eventually affect the living spaces, architecture, and urban identity. Meanwhile, business centre and high residential blocks took over historical buildings that are the symbol of the city before. Globalization process overcomes the success the city by creating modern, new identity and value (Kutsal, 2012). Changes in the modernity will change the social lifestyle of the urban community. Most of urban community prefers to live in modern way. Lifestyle, identity, culture and the terms of belonging created a strong social bonding among people. However, when they tend to do an individual way of lifestyle without the social interaction with the community, than their urban place identity will gradually disappear. The people, who changed the lifestyle, shaped the city for a new lifestyle. The changing of social-cultural lifestyle structure will play an important role in changing the form of the urban identity (Kutsal, 2012).

### *The influence of open space design, street and historical features*

In designing a space towards reviving the urban identity, there are several principles and guidelines that should be concerned and practiced. This is to ensure a place will be more functional, and people can get different experiences when they utilize the spaces. In the urban identity context, the priority of space to be focused only is in these three parts, which are open space design, efficient street design, and conservation of heritage features.

### *Open space design*

According to Gold (1972) cited in Francis (1987), open space can be defined as land and water in an urban area that is not covered by cars or buildings. On the other hand, according to Tankel (1963) cited in

Woolley (2003) open space is also the space and the light above the land. Open space has also been described from a user's point of view as being an arena that allows for different types of social activities (Gehl, 1987 cited in Francis, 1987). The effective open space design has allowed and attracted people to utilize the space and create events for a different experience from the other places. Open space design also should focus on the comfortability, familiarity, multi-purpose and a variety of activities regardless of different ages of users. Open space is required depending on the environmental conditions and the human behaviour in that area. Designing an attractive and functional open space can serve as a space for children's play, greetings and conversations, communal activities and the passive activities of watching and hearing other people (Francis, 1987). The design and management of the physical environment can clearly have an impact and advantages upon the opportunities that might arise from such social activities.

However, in the formation of a town the design of the open space is becoming less attractive, less variety and lack of functionality. Yet, the open space plays an important educational role, is ecologically significant, necessary for social interaction and fosters community development, and is supportive of economic objectives and activities (Francis, 1987). In a particular aspect, it helps to reduce the inherent tension and conflict in the deprived parts of urban areas. It also has an important role in providing the recreational and leisure needs of a community and has an economic value.

### *Street design*

The street should have always held a particular fascination for those interested in the city. Streets are the terrain of social encounters and political protest, sites of domination and resistance, and places of pleasure and anxiety. The street also is a place designed to foster and complement new urban lifestyles, reclaiming the street from system to life world (Fyfe, 2006). Connecting or linking the road systems will give people choices and make it easier to understand, especially for children and elderly to get around an urban area. The significant continuity of the street will influence the community integration and also can be one of the local urban characters (MFE, 2002 ). Streets are divided into various types of vehicles and pedestrians, and the road becomes an experienced by all users, but the qualities of the experience are different. Besides, an active connection for all types of transport and pedestrian should be provided. It is also necessary to provide long-distance cycle and pedestrian routes that offer a real continuity and exploration (Burton & Mitchell, 2006). The street is the main important element that plays a role to conduct and bring people around the urban area. An efficient road can be shown through the density of people utilising and using the street.

### *Historical feature conservation*

Cultural Significance stresses on aesthetic values, historical values, and social values in the past, present and future. Culture signified is a concept that helps in estimating the value of place identity. In establishing the cultural significance of a place, it is necessary to assess all the information relevant to an understanding of the place and its fabric (Charter, 1999).

The social and cultural value is the intangible value that sometimes disappears in time. It requires the contributions of local people who may still perform their former cultures. A place may have historical values because it has been influenced by historical figures, events, phases, or activities. In preparing the historic preservation plan for downtown areas, guidelines must be provided to apply appropriate reuse buildings. Besides that, the authority should also have strategies and action programmes to protect, and enhance the cultural environment by delineating historical districts, including the reuse plans, zoning and the preparation of ordinances, and codes to assure preservation of the areas (Charter, 1999).

A strong visual connection interface between a historic building and public space should be provided to create a spatial enclosure in more intensive urban conditions. Material and visual references should be used to reflect the local character, and evoke the full range of senses with designs that use a variety of textures, sound effects, and fragrances. Besides, an active and vibrant signage must be provided to



to determine the best option in allocating certain function, so as to provide the overview of how the district in a region should work.

#### *Social and cultural element*

Social and cultural element is intangible data that play important roles that are properly nurtured and supported and lead the way of life of their people. It includes the local food, traditional custom, event and others in giving the spirit of the place. Culture can be a vibrant experience in different value, which will create a unique identity for the site.

#### *Circulation and parking*

Circulation is an element of city planning that directly shapes a pattern of activity, with the existence of a public transportation system such as roads, pedestrian walkway, and places of transit interconnected forms of movement (activity). Parking areas have a direct influence on an environment that supports commercial activities in the urban area. The parking area also has a visual impact on urban areas. Self-parking space gives visual effects on a successful effort in the planning of the city (Shirvani, 1985).

#### *Building form and massing*

Building form and massing is about the shapes and facades of the buildings that can form a city. Besides, the study considers the character of building height, the distance between building, setback, skyline, color, boundary, scale, texture and much more. Building form and massing are also associated with the appearance of the building.

#### *Figure ground study*

A figure-ground theory is the starting point for an understanding of urban form and is the analysis of relationships between building mass and open space (Trancik, 1986). The figure-ground analysis is a powerful tool for identifying the textures and patterns of the urban fabric, as well as problems in its spatial order, and can lead to a static and two-dimensional conception of space.

#### *Imageability study*

Imageability study will be determined by site inventory and will be analyzed in the synthesis stage of design. Lynch (1960) stressed that a quality in a physical object gives a higher probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. The three main characteristic paths are prominent with identity, continuity and directional quality. Edges are the linear elements that can become a boundary between two phases. Districts are different character areas that provide functionality and services of user needs. According to Lynch (1960) the nodes are the strategic foci into which the observer can enter, typically either junctions of paths or concentrations of some characteristics. In contrast to nodes, which can be entered, landmarks are external features of the individual that act as reference points.

#### *Analysis and synthesis*

All the primary data that have been collected through observation and measurement will be analyzed and evaluated. The analysis will determine the point of issues, concerns and opportunities of the site study based on the inventory data that were conducted. In order to produce a final synthesis map, overlay technique will be used in all the inventory and analysis plans. The final synthesis map that has been overlaid will indicate the potential area to be developed to solve the issues and fulfil the aim and objectives of reviving identity in the study site. Those kinds of information will take over in enhancing

the final design approach, including the function of open spaces, systematic street linkages and conservation of historic features.

## Results and discussion

### *Site history*

Kulim at the beginning of the 1830 was inhabited by the people of the Malay *Pattani* who came from the *Pattani* province, southern Siam, and Thailand. In the 1850 the immigrant tin miners from Larut Matang, Taiping and Selama started to develop Kulim as a town (MPK, 2005). The immigrant miners were looking for a new place to be their new settlement, as they did not want to be embroiled in the triad conflicts that were constantly surfacing in Perak.

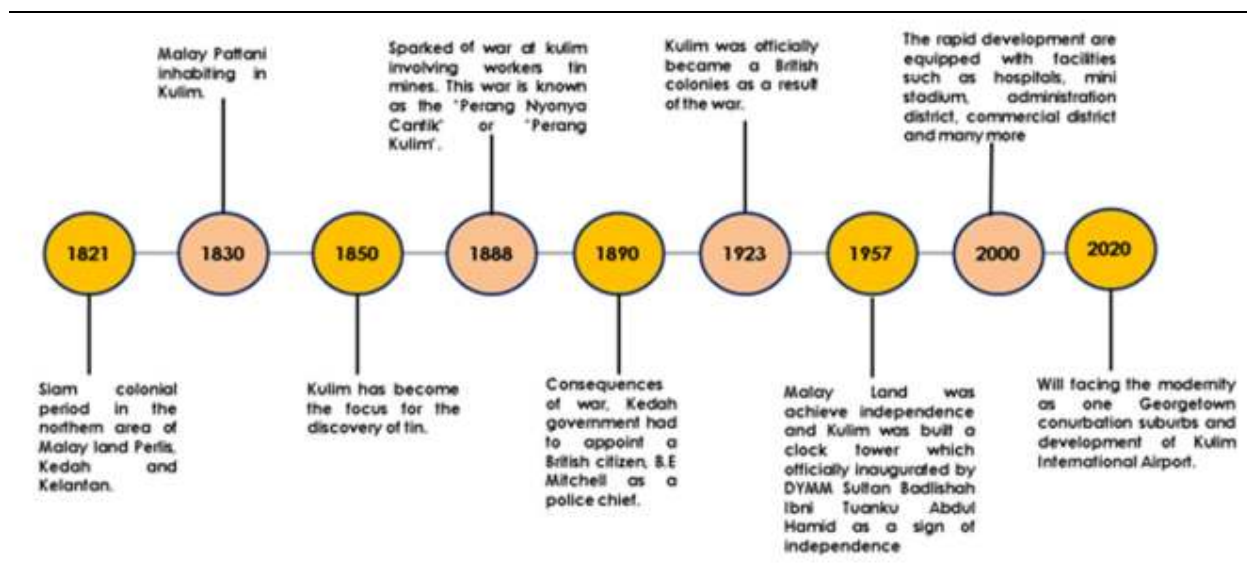


Figure 2. The timeline chronology in the study site

These miners escaped from Perak into the jungles of Kulim to head to Penang, but they tended to cancel since the island was a busy English port then. During their journey through the forest, they discovered tin in the rivers and quarries at Kulim. This prompted their decision to settle in Kulim and mine the ores without the interference of the triads elsewhere. By mid-19th century, Kulim town experienced a boom due to the discovery of tin ore. The Kulim town was said to be founded circa mid-19th century by an ex-carpenter named Chin Ah Cheoh. At the end of the 1870, he was elected by Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Mukarram Shah as the first Kulim Chinese Chief.

In 1888, a major incident happened in Kulim town, where there was a war among the chiefs of tin mines due to the fight to get the most beautiful Chinese lady at the time. This war was called the "Kulim War". The chiefs mobilized their respective workers in this seemingly minor squabble that escalated into a major riot. As a result of the war, a Chinese chief under the rule of Sultan Hamid Halim Shah appointed a British officer named B.E. Mitchell as the Kulim Chief of Police. He was successful in using his influence and power to return peace to the district and also established an active and influential police force (MPK, 2005).

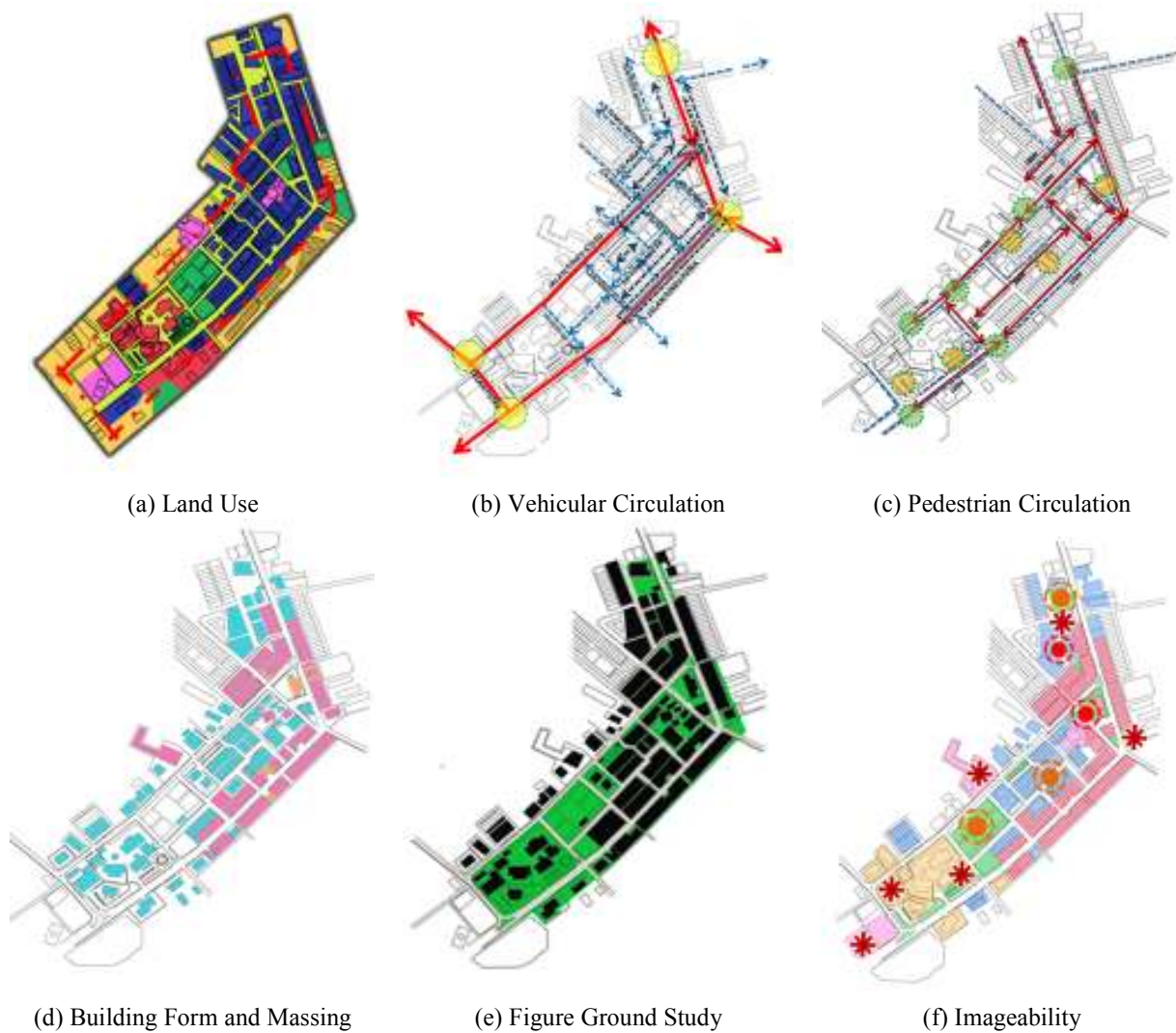
Currently, Kulim is a prosperous town with modern identity. Besides Kuala Muda, Kerian and Sungai Petani districts, Kulim are a one of the Georgetown Conurbation formation suburbs, which is located on the border of a big city Bukit Mertajam, Penang. The development of Kulim Town is important to support

the economic growth and urbanization of the Northern Territory. Kulim is also listed as one of the Satellite Towns (NPP, 2005).

### *Data analysis*

The data analysis will identify the issues, concerns and opportunities in the study area and the result will be finalized by using overlay potential urban map technique. Therefore, the data from the potential map will identify the potential area to be developed, enhanced and preserved. The potential field data will be processed in the design stage in creating the best design solution for the site study. The study will be focusing on the main issues of physical attributes that are based on data collection and analysis that have been conducted. Physical issues that occur in the site study area are:-

- i. Traffic congestion and conflict, between pedestrians and vehicles on the main road of the commercial area that is located at Jalan Tunku Assad and Jalan Tunku Putra.  
These are the main routes accessing Bukit Mertajam with the Kulim region, commercial area and Kulim Hi-Tech. These are the busiest roads and always have conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians. This is because of the straight line of the road pattern and wide lanes which cause the high speed of vehicles, and will provide some difficulties for pedestrians to cross. There are also problems of traffic congestion at certain times, especially during the peak time of the weekdays, and due to the function of the road itself as a primary road access to the Kulim region.
- ii. Discontinuous pedestrian footpath linkages in forming an efficient urban network between spaces. There is a lack of systematic and connectivity of the pedestrian paths between the areas, which resulting from less use by the users. It is also a lack of comfortability in terms of providing shade, street furniture facilities and safety. Some of the interlocking pavers were not designed to a proper size that will be a threat to users. Thus, these make the users not interested to use the walkway provided.
- iii. Lack of functionality and maintenance of open spaces.  
Most of the open spaces have been focusing on seasonal activities, and they are being abandoned and lack of functionality during ordinary weekdays and weekend. Most of the urban communities so not have a place for gathering and relaxing in the site study area. There is no interactive space that can pull the interest of the urban community. Most of them prefer to go to the nearest town, Georgetown, where many interactive spaces have been provided.
- iv. The visual facade of the historic buildings appears obsolete and is poorly maintained.  
Building facade was not given attention in terms of historical building modification and preservation, maintenance, and facade quality. It should be controlled in terms of change, which needs to be preserved and conserved its historical value. The building and facade designs reflect on the history of the earliest buildings that form the town in the past decade. Besides that, the abandoned back lanes also give the bad appearance of the commercial areas, and it is supposed to be enhanced by creating more vibrant spaces and historical aesthetic value.



**Figure 3.** *The six maps of data to be overlaid*

There are three major concerns based on site issues that have been identified:

- i. The linkages and connectivity between urban spaces. The urban spaces that need to be improved are pedestrian accessibility, legibility, comfort, safety, familiarity, and distinctive element. Those factors are imperative as an essential need to encourage users to walk in healthier urban living, and provide the vitality of authentic journey in the study site.
- ii. More functional and attractive open space design in providing a safe social interaction space among the urban community. The open spaces should be enhanced with a variety of spaces for all age categories of users, blend with robustness function that do not only focus during the day but also at night. The most important thing is making the spaces livelier with appropriate facilities provided. Finally, the image of the space is formed by bringing back the authentic element and space function as a public art to flourish the "Spirit of Place".
- iii. Historical features should be maintained, conserved and preserved in terms of their building structure and facade. New guidelines in terms of building extension, scale, design features, the size of signage, and former color should be provided to avoid from losing the old legacy history of all historic buildings in the study site. The interface or intermediate space should be provided



in front of the historic building, to make it livelier, where users can appreciate the richness of historic features in site study.

There are several significant values that have been identified. Site assets or opportunities have social, economic, historical, and aesthetic values. Preserving and enhancing the high value can add value and make the place more desirable to the local and tourist. There are several opportunities and assets that have been recommended, as follows:-

- i. Listed or gazette as an authentic heritage downtown.  
Downtown Kulim is rich with the historical features, culture, and old chronology. It represented the eclectic, British colonialism, and the traditional *Pattani* building styles era that was influenced by the transition order of each early chronology. All the forms of old historical features that have reached almost 100 years and should be preserved and gazette as an authentic heritage downtown.
- ii. Vibrant and lively open spaces function with an own identity.  
As facing the developed country in 2020 with a near development of the Kulim International Airport, and one of the Georgetown conurbations, the study area, should have a quality, functional, and attractive open spaces that were becoming a central meeting point for an urban community. According to MPK (2005), the population of the area will be increased from 85,309 to 89.658 in 2020 due to migration from Penang. It should have a vibrant public space that can serve and meet the needs of the urban community.
- iii. The authentic journey through systematic linkages and connectivity.  
As the main commercial and administrative area in the central town, a systematic linkage between spaces and historical features will provide an excellent opportunity to attract the local users to explore the area through pedestrian and cycling journey. There are also good opportunities to show the richness of the Downtown Kulim, as one main road and as an access to 'Le Tour De Langkawi', Asia's most famous bicycle race.

#### *Data synthesis*

The overlay technique will identify the problem areas that are traffic congestions, and conflicts between vehicles and pedestrians around Jalan Tunku Assad and Jalan Tunku Putra. It should propose a traffic calming such as road humps, speed tables, pedestrian crossings, signs, and interactive signs. Widening the pedestrian walkways and replacing the existing side parking are alternative solutions in order to reduce the traffic congestion. The synthesis maps also identified four potential areas of open space that should be developed. Most of the open spaces have been used for seasonal activities, and will become abandoned during the ordinary days. There should be a variety and functional design of open space that can attract people all the times, and also will become the meeting places in commercial and administrative areas.

The historic areas have been identified in the commercial area, and most of the buildings were facing problems in terms of obsolete appearance and not being well maintained. A new guideline in the historic preservation can be proposed, which takes consideration in terms of extension rules, scale, design features, signage and standardized color. The site study rich in historical features and interactive public spaces will face the modernization in 2020 as one of Georgetown's conurbations. In order to revive the identity of an authentic element in the site study, the design will propose a cycle lane and a systematic pedestrian path with a different meaning of history and the sense of place.



**Figure 4.** Synthesis map with examples of proposal for the urban open spaces (A - Laman Serambi, B - Golden Patriotic Square, C- Historical Walk and D - Anjung Seni)

### Design approach and guidelines

The design approach was inspired by the site chronology of Kulim, which started with the area being inhabited by a Malay *Pattani* community in the past 1830. They were influenced by the recent colonization by the Siamese. Among the significant values that can be taken to be inducted in the design are the *Pattani* lifestyle, architectural features and their culture. The famous lifestyle of the Malay *Pattani* was supported by influential Islamic religious activities and the lifelong Malay traditional characteristics. They live modestly and in socially conscious limitations. Most of the *Pattani* people are self-employed either as farmers or fishermen. The *Pattani* people lead a subsistence type lifestyle. They continually study the Islamic religion from the "Pondok" School or "Madrasah" as a local place for religious education.

The *Pattani* architectural styles are giving more intention on traditional house setting. The concept of their traditional house was in harmonious proportions with a decorative element. They use wooden materials, practice natural lighting and ventilation by using carving, and transition space of their home such as "Serambi", and "Anjung". The setting of their traditional house was facing the Qiblah as a sign of obedience to Islam. The *Pattani* lifestyles, architecture and culture, will bring the authentic value of their first settlement during the *Pattani* era that can reflect the identity of the study site. From the elements that have been identified, it will transform into the physical form, spaces and function.

**Table 1. Examples of urban spaces and its functions that are inspired by the Malay *Pattani* architecture, community and culture**

No.	Space	Function	Inspired by
A	<i>Laman Serambi</i>	A place for the urban community to gather and relax, while the children play with the natural element and ride bicycles.	Traditional Malay <i>Pattani</i> house which has spaces of <i>Serambi</i> in front of their house. There is also a water fountain reflected the old well that becomes the primary source of water and natural levelling representing the natural element of the environment.
B	Golden Patriotic Square	The area has been enhanced to be more functional and attractive as a landmark.	A plaza that reminds an independent day where the place consists of an Independent Clock Tower that was officiated in 1957. Using the traditional <i>Pattani</i> house structure that has been transformed into a landscape element, such as a swing window and pergolas.
C.	Historical Walk	Widening the pedestrian walkway in front of the historical shop houses to encourage users to walk and more appreciate the historical features. By proposing the native shade trees of <i>Cinnamomum Inners</i> and <i>Cocos nucifera</i> along the pedestrian will provide a sense of place, comfort and safety for the user.	The element of the traditional structure of lamp post inspired by oil lamp, carving pattern of road and pedestrian walkway is from the <i>Pattani</i> era. The facade of the historic buildings is enhanced by restoring the wall patterns, bat shape vents, the <i>singgora</i> roof materials, the standardized light brown color, and building size must not more than three storey.
D.	<i>Anjung Seni</i>	A multi-purpose place which consists of Outdoor Wakaf Putra Market that is held seasonally with leisure green side and the timber rest area for waiting.	All the designed spaces are inspired by <i>Mak Yong</i> music equipment such as <i>Rebana</i> and <i>Seruling</i> as a sculpture and also the elements of carving.



A. *Laman Serambi* (left–before and right–after)



B. Golden Patriotic Square (left–before and right–after)



C. Historical Walk (left–before and right–after)



D. Anjung Seni (left–before and right–after)

**Figure 5.** Examples of reviving the urban spaces, blended with the Pattani history

All the three transformations will flourish the spirit of the place in the site study to make it more memorable, experiencing and meaningful. The *Pattani* architecture and culture elements will apply to create more functional space and give a different experience, systematic linkages with a different and authentic journey. The element must be blended with the existing historic features. The concept will be exposed through a journey in cyclist, pedestrian walkway and the vehicle itself create a sense of belonging spaces. Based on the chronology of the site study, which is very dominant by the *Pattani* first settlement, the character of the *Pattani* lifestyle, architecture and culture will be transformed into physical form, space and function.

The site study will be designed as an authentic place with concept arrangement that can provide a livable and variety space used that can attract local and foreign tourists. The approach to enhance the

design of open spaces, street and historical feature as a significant value will give the actual local identity to Downtown Kulim. Besides that, there are several principles and guidelines that should be emphasized through the open space design. The principles and guidelines should be concerned with the aesthetic, attractive and vibrant spaces with comfort and safety for kids, youngster, or elderly users. The placement of public art elements must be more memorable, applied on site with the natural system and quality, environmental, and able to maintain the needs of present and future generations.

The street design, especially in the historic commercial area should be concerned with familiarity principle. Creating the distinctive element along the streets can attract users to walk as by planting shade trees and wide pedestrian walkways, and making walkways more legible and easy. New guidelines should be provided for the historic buildings in terms of the building scale, extension, standardized colour and size, façade enhancement, and signage.

## Conclusion

Kulim has a unique and spatial quality that can be developed and enhanced to show its true local identity. Some of the open spaces have problems to be used, which do not meet the needs and desires of people as a place for gathering and recreation. In fact, there was also a lack of continuity between urban spaces and people cannot use it as a medium to move from one place to another. Therefore, all the uniqueness and historical elements should be conserved and preserved as the primary identity of Downtown Kulim. These criteria will become the central local character towards the modernization era in 2020 and as one of the Georgetown Conurbation suburbs. The purpose of reviving the identity of Kulim is to give it a sense of a different feeling and memorable experience that will make local people or tourists to come and appreciate its identity. Bringing back the nostalgic value, meaning and identity of Downtown Kulim as the first starting settlement of the Malay *Pattani* era may give that pleasant, unique and memorable experiential journey.

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