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Re-imagining Pekan Kuah as the Rainforest Shopping Paradise of Langkawi

Abstract:

This paper addresses Theme III: Architecture, Spatiality and Perception. Pekan Kuah, a small town on the legendary island of Langkawi is used as the exploratory setting. The rich bio-diversity provides major tourists' attractions on Langkawi. Shopping does not. Its designation as a Duty-Free island status in 1987 had limited effect. The issue is how to turn Pekan Kuah into an inviting shopping environment for local and international visitors. This paper outlines the relationship between structures and objects that defines 'shoppingscapes' within a newly rejuvenated urban-shopping environment of this island town. The more urban part of the island need not be an isolated man-made district. The rich layering of tropical rainforest provides the inspiration. New structures not only provide a new kind of public spaces in Langkawi but also change the perception of public spaces there as a whole - thus transforming Pekan Kuah as the Rainforest Shopping Paradise of Langkawi.

Keywords: Island; tourism; shopping; nature; urban design.

1 Introduction

This paper addresses Theme III: Architecture, Spatiality and Perception. Pekan Kuah on the legendary island of Langkawi is used as the exploratory setting. This small town is the arrival point for tourists. The ferry terminal is located here. Access by air is also available on Langkawi. From 2000 to 2009, tourism on Langkawi recorded 3.6% annual growth. This is a similar trend to those reported for popular island destinations such as the Seychelles and Mauritius. This island in the State of Kedah received more than 2 million visitors in 2010 with 50% being domestic visitors and the other half were international tourists. Visitors from UK, Australia, Saudi Arabia, China and India make the top five nationalities. Additionally, half a million day-trippers visit the island. The generated tourism revenue was approximately RM1.9 billion per year. This figure contributed to over 11% of the State of Kedah's overall GDP. Tourism on Langkawi is also the work-base of 60% of the island's population. Nevertheless, Langkawi lags behind destinations such as Bali, Phuket, Hawaii, Mauritius and the Seychelles on measures of spend per day, length of stay and seasonality. On average, tourists to Langkawi spend RM200 less per day than the amount that they would spend in other competing destinations. They also stay 5.3 fewer days on average in comparison. When compounded, the two figures result in a huge loss of potential revenue. A further misconception of seasonal bad weather adds to a low season of tourist arrival. The primary tourist attractions for Langkawi are the natural features, particularly the bio-diversely rich flora and fauna, the sea and its marine life and the geological formation. Cultural and sporting events are also part of the offerings (Fig. 1). Shopping is not.

In 1987 Langkawi was accorded a Duty-Free island status. Since then, shopping is on the agenda of shorter-stay visitors, particularly Malaysians who will visit for about 3-4 days. International visitors would have lesser interest because the typical duty-free items such as chocolate, liquor, cigarettes are common to airports around the world. Furthermore, the town setting of Pekan Kuah lacks commercial excitement. The Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) published a strategic document on 8 December 2011 to overcome the economic shortfall. The LADA Tourism Blueprint 2011-2015 had a target of placing Langkawi onto the global top 10 list of island and eco-destinations by 2015. The ensuing design research was prompted by this blueprint and intends to offer an alternative vision of the main commercial centre at Pekan

Kuah. The issue of this study is thus, how to turn Pekan Kuah into an inviting shopping environment for both the local and international visitors.

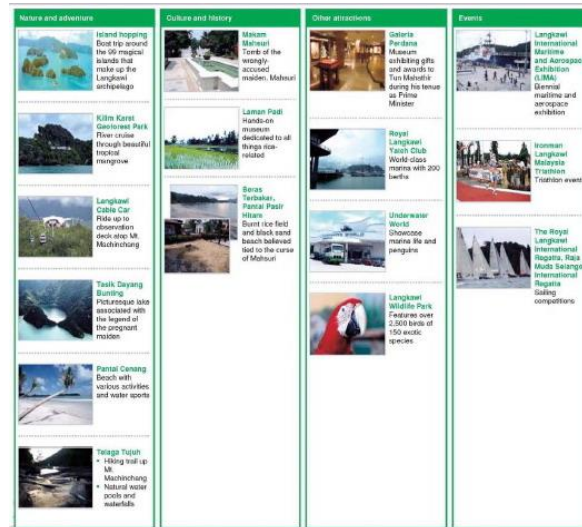


FIG. 1 Bio-diversity and Tourism Offerings on Langkawi. Picture by: LADA Tourism Blueprint 2011-2015

2 Introduction

Island nations tend to have limited natural resources beyond sun, sea and sand. The Caribbean Islands for instance, have undergone challenges of expanding their tourism programmes beyond these resources with variable success. Cameron and Gatewood (2008) considered what took place in Jamaica, Barbados and the Bahamas as negative examples or problems associated with unplanned growth in relation to tourism. They reviewed the construction of heritage contents for the Turks and Caicos Islands as potential directions for tourism development. Nevertheless, heritage contents are bound for different interpretations. Popular culture is now being integrated into the perception of heritage. In Melbourne, Australia a street has been renamed to commemorate a popular rock band. The newly named AC / DC Lane challenges the norm of what heritage is about (Frost 2008). It also brings into the discourse which aspect of heritage is worth preserving and celebrating. Such is the situation as cities

around the world look for ways to improve their tourism industry. As in other businesses, diversification is always an option. The new destination image promoted via AC / DC Lane is one way to enrich their heritage; in this aspect via the cultural ambience, and attract a different sector of potential holiday-makers.

UNESCO defines cultural heritage as encompassing '*both the human and the natural environment*'. These include architectural complexes and archaeological sites, the rural heritage and the countryside, the urban, technical or industrial heritage, industrial design and street furniture. Added to this definition is that '*the cultural heritage should be considered both in time and in space*' (Jokilehto 2005). The collections of past and continuing non-physical cultural practices, knowledge and living experiences also are a component. Cultural heritage thus concerns the documentation and expression of the long processes of historic development. From the inclusion of the natural environment into this definition, the bio-diversity of an island is also an inherited ingredient. This implies that the 10-50 million years old rainforest and natural features are part of Langkawi's cultural heritage. Integrating nature and the built retail environment can excite the potential visitors. This may take the tourists beyond the stereotypical perception of island holidays as one of enjoying the sun, sea and sand. Shopping is definitely a branch of tourist activity that has been overlooked. It is through shopping that the monetary flows contribute directly to a tourism destination. Its role however has not been well-represented in the tourism literature. Meng & Xu (2012) noted that there is limited study on tourism shopping and even so it is still at an exploratory stage. Their study wanted to expand the understanding of tourists' shopping experiences by examining the nature of tourist shopping behavior through a conceptual approach. Their finding is that tourist shopping behavior is a mixture of planned, impulsive, and experiential consumption behavior. Although they did not highlight the composition of the tourist segment, people of different age groups do have different economic capacity. In Langkawi, a segmentation of the visitor profiles indicates a wide range of spending power (Fig. 2).

				
Meet	Bob and Carol, Retirees from the UK who travel to Asia during winter.	Mr. and Mrs. Zhang from Shanghai. Visit countries around the region via tour groups.	Rahman and family from KL. Drives to Kuala Kedah and takes ferry to Langkawi during school holidays.	Balwant and friends from Penang. Take the ferry for daytrips to the island
Profile	Long stay	Foreign tour group	Malaysian families	Day trippers
Length of stay	~ 6-10 days	~ 4-5 days	~ 3-4 days	0-1 day
Accommodation	Four Seasons, The Datali, The Danna	Westin, Berjaya, Meritus Pelangi	Holiday Villa, Bella Vista, Awana	Citlin, Seaview, Eagle Bay
Activities in Langkawi	Spa, dinner at Bon Ton, golf	Cable car, island hopping	Shopping, Makam Mahsuri, Wildlife park, Underwater World	Shopping, beach and sun
Spend per trip ¹	~RM 20,000	~RM 4,000	~RM 1,500	~RM 400

¹ Average spend per trip estimated based on food, accommodation, transport, shopping and other spend with hotels and tour operators

FIG. 2 Visitors' Profile and Spending on Langkawi. Picture by: LADA Tourism Blueprint 2011-2015

This might reflect their degree of engagement to shopping whilst on holidays or why they might opt for other tourist activity instead. In their segmentation analysis of young tourists for example, Cini et al (2012) were able to identify a particular category that they termed 'eco-tourists'. The holiday motivations for this group focus on the opportunity to experience fusion with nature and new experiences, such as contact with diverse cultures and populations, adventure, and solitude. Historical and archeological sites would be their most likely place of visit. They would also give priority to conservation and responsible recycling. Their personality dimension is characterised by intellect/openness. The natural environment is appreciated for its intrinsic value. Their belief in the equality of all living organism means that none is intrinsically superior to any other. With such a positive attitude toward eco-tourism, they reflect strong human-nature interactions. Their post-materialist values inform their tendency towards ecology and nature conservation. On first impression, eco-tourists are not valuable for retail tourism. On closer inspection however, they will be the guardian of the retail tourism environment if it had all the right ingredients that this visitor category cares about, i.e. anything and everything that is eco-friendly. Businesses that could offer merchandise and/or services that promote nature conservation or those that build on the 3Rs (reduce; reuse; recycle) will most likely

entice them. Having this group around means the shopping area environment will not be abused through littering and aggressive behavior to the surrounding, natural or otherwise. They form the environmentally responsible consumers (Ogle et al 2004). Their concerns are also likely to extend beyond their knowledge and beliefs about the products and services that a company manufactures and sells. They would be interested in broader aspects of a company's environmental stewardship, such as financial contributions to environmental causes, support of environmental education programs, and the use of natural resources in everyday business operations including the design of company facilities.

The international tourists who come to Langkawi are those that fit the description of 'eco-tourists' by Cini et al (2012) and 'experience seekers' described by Cameron and Gatewood (2008). They seek places where they can experience nature, spiritual growth and active body sports. This group looks for 'natural, un-fabricated locations, indigenous culture, eco-experiences', and alternative forms of holiday habitation rather than the standard hotels. The necessity to attract this particular group of patrons has prompted retailers to incorporate environmentally responsible decision making—in particular, sustainable development principles and practices—into the design of company facilities including their retail store space. Moreover, another potential market segment is the young people. According to Luckmann et al (2013) this group of teens finds more engineered environments attractive. Their preference for more structured and arranged elements in landscapes imply that orchestrated natural elements within the shopping zone could be an attractor for this group who prefer horticultural landscapes. This preference is due to the availability of urban infrastructure that allows for social interaction and supports their personal needs within a natural scene rather than pure wilderness. It is therefore sensible that selective natural elements be given the limelight in devising a revitalised shopping space for Langkawi.

3 Project Methodology

This paper outlines the relationship between structures and objects that defines 'shoppingscapes' within a newly rejuvenated urban-shopping environment of this island town. It first looks at the typology of the existing shopping facilities. Review of

more successful urban shopping spaces is also carried out to provide the theoretical framework. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and constraints (SWOC) of the existing Pekan Kuah are analysed in order to determine the best course of design strategies. An overall theme and design vision was established. The architectural values intend to blend the built environment with the natural environment into a seamless shopping experience rather than treating the more urban part of the island as hard-edged, hard-surfaced retail district. The aim is to regenerate Pekan Kuah as an iconic and vibrant commercial hub with an ecological focus.

4 Proposed Scheme and Discussion

Pekan Kuah has been chosen as the test-bed for this design research because it is the focus of retail and commercial activities on Langkawi. It has the potential to become the central business district (CBD) as described by Murphy (2008, p.25). The CBD is about the retailing of goods and services in stores and shops of all kind and sizes. Various financial and the whole miscellany of office functions must complete the business ecology. Whilst there will also be stores, shops and offices elsewhere; it is in the CBD that there exists a maximum concentration of such activities and business functions. Besides the improved economic diversity and activities, enhancement of factors such as the density of the population as much as better structured urban elements and connectivity are imperative. A constraint with Pekan Kuah is that historically, Langkawi is home to traditional Malay timber houses rather than commercial outlets. This fits the traditional economic activities that are agriculture and fishery. The rows of two-story shop-houses in Pekan Kuah traced their origin to the Chinese shop-houses more commonly found in bigger cities in Malaysia (Fig. 3). These cities started being urbanised during the colonial British period in the 19th Century.

Other than these shop-houses, bigger scale shopping complexes are becoming part of the commercial typologies. A few operate similar to a mall with smaller shop units within. There are also independent shopping centres that belong to single-owners. These represent the successful local duty-free business operators. More light-weight structures made of canvas and polyurethane materials are also constructed as shopping outlets (Fig. 4); in this case occupying a parking area. On a smaller scale, temporary stalls and push-carts provide shelters for the *pasar malam* (night market)

entrepreneurs. These operate by rotation at designated open spaces or road-stretches in various parts of Langkawi on various evenings of the week. These usually singly-operated small structures complete the smallest grain of business spaces.



Fig. 3 Existing Pekan Kuah. Picture by: R. Ab. Rahman (2012)



Fig. 4. Temporary Canvas and PU Shelters as Shopping Spaces. Picture by: R. Ab. Rahman (2012)

It is only natural that heritage buildings and local architectural forms would be considered for integration into an urban redevelopment scheme to remind of the place's history. Nevertheless, our proposal examined another option of heritage contents. The main reason is that the existing historical forms such as the traditional timber houses on this island do not fit the commercial typology for a shoppingscape. The original context of these domestic structures is the countryside rather than urban areas. A further dilemma is that a study by Darlow et al (2012) indicated that very few heritage sites produce sufficient surpluses to facilitate investment in sustainable practices. This conclusion was made through their investigation of 416 heritage properties and sites in Devon and Cornwall. Without such economic surpluses the financial viability and funding to enhance future conservation activities of such heritage sites will be jeopardised. Similar trend could be observed of maintenance-neglected historical sites on other parts of Langkawi. As Cameron (2010) remarked, "Not everything from the past or the current cultural 'warehouse' may get written into the heritage script. Heritage retrieved from a cultural source is selective, though it usually has some relevance and function for the present."

Heritage forms thus do not serve as structures or objects of design in this scheme. Moreover, 'the spatial layout of the city is the largest object of human creation' (Stonor & Parham 2011). The whole shoppingscape masterplan of Pekan Kuah would therefore 'be planned as an object in its own right' as per Stonor & Parham (2011) rather than be thought of independent individual forms. Instead of utilising architectural built forms from the past, there is greater freedom in injecting contemporary architectural components in this urban redevelopment. This is not to say that the design will be of absolute *tabula rasa*. Rather, the man-made aspects will take a back-seat somewhat to natural tangible elements as objects of design. Simple architectural forms are justified as long as the retail spaces can be perceived. This being at the urban design conceptual stage, no attempt was made to detail out the actual architecture and structure. The natural but tangible alternative provides the complementary spatiality to architecture as this is integrated into the urban redevelopment of Pekan Kuah. In order to express the blending of man-made and natural objects, architectural built forms and structures will have green foliage as the shading envelopes (Fig. 5).



FIG. 5. Re-imagined Scenes of Pekan Kuah. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

Furthermore, BCSC (2007) suggested that, design changes in future retail environment need to link to sustainability issues, provide innovative design and interesting environment that act as a destination pull. Shopping needs also address growth in leisure and entertainment with awareness of health issues and wellbeing. Appropriate place-making can create an efficient, exciting and emotionally engaging experience that is filled with surprise and originality. All this could be derived from visual stimulation and sensory excitement. An immediate response to including visual stimulation and sensory excitement brings to mind bright neon-lights, blazing advertisements and billboards. This however, may not be appropriate for a fragile place such as Langkawi. On the other hand, Hall et al (2011a) noted the charismatic properties of trees and forest species that could serve as tourism attractors. This is applicable in the context of Langkawi. The rainforest here could be capitalised by merging its pull-factor into the urbanised area. Re-incorporating the lost green is thus a natural form of compensation to the somewhat paradoxical nature of urban development, i.e. as the culprit of deforestation.

Trees and urban landscapes contribute to climate change mitigation (Hall et al 2011b). This includes their significance in reducing the temperatures of urban environments. Forests and trees planted as part of the urban green landscapes are a form of 'soft engineering' climate change response strategy. Therefore, management practices that preserve and promote the use of these green urban spaces should be encouraged. Increased shading for sunny Langkawi is a welcomed feature. Similarly, urbanised areas with higher volumes of motor vehicles could do with healthy urban forests that help to absorb CO₂. In another article, Hall (2011) proposed the establishment of new forest areas to benefit recreational demands within an expanding urban population. There are obvious and significant environmental,

economic, and social services from forest and wooded environment. The softer visual texture of tree canopies and plants balances what would otherwise be hard built-up surfaces in the city. Undeniably, trees are part of the creative palette for attractive urban and cultural landscapes. Healthy forest and green areas complete the symbiosis of biological diversity. This could put a check if not neutralise the damaging effect of unchecked tourism on bio-diversity loss (Hall 2010). All the cues about the importance of greenery and natural elements are adhered to in this proposed scheme (Fig. 6).

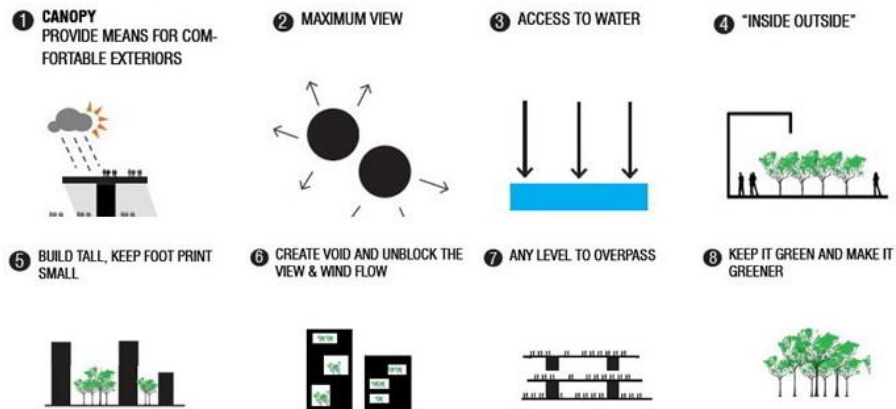


FIG. 6. Planning and Design Strategies. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

The proposed mixed development faces the sea (Fig. 7). Reconnecting people to the water is part of the strategies to tie the artificial to the natural whilst allowing convenient access from the commercial zone to the bay area. The spiritual and economic values of water, in addition to the greenery, provide great opportunities to reinvent them as vital anchors that bring new life and investment into the urban settlement. This will create a memorable shopping environment and provide a rich mix of opportunities for diverse groups of people. It is part of the incitement of desire to increase Pekan Kuah into an attractive product-object and simultaneously prod its ability to be 'sold' to the locals and visitors. Creating desire is essential to its sustainability and ensuring its longevity and survival. It is a serious business in that the same process of sustainability through attraction drives financial markets. It is

about enhancing the appearance of this urban area, buildings and built landscapes within as commodities (Schwartz, 2010).

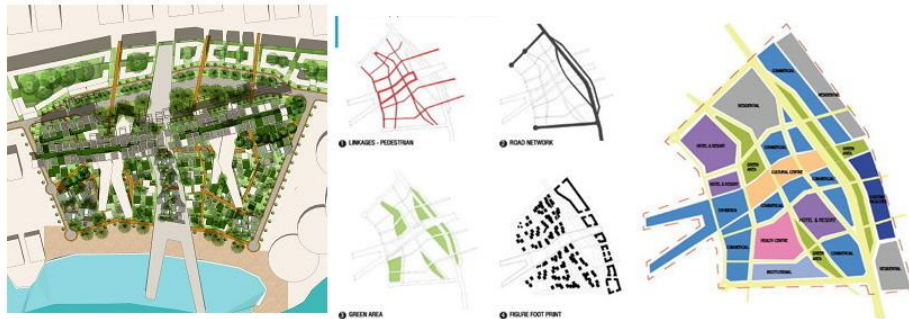


FIG. 7. Masterplan of Re-imagined Pekan Kuah. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

The architectural values intend to blend the built environment with the natural environment into a seamless experience instead of treating the more urban part of the island as isolated man-made district. This is the proposed form of design elixir for the new shoppingscape of Langkawi. Rather than thinking of urban landscapes as one of the manicured gardens, the rich layering of tropical rainforest provides the inspiration (Fig. 8).

This tends to follow a four-tiered structure. The forest floor forms the base tier. Being more open in quality, it permits easy movement for the bigger animals as well as is home for many species of flora and fauna. This tier approximates the importance of ground or street-level for pedestrian and vehicular connectivity for the revitalised Pekan Kuah. The capacity for commercial showcases is also integrated here to catch the interest of passers-by. Emphasis is thus for architectural spatiality that will encourage walking. Within a shoppingscape, it is at the pace of walking that the sense of architecture and spatiality can be fully perceived and appreciated. 'Movement and perception are tightly coupled' (Hornecker 2005). This is because real space is not an abstract, geometrical space of coordinates and lines but spatiality, which is the structural aspects of space, is a natural habitat filled with life. In the scheme for Pekan Kuah, this life is not only of human shoppers but also of growing trees and plants and symbiotic fauna that live within. The integration of man-made and natural objects in this scheme is part of orchestrating the sense of *embeddedness*

into an island context. In this way, the new shoppingscape of Pekan Kuah will become real places with an *atmosphere* that results from a complex interplay of social factors, aesthetical, physical and natural factors of the setting. This will also include the essence of a soundscape (Kang & Zhang 2010) that is urban and yet echoes one of a fragile bio-diversity.

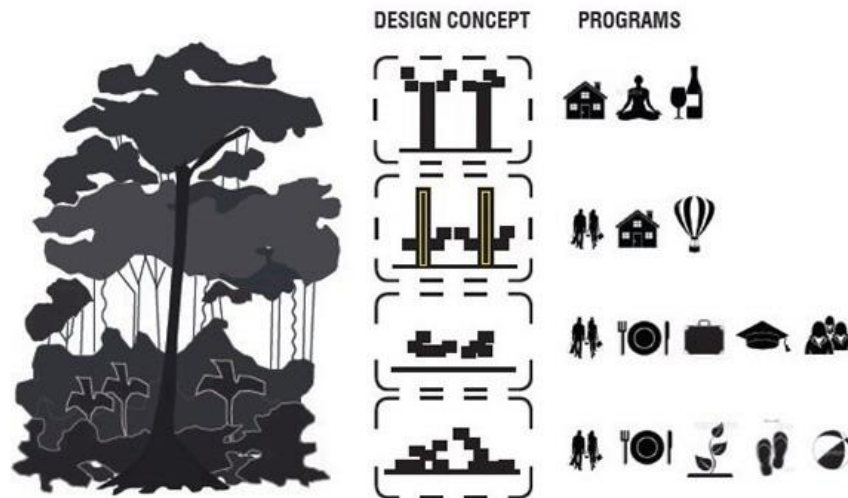


FIG. 8. Rainforest as Inspiration. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

The second tier of the rainforest is the understory layer. This is home to shaded shrubs, small trees and a number of animals. Plants climb into the trees to capture sunlight and so evolve larger leaves. Programmatically, this tier approximates and makes up the majority of habitable spaces for working, commercial and even recreation. The dramatic effect of sunlight penetrating deep down the forest floors is equivalent to atrium spaces that define architectural volumes and provide the ambience identity for the understory layer (Fig. 9). This day-lighting effect will be pleasurable in the ways that it connects the users to the dynamics of the natural world. Besides solving the Pekan Kuah issue on a performative level, the humanistic experience of pleasure-seeking has also been considered. This combination is one that Brown (2009) recommended in order to achieve sustainable features. An integral part of the design, buildings and in this case natural forms, provide both pleasure and

performance. As Brown remarked, 'A building that achieves broad architectural purpose and sustainable performance is elegant and, at its best, inspirational'.

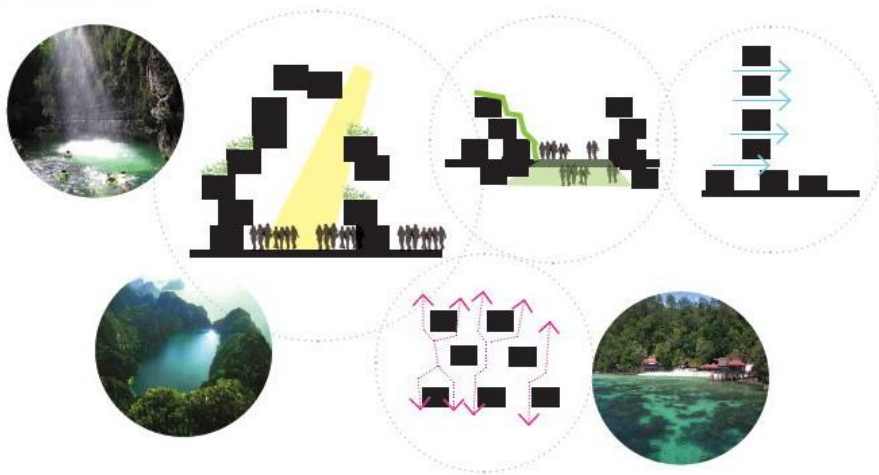


FIG. 9. Spatial Identity of the Understory Layer. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

The third tier is the canopy layer. The majority comprise larger trees with the densest biodiversity that supports a rich flora. Epiphytic plants are supported by the large trunks and branches. This tier is representative of the vertical finer-grained habitation layers that would support a rich mix of urban population. The top-most tier is called the emergent layer. A small and selected very large tree species grow to this height. Several unique but more diverse faunal species occupy this layer. Architecturally, this layer consists of the elite spaces such as pent-houses and event spaces that will benefit from the maximum unimpeded 360° views of the sea and surrounding islands (Fig. 10). Similar to the top-most floor in the 30 St Mary Axe building, this will make up about 2% of floor space percentage. The economic return nevertheless, will be in the 10% range (Vollmer 2013).

A similar appreciation for forest type environment has been recorded by Guichard-Anguis (2011) in her analysis of the forest of Kumano in Japan's Kii Mountains. One aspect of this was forestry as an industry. The more relevant aspect for Pekan Kuah project is with this forest as a new environment for a leisure boom associated with walking. At Kumano, this walking activity had its origin as a form of pilgrimage. The

significance of that ritual is slowly eroding although some parts of the spiritual benefits have been retained. More importantly the contact with nature offers a healing power. The forest might represent ascetic practices in the past. Nowadays it is part of a healthy programme of mental and physical regeneration. Whilst in Kumano, forest ambience originally had its religious connotation, in Pekan Kuah, the rainforest would enhance the retail experience as shopping becomes a form of therapy if not somewhat of a new 'religion' today.



FIG. 10. Architecture and Spatiality of the Emergent Layer. Picture by: A. F. Mahdzub (2012)

5 Conclusion

A successful shoppingscape on Langkawi will be inviting enough to be visited again and again not unlike a form of pilgrimage. Befitting the context of island tourism, here nature will be used to valorise culture and shopping (Gudis 2004). However, injection of nature will hopefully deviate from the total consumption of signs for places such as airports, shopping malls and tourists areas that so troubled Conley (2009). Although shoppingscape is an inescapable relation of ATM, bank cards and credit cards as she claimed, the patrons of the revitalised Pekan Kuah need not be

'narcissistic and solitary pleasure-seekers engaged in an ever-intensified accumulation of goods and signs or images of those goods and signs'. Bringing back nature into urban shopping places in the fullest sense may ingrain people's existential territories (mental or physical) and their ties to the world. This new conceptual model for the revitalised shoppingscape of Pekan Kuah represents Langkawi as a bio-diversely rich natural environment. New structures not only provide a new kind of public spaces in Langkawi but the integration of natural elements within architecture and urban areas also change the perception of public spaces there as a whole - thus transforming Pekan Kuah as the Rainforest Shopping Paradise of Langkawi.

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