



# Under the Flyovers of Kuala Lumpur: User centered activities in leftover spaces

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## Abstract

Existences of public spaces in cities are essentials for social interactions to take place, fostering the creation of sustainable, safe and livable cities. Although public spaces are often designed for certain activities, existence of unplanned spaces seemed interwoven in the cityscape, some in the form of leftover spaces, including under the flyovers and bridges, which offers an abundance of opportunities. This paper attempts to review activities under flyovers initiated by its local community in Kuala Lumpur and aims to contribute in further identifying the leftover spaces, and to the possible activities to be considered in developing these spaces to benefit surrounding communities.

Keywords: Public Spaces; leftover spaces; activities; community involvement.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/jabs.v3i7.267>

## 1.0 Introduction

Traditional master planning of cities at which designers, planners, developers and authorities regulates rather than initiates are currently being criticized of contributing to the rigidity, social exclusions and outdated-before-completed planning approach as mentioned by Peter Bishop & Lesley Williams (2012). The planning of cities that are tight and restraint with intended uses place strong constraints to activities, users, diversities and possibilities that loose space may stimulate as mentioned by Karen A. Frank (2006). Public spaces should accommodate change and people from all sorts of background should be accessible to public spaces with the right to variety and flexibility of as mentioned by Wakhidah Kurniawati (2011). Studies on three cities namely Berlin, Brussels and London by Verlag Muller and Busman (2002) shows that the city is dynamic and continuously developing every day where continual phenomena emerges in space, time and energy, breaking out from the constraint of organized and stable public space into a space of uncertainty. Consideration on temporariness is as important as planned in designing public spaces rather than fixed and rigid planning that might hinder certain group of people from being a part of the city. User centered planning approaches that cherish existing site values that nurture possibilities and define the missing are becoming popular. Insensitive development erases the memory, identity and the existing surrounding community, rather than embarking from the present nature of the site.

In leftover spaces, restraint on possibilities becomes vague thus cultivate experimentation of uses, allowing local community to decide on who, how, when and probability of its usage. This paper attempts to review the possibilities under the flyovers initiated by local community – free from the forced, organized, structured assumptions of the designer, focusing on two case studies in the setting of Kuala Lumpur. This paper contributes to further identifying the leftover spaces and the possible activities to be considered in developing these spaces to benefit surrounding communities gearing towards sustainable cities in Malaysian context.

### Leftover spaces

Leftover spaces have been defined in many ways such as “spaces of uncertainty” (Muller and Busmann, 2002), “urban voids that are considered unutilized, unnoticed or meaningless by a large segment of community” (Eli First and Tamar Pertzov (2004) from Abraham Akkerman and Ariela F. Cornfeld, 2009) and “could be old building yards, lanes, or casual passageways, evolving through an ongoing informal use,” (Akkerman and Ariela F. Cornfeld, 2009), “the areas underneath the bridges are defined as un-designed, leftover spaces” (Selcen Özgül Özkan, 2010). Having a long list of definition, (Karen A. Frank and Quentin Stevens, 2006) further defines leftover spaces based on various writers as stated:

“Lacking officially assigned uses, leftover spaces and abandoned spaces lie outside the “rush and flow” as well as control regulations and surveillance that come with the established uses of planned urban public space. They are the negative or void to the city of named and fixed types of open space (park, plaza, street, sidewalk) – the “other” places, what Ignasi de Sola-Morales calls *terrain vague* (1995). Calling them “superfluous landscapes”, Nielsen (2002) sees abandon space as the “backside” of the designed, “primary” spaces of public life, which he sees as controlled and scripted, following the model of the theme park and the mall. Also called “no man’s land”, “indeterminate spaces”, and “free zone” (Gorth and Corjin,

2005), abandoned and leftover spaces, temporarily free of official planning and commoditization, are appropriate for other uses.”

### **Activities**

Jacobs (1993) mentioned of need for “eyes upon the street” belonging to street’s natural proprietors’ (both residents and users). Enhance by a diversity of activities and functions that naturally create peoples places. Gehl (1996) described activities that people carry out in public spaces when the environment is conducive, and categorize it in three types: necessary, optional and social activities. Bently et al. (1985) mentioned the importance of activities and uses as experiences in which variety of experience implies places with varied forms, uses and meanings. This variety in uses open up to another level of variety which include attracting a variety of users for varied reason at varied times because different types of activity, forms and people provide a rich perceptual mix. The importance of activities in spaces contributes to surveillance, safety, social interactions and meanings.

Recent planning approach that looks at potential of phases, sequential and smaller initiatives in development are favourable as it is more sustainable and reacts fast to changes compared to longer term planning that might not happen as planned. Peter Bishop & Lesley Williams (2012) advocates, ‘often the unplanned activities that provide diversity and dynamism that make urban areas attractive and livable’. They argue that making small changes in the ‘nooks and crannies of existing urban environment’ (in other words the leftover spaces) could accumulate in to a greater betterment of urban life as compared to the planned homogenous spaces with little vitality. Hence, supporting temporary uses and activities is becoming popular as it opens up experimentation and trial an error with immediate actions. Smaller changes in the urban fabric allow the existing community to adapt and grow naturally into stronger communities which will lead to safe and liveable cities. In order for the temporary activities to occur naturally, urban spaces must be allowed to be loose to a certain degree. Likewise, loose space are mostly generated by activities that are none productive or reproductive, but generated by activities related to leisure, entertainment, self or political expression, reflection or social interaction as mentioned by Karen A. Frank (2006).

### **Characteristic of Under the Flyovers**

Flyover that is also known as overpass is defined as ‘a bridge carrying one railway line or road over another’ by Oxford Dictionaries (abstracted online on June 2012). The uniqueness of flyovers lies in its character of an overhead shelter with its generous underneath space that is longitudinal and barrier-free. Generally, the shape under flyovers have convex ‘roof’, the volume of space may varies according to the ground level where it is constructed. These diverse volumes stimulate different activities to happen mostly due to limitation in height clearance. The finishes under the flyovers vary in terms of the ground covering which include interlocking block pavement, paved road, earth and natural landscape.

## **2.0 Methodology**

This paper presents case studies to illustrate activities that took place under flyovers of Kuala

Lumpur focusing on two areas namely under the flyover of MRR2 at Jalan Kanan 1 and the flyover of Penchala Link at Jalan Sungai Penchala in which positive activities are observed taking place. The two case studies will be reviewed in terms of the similarities and dissimilarities of activities that occur. Flyovers of Kuala Lumpur are chosen since it is the capital city and the most urbanized state in Malaysia. Visual observation of activities will be recorded in the form of photographs, sketches and writing records.

## Introducing Case Studies

### Case Studies 1: Under the Flyover of MRR2 at Jalan Kanan 1, Kuala Lumpur

The MRR2 or Kuala Lumpur Middle Ring Road 2 stretches 35 kilometre, was a project of Public Works Department (PWD) which provides connection to various highways in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. For its construction, some squatters have been relocated especially around Ampang, Pandan and Cheras areas. Under the MRR2 lies Jalan Kanan 1 that connects to the immediate surroundings of Kampung Pandan Luar and Kampung Pandan Dalam which shares facilities and amenities on both sides, such as the food court and eatery, schools, religious facilities, commercial and offices. The compact grains of both areas lack the foremost important amenity, namely a public open space where freedom and various activities could happen. This could be one of the contributing factors which pilot the use of the leftover space under the flyover apart from its strategic location and historical background.



Fig. 1. The location of the study area under the flyover of MRR2 at Jalan Kanan 1.  
Source: Google Earth Image retrieved and modified by the author, August 2012.

### Case Studies 2: Under the Flyover of Penchala Link at Jalan Sungai Penchala, Kuala Lumpur

Penchala Link is a 5.5 kilometer link that provides connection between the Lebuhraya Damansara-Puchong (LDP) in the west and Jalan Bukit Kiara at Mont Kiara in the east, a

direct link to and from Kuala Lumpur avoiding commuting along the congested Jalan Damansara and Jalan Kepong, as well as an alternative highway of North Klang Valley Expressway - NKVE. The Pechala Link was completed in 2004 and is part of a border network of SPRINT Highway that is managed, designed and constructed by a concession company known as Sistem Penyuraian Trafik KL Sdn Bhd (SPRINT). (abstracted form sprint.com.my on August 2012).

Penchala Link passes across a Malay Reserved land of Kampung Sungai Penchala that consists of smaller villages namely Kampung Penchala Indah, Kampung Palimbayan and Kampung Palimbayan Indah. Set in a village setting, the ambiance of Kampung Sungai Penchala differs from the rush and crowd of surrounding urbanized areas of Taman Tun Dr Ismail and Damansara Perdana. Though the arrangement of houses and buildings are loose, most of the lands are privately owned except for compounds of several public amenities such as mosques and *rukun tetangga* (community associations) often fixed in nature in terms of activities. This results in the modification of leftover spaces with various activities by the community.

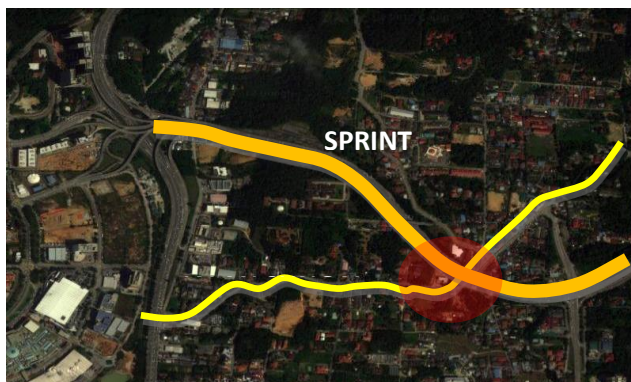


Fig. 2. The location of the study area under the flyover of Penchala Link at Jalan Sungai Penchala.  
Source: Google Earth Image retrieved and modified by the author, August 2012.

### 3.0 Result

Field observation that was carried out during day time and night time in both sites provides a better understanding of possible activities that occur in leftover spaces specifically under the flyovers in Kuala Lumpur. Although Gehl (1996) stresses on the strong relationship of activities with its environment, for the purpose of this paper, only the types of activities will be discussed. The findings shows of some similarities in activities such as stalls and cafes, recreational activities, business and services as well as the basic of seeing and being seen.

#### Food Stalls

Food stalls are seen in both case studies though varies in numbers, operation time and location. Under the MRR2, the food stalls are scattered but maintain a direct relationship to

the roadside. The stalls operate only during day time selling banana fritters and local *kuihs* in the morning, drinks and *cendol* during lunch time and *lemang* from noon to the evening. Under the Penchala Link, the food stalls are arranged in a linear pattern along the roadside that operates at different times such as morning, evening and night. The stalls offer a variety of food from finger foods, breakfast and lunch meals, cigarettes and candy as well as burgers and hotdogs.

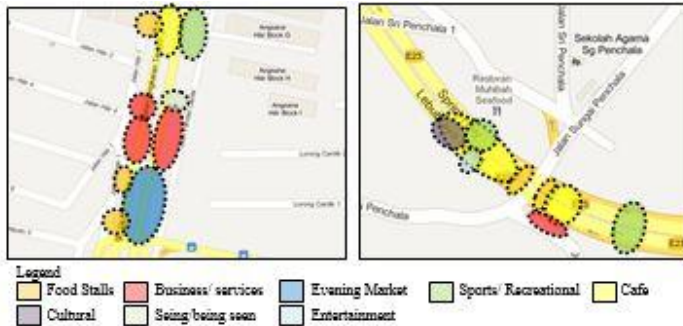


Fig. 3. Types of activities under the flyovers of (a) MRR2 at Jalan Kanan 1; (b) Penchala Link at Jalan Sungai Penchala.

Source: Google Map image retrieved and modified by the author, August 2012.



Fig. 4. Linear row of stalls where some operates during (a) day and; (b) some at night under the Penchala Link flyover.

### Cafes

Activities of eating, having some drinks with friends, gossiping, and watching television are some of the leisure activities that appear in the cafes of both case studies. Under the MRR2, only one cafe operates namely the *Mai Sembang Kopitiam*, and its location is secluded at the far end of the flyover. The cafe operates at noon till late night and also being supported by recreational activities that take place beside the cafeteria. Dynamic cafe activities could be felt under the Penchala Link flyover due to the variety of food served by three main cafes. *Apek Corner* serves a variety of soup-based meal from morning till tea time and at times a

*roti canai* stall operates in the morning. Movements of people that come and go, stopping to choose their meal contribute to the vibrant atmosphere. In the evening when *Apek Corner* closes, the cafe activities shifted to the opposite *Warung Cherry* which offers ala carte menu, strengthen by entertainment such as watching television, alternate weeks of *dikir barat* performance and paid karaoke sessions.



Fig. 5. (a) *Mai Sembang Kopitiam* cafe under the MRR2 in the evening; cafe under the Penchala Link (a) in the morning *Apek Corner* (b) and at night *Warung Cherry*.

### Sports and Recreational Activities

Under the flyover of MRR2, activities of chess playing, carom and ping pong takes place beside the café, often receive and produce cheering, inviting participation of other people, as spectators. Under the Penchala Link, extreme sports of paintball is set approximately 100 meters from the *Apek Corner* cafe happens during weekends. Leisure activities take place inside *Warung Cherry* areas



Fig. 6. Recreational activities (a) under MRR2 occur beside the cafe such as ping pong, carom and (b) chess games. (c) Extreme sports of paintball bunkers are isolated from the cafe but connected visually. The sport only takes place during weekends.

### Business and Services

Under the MRR2 flyover, car wash service only operates after 6 o'clock in the evening to night time; where else under the Penchala Link, it operates during day time supported by a workshop next door – the only service available. Contrarily, under the flyover of MRR2, other types of business such as toy stall, used clothes and movers (lorry service) are found.



Fig. 7. Business and services offers under the MRR2 flyover include (a) evening to night time carwash service; (b) movers and lorry service; (c) toy stall and used clothes (bundle) stall.



Fig. 8. (a) Carwash and (b) workshop services are provided under the Penchala Link flyover.

### Evening Market

Evening market (*pasar tani*) is held twice weekly under the MRR2 flyover. The colorful atmosphere of goods such as fruits, meat and fish, shawls and food transformed the ambiance of this leftover space into spaces for interactions and chatting where neighbours and friends bump into each other and the sidewalks act as seating apart from fulfilling their need to do grocery.



Fig. 9. (a) Evening market activities creates a lively ambiance on the leftover space where (b) meeting other member of community happens while shopping for groceries, (c) fresh chicken, meat, fishes as well as, (d) fruits and others.

### Cultural Activities

Under the flyover of Penchala Link, a unique practice of cultural activities is seen on alternate Friday nights, where a small community of *Kelantanese* that live in the area sometimes fill their leisure time with *dikir barat*, a form of traditional performance that consist of *tukang*



*karut*, members and traditional music instruments. The cultural activities require approval from the Rukun Tetangga Kampung Sungai Penchala and usually in collaborations with the owner of the cafe *Warung Cherry* and clubs such as Kelab Jaguh.



Fig. 10. (a) Temporary stage for in expensive material; (b) sofas are arranged for the convenience of spectators, (c) view towards the cafe seating's from the stage.



Fig. 11. (a) Traditional music instruments – komping, rebana, gong and others are being used; (b) *tukang karut* leads and follows by others in unison of voice and upper body parts movement; (c) a friendly match of *dikir barat* enliven the leftovers space. Source: Kelab Jaguh, 2012.

### Seeing and Being Seen

Kostof (1992) advocates of the term public spaces where he recommends a character of freedom in that space; 'freedom of action and the right to stay inactive' in the space. In both case studies, these activity are seen, at no specific place, but some similarities are seen that are the used sofa areas and places to lean such as at the column

### Sense of Belonging and Ownership

According to Lynch (1969), people feel safe when they are familiar with their environment, where they can orientate and navigate themselves in the environment. In both case studies, some modification of the environment activities is evident and these changes manifest efforts to make places more familiar, where people feel associated and could orientate themselves in their community.

## 4.0 Conclusion and Discussion

Observation of the case studies strongly manifest opportunities in leftover spaces specifically under the flyovers, though different in location and community background, suggest of activities and uses that could be considered in designing spaces under the flyovers if conditions permit. Some similarities that attract users were found such as cafes, food stalls,

leisure, recreational activities, business and occasional weekly activities. In order to create places with identity, activities that are distinctively unique to that area should be encouraged. To understand further the opportunities that stimulate activities, research on the physical characteristics, and the complexity of community background need to be conducted.



Fig. 12. (a) Photographs pasted on the walls; (b) landscaping; (c) chandelier; (d) detailing beautifies the leftover space under the flyover of Penchala Link where a strong sense of community ownership could be felt.

## Acknowledgements

Warmest appreciation highlighted to University Teknologi MARA UiTM, Prof. Dr. Mohamed Yusoff Abbas (Head of Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies). My Highest appreciation to Mr. Ainor Izman Mahmood, Mr. Sugeh Budee Qamaruz Zaman, Kelab JAGUH, Assoc. Prof Dr. Shuhana Shamsuddin and Prof. Dr. Bashri Sulaiman and the communities of both case studies in showing the opportunities in leftover spaces specifically in Malaysian Context.

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