Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia

Ross King
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Ross King's *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia* provides a provocative interpretation of urban landscapes in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, a recently built government administrative center. He attempts to explicate meanings of the built urban environment as well as its history, ideology, and contemporary possibilities.

Consisting of a preface, five chapters, and an afterword, the book is highly illustrated with pictures, sketches, maps, and architectural plans. In the preface, King introduces the dilemma of Malaysian nationalism, imagining a multicultural nation with a politically dominant Malay Muslim majority, through the specter of the fiftieth anniversary of independence. He informs us that its two venues – Kuala Lumpur's jumbled, multi-community spaces and Putrajaya's purely Malay pan-Islamic spaces – indicates an ambivalent identity: Kuala Lumpur, "historically a Chinese town … is today the capital of a nation that privileges the Malays" (p. xxiii). He immediately moves to selectively deconstruct Malay identity, stating that it is "in the main a construction of the colonial era" during which people of diverse origins from insular Southeast Asia migrated to the Peninsula (ibid). This oft-repeated assertion, which is a hotly contested topic in Malaysian discourse, indicates a slant toward the widespread Chinese Malaysian perspective that Malays are not the country's true "natives." King also states that his focus will be to "read" the messages of architecture in terms of things observed, imagined, forgotten, and potentially reconciled along with some historical background.

In Chapter 1, "The Phenomenal City: Diversity of Space," the author draws upon theorists of "the postmodern city" to describe the greater Kuala Lumpur metropolitan region in the form of three transits: the arrival from global hyperspace (Kuala Lumpur International Airport through older transforming plantations and neighborhoods to the KL Sentral transport interchange and the Petronas Towers, Putrajaya, and Cyberjaya mega-projects), moving through the fractured colonized landscape of Chinese, Malay, and Indian urban spaces; and the Klang Valley (the gentrifying predominantly Indian Hindu Brickfields, Malay Shah Alam, and Klang and Port Klang with the Sultan of Selangor's palace and history of Chinese and

Indian working class struggles). King argues that his aim in architectural interpretations of these spaces is to provide a reading that suits his current purposes (p. 55). To the contrary, a more rigorous examination of diverse local interpretations over time would have strengthened his book.

In Chapter 2, "The Contested City: Race and the Social Production of Space," King presents some historical background of the greater Kuala Lumpur region. He argues that any account of its social production must consider these "five inescapable realities": race, the culture of suspicion, the production of spatial meanings, the material benefits, and the individual personalities of successive prime ministers (p. 57). King depicts the largely European and Japanese constructed "Malay" and more actively self-constructed "Chinese" racial identities as increasingly segregated through the colonial implementation of the Malay Reservation Enactments of the 1930s and the Brigg's Plan for New Villages in the 1950s.

The civil war with the Malaysian Communist Party, disputes over postcolonial citizenship, together with spatial, ideological, and class divisions were inscribed in the urban landscape. The author describes how post-independence tensions over language and education issues culminated in the 1969 post-election racial riot, after which Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's conceptualization of the "Malay dilemma" gained traction and the New Economic Policy was implemented to uplift Malays. King notes that Mahathir, as chief UMNO ideologue, combined the promotion of Malay privileges with the goal of achieving developed country status, which worked as long as the economy expanded. But after the 1985 recession he turned toward privatization, liberalization, and the formation of Malay conglomerates that were handed the infrastructure components of the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan. King argues the regime of surveillance, fear, and Malay spatial claims stem from the racial divide.

In Chapter 3, "The Imagined City: Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, and the Multimedia Super Corridor," he describes the visions entailed in the processes of social production of these urban spaces. He demonstrates that both practical ideas about relieving congestion in Kuala Lumpur and utopian ideas of creating a high-tech and cyber-savvy Malaysia consonant with Mahathir's Vision 2020 underlie this project. Cyberjaya was imagined as a medium for housing thousands of residents and hundreds of IT and multimedia companies. It also became home to the Malaysia Multimedia University, which UMNO leaders claimed to be modeled after Stanford University. In contrast with Cyberjaya, King demonstrates that planners of Putrajaya, especially Mahathir, were more concerned with content. They devised schemes

of a "garden city" with numerous "precincts" housing the government and administrative offices. The reports called for "Moorish architecture," and subsequently several domed buildings were constructed. Finally, King presents his "deep reading" of Putrajaya as political and cultural programs and a re-imagining of Malaysia. He underscores that the ethnic and religious diversity of Kuala Lumpur is not replicated in Putrajaya, which embodies Malay and pan-Islamic visions.

Chapter 4, "The Forgotten City: Spatial Representations and their Absences," argues that imaginings of identity and of the city involve selective memory and forgetting, and that references in Putrajaya are really about Kuala Lumpur. King claims that Malay UMNO leaders are selectively forgetting Malay origins outside of the Sriwijaya-Melaka genealogy and syncretistic, Sufi, and customary roots outside of normative Islamic orientations. In terms of the city, these leaders are selectively forgetting the *kampung* (village) economy and diverse architectural styles of Kuala Lumpur's built environment. He interprets that the orientation toward the Middle East evoked by Putrajaya's architecture should be understood as an attempt to escape continued western and Chinese domination and as a retreat into *kampung* conservatism to avoid multiculturalism.

Chapter 5, "The Metamorphic City: In the Interstices of the Hyperspace, Cyberspace, and the Malay World," attempts to answer the question of what sort of Kuala Lumpur is emerging. King describes the Malay-Muslim community as being split between the grand "utopian" ideas of two Islamic conservatisms represented by the UMNO-Putrajaya megaproject assimilation into global capitalism and the PAS-Kelantan framework based in *kampung* economics and religious policing. He erroneously asserts that both ignore the question of class, which only surfaces in the garb of racial struggles with Indonesians, Bangladeshis, and other "guest workers" (p. 208). This perspective ignores PAS' class-based critique of UMNO-NEP's elitist orientation in the 1990s and 2000s and PM Badawi's successful appropriation of populist discourse in the 2004 general election. King posits that the urban spaces with bars, pirated videos, religious festivals, headscarf wearing Malay-Muslim women drinking beer, and anti-establishment middle-class art workers are spaces of resistance. Finally, King searches for clues to the newly emerging Kuala Lumpur in spaces that "enable an acceptance of otherness," without explaining his underlying assumptions about why such spaces rather than spaces of entrenched differences offer the best insight into future courses of change.

In the Afterword, "Widening Divide or Conciliatory Space," King revisits his core ideas of "reading" urban spaces as texts, architecture as discourse, selective memory and forgetting, and fragmented space as conciliatory. This book offers a thought-provoking top-down approach to interpreting the meanings of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. It would be best utilized alongside more bottom-up ethnographies of local "readings" of urban spaces in Malaysia.

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