

ETHNOGRAPHY AS THE TOOL TO UNDERSTAND SPACE AND PLACE

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As we traverse the street through Kampung Gersik to Kampung Bintawa, at first glance, we see that the redevelopment of the whole area is underway. If we carefully make our way from Kampung Boyan, we will first encounter a lively arterial public space dotted with diverse small enterprises. Then, we succeedingly encounter houses built too near the street that their threshold fleets by. Only when we observe carefully can we make out its character. Passing through them deep enough, we start to feel that the urban scale – exacerbated by the towering masses over the Tebingan Sarawak – is slowly being brought down to a more human scale and sympathetically articulated street.

Further down the street, we know we are nearing the core of the kampung as we start seeing stark visual contrast of an image slowly being brought over to the foreground. That is the image of partially demolished houses and formerly inhabited homes. Little by little we are brought to the realisation that almost surely this place will be no more. This implied doubt is constructed from various contradictions: 1) we are sure that the demolition process is underway, but currently everything is stopped; 2) the houses are demolished, but their suggested form is still there; 3) we know that the works are carried out in sections, but the sections are in patches; and, 4) we can safely assume that the works involved heavy machinery, but the works started from the narrow core. Indeed, little makes sense to those that are out of the loop. Most people are, save for the families that made and maintain the kampung as a place.

The people's response to their relocation, a pattern seen in previous relocation projects, is telling. The rows of houses offered them a new start – different from the culturally negotiated kampung plot boundary – but one that did not foster the creation of a place familiar to them. This incongruence is further underscored by the current inhabitants, who responded to the inactivity by constructing new structures, effectively stretching the time by adding more work – thus time – to complete the project.

From the ethnographic point of view, this response is a form of subdued but active resistance. If the demolition is at the kampung's innermost core, the resistance is carried out at the periphery. We see first-hand how the complexity of urban places organises itself as a reaction to the political economy aspiration of authority. The relocation gives a glimpse of an out-of-proportion scale akin to the one across the river, so the resistance attempts to strengthen the human scale of the kampung. The demolition took the capital away from the people, so they resisted by capitalising on whatever little they could. If the plan to redevelop the whole area is followed through, then this familiar image of the place will surely be missed because little could be reproduced at the newly relocated site. In the meantime, I urge all to take a trip down that street and read the kampung not as forms but as a place: a situated culture of its people, and empathize with their struggle to maintain their cultural identity.

