

**CONSERVING
THE CHARACTER OF
JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN**

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CONTENTS

1 KUALA LUMPUR AND ITS NEEDS FOR URBAN DESIGN CONTROL

- 1.1 Controlling the design of the city.
- 1.2 What is Urban Design.
- 1.3 The Elements of Urban Design.
- 1.4 Why is Urban Design required.
- 1.5 Why is Urban Design consideration lacking.
- 1.6 Contribution of Urban Design toward society.
- 1.7 Urban Design tools.

2 JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN - BRIEF HISTORY AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

- 2.1 Brief History.
- 2.2 Location.
- 2.3 Activities.
- 2.4 Planning, Architecture and Environment.

3 JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN - ITS ROLE AND DILEMMA

- 3.1 Position in the development pattern of Kuala Lumpur.
- 3.2 Role in the Central Business District.
- 3.3 Modernization - Haphazard? A Threat?
- 3.4 COuld Urban Design Control be a solution?

4 THE USE OF URBAN DESIGN TOOLS TO IMPROVE JALAN TUANKU ABDUL RAHMAN

- 4.1 Consideration for pedestrian.
- 4.2 The need for pedestrianisation.
- 4.3 Separating wheels from people.
- 4.4 Conservation.
- 4.5 Design of Infilling
- 4.6 Street Furnishing.

5 DEFINATION OF PROBLEM AREAS

- 5.1 Demand for Urban Amenities.
- 5.2 Demand for Floor Space.
- 5.3 Vehicular Traffic Requirements.
- 5.4 Pedestrian Requirements.
- 5.5 Environmental Control.
- 5.6 Architectural Control.

6 MASTERPLAN PROPOSAL

- 6.1 Urban Design Vocabulary.
- 6.2 Sketch Proposals.

7 CONCLUSION

Appendices

Bibliography

1.1 CONTROLLING THE DESIGN OF THE CITY

We often see the visualisation of a major project in the city or even the renewal development of a major street or area. But what will happen, as usual, to portions of the project when they are parcelled out to different developers to undertake, and what will happen to the overall scheme in say thirty or forty years' time when every development is completed.

The forces at work in our cities are so diverse, and the rate of social change has accelerated so rapidly, that it is most unlikely that such a large project, if it is constructed at all, will end up looking like the original design. All too often, the merit of the published design derives from the architecture of the proposed buildings, rather than from any underlying coherence in the plan itself. What if the building is not placed at precisely the angle shown in the drawings? What if materials vary; what if changes in architectural taste occur? What if changes in function or economics force major changes in size or shape of buildings? Will the design still make sense?

Another, more difficult question: What about those parts of the city where large-scale redevelopment will not occur, only a process of piece-meal modifications on a block-by-block, or even lot-by-lot basis? Is there any way to plan such areas so that they come to have the coherence of a group of buildings designed at one time? Is there an alternative to architectural consistency that will still produce a unified design.

The planning process of Kuala Lumpur, as with other major cities of the world have considered their primary task to be, not control over design, but over more abstract considerations of public health and welfare. The basic framework for the design of the city is determined through a combination of local zoning regulations and the street pattern, neither of which has been enacted with its design implications in mind.

Zoning is a technical subject while street mapping is considered a routine matter of little conceptual interest. Learning more about these technical specialities will provide us clues to the solution of the fundamental problem of city design: How can we design a city if we cannot design all the buildings?

Zoning, as the name implies, is a process of dividing a city into zones, each of which has different legal requirements. Within each zone, regulations specify the size and shape of the building that can be placed on the land, and the uses to which buildings can be put.

The regulations specified what activities could take place in each zone, and imposed 'setbacks' on buildings based on the size of road that border the boundary line, the adjacent lots and the fire-hazard rating of the building in question (though this affects only industrial buildings).

While zoning regulations are far from being a master plan, it is to forget, now that their use has become a routine, what an enormous restriction of property rights the enactment of zoning represented. Owners of land were used to the idea, that, if they owned a piece of property, they could do what they wished with it - subject at most to some deed restrictions.

The legal rationale for zoning is the authority of the Government to make regulations to protect public health, safety and general welfare. But, zoning, whatever its rationale and intention, is as strong a design control as any element. The setbacks created by New York's 1916 zoning changed the tall building from the straight towers of the early skyscrapers to the pyramidal masses.

A parallel situation exists in the case of street mapping, which also has extensive design implications that are largely intended or based upon antiquated and stereotyped ideas.