

A walk through history with 'Kaki Lima Stories'



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The 'Kaki Lima Stories' book has both retrospective and forward-looking views on how five-foot ways fit into Malaysian society. Photo: Aiman Mos Johari

How many of us really take the time to explore and truly acquaint ourselves with the cities we live in?

In our haste to get from Point A to Point B, we tend to simply rush past and overlook our surroundings.

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But the next time you find yourself in downtown Kuala Lumpur, do take a look around. Do you notice the archways and colonnades that form covered walkways in front of old shophouses?

These are known as five-foot ways, or “kaki lima”. They’re a unique type of sidewalk that you can only find in historical areas of urban city centres within South-East Asia, particularly Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Thailand.

Sir Stamford Raffles is often credited with the proliferation of five-foot ways throughout the region, as he introduced regulations that required new buildings to have a covered walkway on the ground level, providing shade from the sun and shelter from the rain for pedestrians, as well as space for outdoor commercial activities for traders.

The regulations stipulated that the walkways must be five feet in width, hence its name: five-foot way.

Charmed by the cultural value and history of our five-foot ways, Associate Professor Camelia Kusumo, Programme Director of the School of Architecture, Building and Design at Taylor’s University, and Lee Sze-ee, a senior lecturer of the same faculty, decided to explore its historical and contemporary usage in Kuala Lumpur, which culminated in a book, [Kaki Lima Stories: Life In The Five-Foot Ways Of Downtown Kuala Lumpur](#) (published by Suburbia Projects).



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“The idea for the book came from our fascination with the five-foot ways, not only as part of our urban heritage, but also as a liveable space within Malaysian cities,” says Kusumo.

People stories

As a public space, five-foot ways serve two types of activities: transitory and stationary. Pedestrians will use them out of necessity to get from one place to another – that’s the transitory function.



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This inspired Kusumo and Lee to not only look into the physical use of five-foot ways, but to also capture the personal stories of those whose livelihoods are centred around the open-air walkways that we tend to take for granted.

“We realised that, as architects and in a conservation effort, we often focus heavily on the physical heritage, but overlook the intangible heritage within it – the stories of the people,” says Kusumo.

“Some of the activities and trades on the kaki lima are temporary and gradually disappearing, so we hope that the book can serve as a source of memory and a witness for future generations.”

In Kaki Lima Stories, the duo investigate the five-foot way as part of the public realm by illustrating how the physical attributes of the 31 five-foot way “sticky” activities contribute to the liveability of downtown Kuala Lumpur.

“In this context, ‘sticky’ activities are those that might slow down the movement of pedestrians, but this is exactly what makes the pedestrians concentrate on shop displays and makes public space great,” she explains.

While conducting the interviews, the authors observed both the constancy and transience of cities.

“We learned that some of the shops have been there for decades, like Chai Huat Hin Trading and K.B. Kader, while some were newly set up and have only been around for several months, such as Jamboo Concept Store and Small Shifting Space,” says Lee.

“When we launched the book in July 2023, some of the places we documented were no longer there, such as Ezze Cafe Classic Station. Things are moving fast, and we do not know how long they will be there. Some of the oft-visited places in my childhood, such as Popular Bookstore (now the Lantern Hotel) and the Fung Wong Biscuit Store, are no longer the same,” she adds.

‘On the road’ reading Kusumo and Lee began working on the book in 2022 and published it just over a year later, thanks to Think City’s Downtown Kuala Lumpur Grants programme.

In the book’s foreword, Hamdan Abdul Majeed, managing director of Think City, wrote that “the insights gleaned from this cultural endeavour highlight how history and culture have shaped these spaces and continue to influence their present-day role.”

Kusumo shares that it wasn’t easy to get the stories, as not everyone was willing to be interviewed.

“Another challenge was to find a suitable publisher, and coordinate with the publisher on the details of how the book should present, especially the legibility of the drawings,” she adds.

A key feature of the book are the simple line drawings that illustrate how the five-foot ways are used by various shops and vendors, such as cafes, sundry shops, florists and cobblers.

Without the distraction of colours in the drawings, the book is able to clearly show readers how the space is being used.



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