Did this shortcoming inadvertently jeopardised what could’ve potentially been the great townscape of Malaysia?

Technology at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur Campus, Prof Dr Shuhana Shamoudin acknowledges this “The complication with urban design arises due to its nature of being at the interface between architecture and town planning. This sometimes results in it being treated as a ‘no man’s land,’ with no profession championing its cause.”

She further laments this sorry state of affairs. “What we lack in the physical planning of Malaysia is not the dearth of Urban planners or architects, or a distinct legacy of our own urban typology. The dire problem lies in the understanding and appreciation of urban design as a significant factor in determining the character and quality of our towns and cities. Even the best people in the best places still perceive urban design as facets of street enhancement, or worse, landscaping projects.”

A prolific writer on urban design, she pointed out in her doctoral thesis, Identity of Place in Malaysia, that the old parts of Malayan town centres have “stronger identity compared to the newer additions of the town centres. Physical structures and urban spaces play important roles in helping residents to identify the town centres.” This identity however is fast diminishing.

Rapid urbanisation and development rate usually becomes easy targets for naysayers, but as architects, planners, and professionals, do we really understand this need for phenomenology, this weave of intricate physical relationship we call urban design, and put it to good practice?

In search of spatial identity or a sense of place, Prof Dr Shuhana highlighted the prospects and threats besieging our towns and cities, not so much on the debates of distant places, but on the role of meanings and semantics in creating such unique character and identity in making our townscape memorable.

Our history it seems is pretty much a plethora of quirky, idiosyncratic urban forms and spaces such as the shophouses, five-foot-ways, high streets, and pedagogy (fields).

In the next time you are stuck in the dreaded NKVE or Federal Highway fantasising that one day you’d be able to walk or cycle or joggle or stroll down the five-foot-way of an uninterrupted and permeable space of quality urban spaces from Taman Tun to Bangsar and sneer at the guy stuck in traffic (which ain’t gonna happen), you might as well ponder this – that despite the one-upmanship and the ego trip: should design and professional practice, or life itself, take the fall for the incompetence, indifference, and lack of, or worse still, refusal to understand the basics of urban design?

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