Decontextualisation: some issues in the Southeast Asian urban and regional spatial constructs

L Boon-Thong

University of Malaya, Malaysia
boonthong.lee@gmail.com

Abstract. The problem of urban system in Southeast Asian countries (with the exception of Singapore, which is a city-state) is top-heavy. In the latter case, if the larger urban region of Jabotabek is considered, Jakarta has a population of some 30 million population, making it the largest urban conurbation in Southeast Asia! What led to these macrocephalic tendencies in Southeast Asia? This keynote paper briefly reviews the overall trend of Southeast Asian urbanisation and urban growth; and asseverates that the reactions/counter-reactions to these processes have decontextualised a quintessential and important maxim – “it is the people (whether social, cultural, or physical) that matters in cities”. There are three recognisable urbanisation processes and urban growth patterns in the last five to seven decades in Southeast Asia: 1) Superinduced Metropolitan Development, 2) Extended Metropolitan Region, and 3) Urban Convolution. Some disturbing features in the current strategies. Social disparity, Fragmented solution to QOL problems, Growing lead-lag disparity and Decontextualisation at the local level. Several pertinent questions ought to be asked. Will greenfield urban space development, like smart cities and new capital cities, lose their underlying charm of informality, like the para-transits (trishaws, tut-tuts) or the popular Southeast Asian al-fresco eateries (the street food vendors and hawkers)?

1. Introduction
It is an indisputable fact that the urban system in Southeast Asian countries (with the exception of Singapore, which is a city-state) is top-heavy [1]. Kuala Lumpur, for instance, has 22% of the total population in the country; Bangkok has 10 million population; Manila has 21% of the country’s population; and Jakarta has a population of 10 million plus. In the latter case, if the larger urban region of Jabotabek is considered, Jakarta has a population of some 30 million population, making it the largest urban conurbation in Southeast Asia! What led to these macrocephalic tendencies in Southeast Asia? This keynote paper briefly reviews the overall trend of Southeast Asian urbanisation and urban growth; and asseverates that the reactions/counter-reactions to these processes have decontextualised a quintessential and important maxim – “it is the people (whether social, cultural, or physical) that matters in cities”. Sometimes, such decontextualisation (whether macro, societal or at the individual level) may be due to the necessity for quick implementation to solve problems, political expediency, or even conceptual misunderstanding of ideas and policies borrowed from somewhere.

2. Urbanisation processes and urban growth patterns
The top-heaviness in the urban systems in favour of the capital city regions is indicative of their roles as conduits for global economic forces as well as their financial and politico-administrative functions.

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There are three recognisable urbanisation processes and urban growth patterns in the last five to seven decades in Southeast Asia: 1) Superinduced Metropolitan Development, 2) Extended Metropolitan Region, and 3) Urban Convolution, each with its distinctive problematic negative externalities which are briefly discussed here.

2.1. Superinduced Metropolitan Developments (SMDs)
Globalisation from the late 1960s onwards saw much of foreign direct investments (FDIs) pouring into Southeast Asian countries because of their lower cost of labour, among other reasons [2]. These globalised functions had shown a strong predilection for the location of manufacturing processes to be in and around major metropolitan centres, particularly focussing around the capital cities, which were able to provide the financial and other support services. Consequently, for the following 30 years or so until the late 1990s, the major gateway capital cities of each country, became the focus points for in-migration in response to job opportunities. More interestingly, it also meant that modern or rather postmodern functions and structures were then superimposed upon the traditional urban structures, most of which were colonial legacies of narrow, criss-crossing grids of streets. The result is a juxtaposition of postmodern structures (like hotels, condominiums, apartment blocks, supermarkets, and office blocks) and traditional homes and squatter huts. The traffic consequence is the infamous traffic 3Cs - congestion, confusion, and chaos – as seen in the 70s, 80s, and 90s in Bangkok, Manila and Jakarta.

![High-rise condominiums at the fringe of Kuala Lumpur](image)

**Figure 1.** High-rise condominiums at the fringe of Kuala Lumpur

2.2. Extended Metropolitan Regions (EMRs).
A concurrent development in the 1990s is what Terence McGee has referred to as the Extended Metropolitan Region. Rising land prices and land shortages within the central cities caused FDIs to leapfrog to the urban peripheries often into the surrounding cities and rural areas [3]. However, most of the EMRs were hardly self-containing and they were very much tied to the mother city. In other words, the pattern of urban growth was largely nodal-centric. The unintended aftermath was stranglehold traffic congestions towards/from the urban peripheries during the rush hours. Besides choking the central cities with a high level of pollution in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Manila, the burgeoning informal sector led to the increase of squatter populations and their associated squalid living conditions. Bangkok, in the 1990s, had about 1.2 million squatter/slum population; while almost 67,000 households were living in so-called “rat-holes” in Ho Chi Minh City. These negative externalities demand urgent attention and the paradoxical situation is that when urban dysfunctionalities are rectified, it attracts a further round of FDIs which will again cause new traffic and pollution problems, again requiring further reinvestments in overhead bridges, road widening, etc. In fact, both the urban growth patterns of SMDs and EMRs exhibit these unending paradoxical cycles.
2.3. Urban Convolution

Then came the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s which resulted in a dramatic decline of FDIs to the Southeast Asian region from 7.9% in 1998 to 2.8% in 2001. In the decade that followed, the trend continued. FDIs in Malaysia plunged by 81% in 2009 from the earlier year; the economy in Thailand and Indonesia contracted by 7.11% and 4.5% respectively in the first quarter of 2009. This has two significant impacts on the Southeast Asian urban cityscapes. Firstly, the financial crunch meant that remedial actions to correct the urban problems up to this point (brought about by the SMDs and EMRs) had to be whittled down or put on hold. Secondly, cities have now to vie for the dwindling flow of FDIs into the Southeast Asian region [4]. Consciously or unconsciously, regional cities began to strengthen or protect their regional competitiveness to attract the limited investment opportunities. How are they doing this?

In Malaysia, the new Economic Transformation Programme was mooted in 2010 as the roadmap to ensure that the city of Kuala Lumpur continue to be a world class city to be able to attract FDIs. In order to become the “iconic and world class city”, the programme involves a whopping 10-fold increase in physical investments from its RM40 billion in the 1990s to RM391 billion beginning from the 2010s. Among some of the projects are improving transportation, such as the integrated 150 km MRT system, improved utilities and amenities, and creating urban spatial clusters with first class amenities/connectivity to attract global firms. However, what is most significant and interesting in terms of urban growth patterns and processes is that, after the financial crisis, most FDIs were not in the manufacturing sector but in the financial, services, and commercial functions. These are the functions that require central locations. So once again, the global investments were bouncing back to the central locations rather than to the extended peripheries. So springing up in central cities were more post-postmodern structures such as supermarkets, shopping malls, office complexes, and condominiums. The consequence is a new wave of negative externalities compounding the previously unresolved urban problems of the 1980s and 1990s (unresolved because the public sector lacked the financial resources). The intertwining and intractable complexity of issues constitutes the new character of the Urban Convolution.

![SMD & EMR: cycle of paradox](image)
What was not surprising of the post-postmodern structures was the frenzy and relentless desire to build skyscrapers and high rises. In Kuala Lumpur, the Petronas Twin Towers was the tallest building in the world from 1998 to 2004 at a height of 452 metres with 88 floors. But come 2020, this will be surpassed by the Merdeka 118 Building at 644 metres with 118 floors and destined to be the fifth tallest in the world. In addition, are another 109 buildings that are more than 30 storeys added to the cityscape.

Are the other Southeast Asian capital cities going through the same urban growth processes as in Kuala Lumpur? Bangkok, in 2010, had the most office space among the ASEAN countries. Yet, because of the fear that “other cities are catching up” (according to Colliers Report in 2011), Bangkok embarked on a new wave of office development – another 132 buildings that are more than 60 storeys high. In addition, the nation’s tallest building - the 77-storey King Power Mahanakhon completed in 2016, is located smack at the heart of the CBD! Indelibly, the infamous Bangkok traffic jam would require massive investments in bridge networks, overpasses, expressways, and lane expansions to see some light in the resolution of their traffic gridlock. In Jakarta, Wisma 46 was once the tallest building in 1996 but has been overtaken by others since the 2010s by Gama Towers and Treasury Tower. Other skyscrapers include the Astra Tower, Sahid Sudirman Centre, Raffles Hotel, and the Pakubuwono Signature. In fact, there are 24 buildings that are more than 140 metres. No wonder, pollution and traffic snarls are getting worse in Jakarta exacerbated by the fact that 99.9% of the 20.8 million motorised vehicles in Indonesia are powered by leaded gas and diesel fuel. Precisely some of the factors for the urgent relocation of the capital city to East Kalimantan! Even in Yangon, there is this frenzy about building high-rises. Until the late 1990s, the tallest building was a 6-storey building! But by the 2010s, there are at least 20 buildings that are more than 20 storeys high, such as the Sakura Tower (20 storeys), Centrepoint Towers (20 storeys), Traders Hotel (22 storeys), Diamond Inya Plaza (34 storeys), etc. In Hanoi, in 2010s, there are 15 skyscrapers which are more than 35 storeys high with the highest the Landmark at 72 storeys (completed in 2011) located in the CBD. The October 2019 Vietnam Insider Report confirmed that the new high-rise apartment blocks in the heart of Hanoi are to be blamed for the traffic crunch in Hanoi unless another US$96 million are invested to combat the traffic congestion.

3. Some disturbing features in the current strategies.

3.1. Social disparity

In attempting to resolve the urban convolution problems, it is pertinent that any strategy/policy must, first and foremost, see people and communities. However, it is obvious that the pitch of “dubaism”, which is largely private-sector driven, is designed for maximum economic returns rather than for social living or improved quality of life [5]. The result is an increasing social disparity. It is clear that economically-motivated policies (or for a better term, the opulence growth paradigm) goaded by economic competitiveness towards urban development have little regard for “it’s the people that matters” in such issues as, for example, affordable housing. More condominiums are being built than efforts at the betterment of “kampungminiums”! The demand for space in the city centres also meant that heritage buildings and traditional kampungs/hamlets are in danger of being replaced by the post-postmodern superstructures. It is obvious that regional competitiveness displays more of the “bright side” (new superstructures) and decontextualises the “dark side” that is in need of urgent attention. For instance, the fact that only 42% of the urban population in Jakarta has access to piped water, requires immediate attention. Or that the Bangkok slum population has increased from 1.2 million in the 1990s to more than 1.5 million in the 2010s. With such increasing marginalisation and uneven access to services, it is obvious that the maxim that “cities are for the people” does not carry much weight.

3.2. Fragmented solution to QOL problems

The limited budget, because of the financial crisis and the intermittent flow of new FDIs, to resolve ecological and environmental issues meant that strategies become piecemeal and fragmented in its implementation. Pollution issues are becoming more serious with urban convolution [6]. Ozone
pollution levels in the capital cities are higher than the WHO standard of 60 parts per billion. In Bangkok, there are 4,000 to 5,000 premature deaths per year due to the particulate matters in the air. In Hanoi, traffic jams are costing the urban managers the loss of USD 1 billion every year. River pollution in Jakarta seems intractable towards a quick solution. Sungai Bahagia, for instance, was so replete with floating plastics that it was impossible to see the river water, it was reported.

3.3. Growing lead-lag disparity
As the hiatus between the leading major urban regions and the lagging rural hinterlands increases, rural urban migration has accelerated adding further pressure to the capital cities [7]. ASEAN countries are well aware of this tendency and have taken steps to counter rural urban mobility such as the building of new towns, rural urbanisation, agropolitans, land schemes, secondary cities, transmigration and, in the last two decades, IT corridors, megaconurbations, technopolises, smart cities, new capital cities, regionopolises, and so on. Except for transmigration, Malaysia is one country which has implemented almost all of these measures in some form or another, with differing degrees of successes. This keynote address does not allow details, but it is pertinent to note that some of these strategies have further contributed, unwittingly, to the decontextualisation of the human dimension. For instance, building new towns to relieve the population pressure in KL has been implemented since the mid-1950s. Borrowing from Ebenezer Howard’s garden city concept to lure outmigration from the city, many new towns and so-called housing estates have been established in and around Kuala Lumpur. However, these have attracted population in-movements from outside (three quarters of the population) rather than from Kuala Lumpur. The result is an urban coalescence to form Greater KL, thus, amplifying the traffic congestion and other urban problems. It is tempting to call this urban coalescence “Jabotabekisation” after the Greater Jakarta conurbation of Jabotabek! This process is also happening in other Southeast Asian capital cities.

3.4. Decontextualisation at the local level
Sometimes, planning and implementation of ideas, policies and strategies borrowed from elsewhere ignores the endemic realities of the society. This is seen, for instance, in the creation of the new capital city of Putrajaya in Malaysia. Established in the mid-1990s with the concept of a “garden city” and “intelligent city” (the concept of “smart cities” did not come about until 10 years later), Putrajaya has exemplary aesthetic identity and character that attracts 10 million tourists a year. It can be regarded as a “carefully planned” city. However, it is mono-nucleated in structure with the government offices and commercial functions located at the core of the city. More than 85% of the residences are located at the periphery. The consequence is a morning rush hour traffic towards the city centre and an evening traffic flow back towards the periphery. Although the plan is for public transportation to be the main travel mode with monorail as its backbone, this did not materialise because the smaller-than-expected population did not justify the monorail to be cost-effective. Several factors explain the non-achievement of the target population such as Putrajaya’s propinquity to Kuala Lumpur that discourages relocation; and the primarily administrative functions that accommodates largely government servants. It is also interesting to note that although Putrajaya has an excellent network of walking paths and biking tracks throughout the administrative capital, it is hardly utilised because Malaysian residents have yet to have a culture of urban sustainability using non-motorised vehicles. Probably, tropical climate conditions discourage walkability and cycleability. Putrajaya is also the first planned city that disallows fences/walls between houses (except for bushes/plants) and gates to individual homes to encourage greater neighbourliness. However, this is also quite foreign to Malaysian homeowners for security reasons.

4. Conclusion
Several pertinent questions ought to be asked. Will greenfield urban space development, like smart cities and new capital cities, lose their underlying charm of informality, like the para-transits (trishaws, tut-tuts) or the popular Southeast Asian al-fresco eateries (the street food vendors and hawkers)? Will brownfield urban regeneration in the central cities mean the loss of priceless heritage buildings? Will
urban policies reinstate the human face? As ASEAN nodal urban regions push towards megalopolis imageries and especially to “seek out the vertical triumph, will they not forget to aim (also) for a horizontal triumph”?

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