LOOSE SPACE AND URBAN APPROPRIATION
IN A GLOCALIZED ASIAN STREET

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ABSTRACT: This paper is aimed at investigating spatial and behavioural patterns of loose space and urban appropriation in an Asian street that shape the continuity and liveability of the space. The study will focus on mapping the interplay of semi-fixed elements such as push carts, chairs & merchandises within a spatial structure of urban spaces (a street, sidewalks, building frontages); and how people as users of the street with its creative perception of urbanity appropriate those urban elements. Cihampelas Street, a well-known commercial street in Bandung is taken as a case study. Findings reveal that the street becomes a contested space and space for tolerance, where global and local, formal and informal layers in urban life coexist and self-organized.

KEYWORDS: loose space, urban appropriation, glocalized, Asian street

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 Asian Streets: Characteristics and Current Challenges
Asian cities are well-known for its dynamic street life; streets and streetscapes are 24-hours activity containers, which are rich in practices and meanings. Streets hold various roles for the society; they are used for gathering space, living room, and dining room as well as playground, trading space, a stage for political discourses and religious procession. As a major element that constitutes the city, the streets face a rapid transformation, becoming modernized to achieve a standard city image concerned with beautification, maintenance and surveillance. The presence of shopping malls with controlled public spaces is also highlighted the formation of new landscape. Due to the socio-economic differences, this transformation is rarely equipped by established urban planning and design frameworks such as those occur in developed cities. This condition has produced a new field where global and local, formal and informal, big and small forces coexist, create tension and then become self-organized. Hatuka & Forsyth (2005) underline this condition as ‘glocalized’ urban landscape, ‘a transition space and stage where international ideas and global economies are adopted and adapted to a local landscape on the development process of the city’. This new field is commonly loose, fluid, and temporal; provides diverse opportunities which occur on public spaces.

1.2 Loose Spaces and Urban Appropriation
The idea of loose space is defined as ‘space that has been appropriated by citizens to pursue activities not set by a predetermined program’ (Franck and Stevens, 2007). This space is far from behavioural control and aesthetic maintenance, hence inspiring for other potential uses. The looser the space the more it provides possibilities for appropriation and the tighter the control the more it restricts one’s behaviour in public spaces. The presence of loose space allows the arrangement of loose parts (semi-fixed elements) on the street and sidewalks; they are temporal and can be flexibly moved around and utilized by people. Such semi-fixed elements are sometimes officially placed there as an urban element such as rubbish bins and street furniture, and many are voluntarily placed by people such as push carts and tables. In Asian cities for instance, the presence of street vendors with their stuffs is regarded as a way of appropriating public space for economic activities. However, their presence in urban space is mostly regarded as illegal due to their occupation on those pre-programmed spaces (Yatmo, 2008).

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1 This paper is based on my master degree’s research project in urban design at The University of Melbourne, Australia (2009)
2 CIHAMPELAS STREET: THE LANDSCAPE AND STREET LIFE PATTERNS

2.1 The Transformation of Urban Landscape

Cihampelas street is a 2-km famous commercial strip in the North Bandung, West Java that has been associated with denim products (Jeans). It has a unique spatial configuration as a threshold and a melting point between two distinct urban fabrics and social conditions. It lies in between a planned residential area, with a strong influence from colonial architecture, and informal settlements (Kampung). The transformation of Cihampelas street from residential area into a commercial street was supported by the popularity of denim fashion among the young generations in the mid ’80s. Competition among shops which sell similar products is translated into the built form, by attaching giant superheroes, global icons, to the facade of the buildings from Superman to Spiderman that give a distinctive streetscape, and signify one shop from another.

Current transformation of the street is emphasized by the presence of shopping malls and an international chain hotel. It is no longer a traditional commercial strip with grain-sized shops lining the street. The urban fabric has changed and mixed, followed by regulating and beautification of some sidewalks in front of the buildings and also a controlled public space within the shopping malls. Given the diverse activities from global to local business and juxtaposition within a dense commercial and residential area with a strong streetscape identity, this has made Cihampelas street a unique case to study. This study is practical to recognize the transformation of Asian streets and to understand the characteristics of loose space with its loose parts and loose practices coexist within the glocalized urban landscape.

2.2 The Street Life Patterns

Findings from street view level show that diverse groups of people from visitors, business owners, residents to street vendors carry out different activities on the shared street and sidewalks; from walking and standing to more complex scenes of intricate bargaining between street vendors and visitors. Chatting, reading newspaper and playing chess under the shady trees are among activities performed by street vendors while waiting the buyers. They use the street and sidewalks both for a living room and a trading space as well as give a way for pedestrian flow. Some visitors utilize the steps and ledges for resting and chatting, at the same time, their existence attract mobile vendors to offer their stuffs. Parking space in front of a shop can be transformed into playing ground at 12 am for some residents and taxi drivers. Mobile vendors with their stuffs are back and forth bringing their merchandises to follow the concentration of visitors along the street. With the owners’ consent, the Jeans’ repairers utilize the steps in front of the shops for their ‘work spaces’ during the day.

Street life intensity changes at different time, follows the rhythm of formal commercial activities. From four interval times, 12-1 pm is the peak of activities and 6-7 am is the lowest one. The segments in front of shopping malls and near the three street intersections are the most intense one. It is found that the activities on the street have a strong dependency on the presence of formal commercial activities. Visitors come to this street mostly for shopping; therefore, the supply for pedestrians on the sidewalks is limited to the time given by the shops and shopping malls. The 2-hours interval observation during the weekend identifies that formal commercial activities mostly open daily from 10 am - 9 pm. Informal activities have much longer span of activities on the street. They start from earlier in the morning to sell breakfast for most residents living there, and still open until 12 am - at least, when the shops are close. Exception for some entertainment centres, they operate until 4 am and also for local & franchise restaurants that are open 24 hours.
3 MICRO SPATIAL PRACTICES

Detailed spatial configuration from street intensity at the three most active segments demonstrate that there are three spatial characteristics of space that is regarded as loose and likely to be appropriated for different activities. They are a) thresholds – steps or entrance to the shop and space in between shops b) street corners - intersection of the streets c) ‘vacuum’ space – space in front of blank walls or closed shops.

3.1 Thresholds

Self-organized coexistence on the street is occurred by unspoken rules between shop owners and street vendors that occupying leftover space with their merchandise and push carts. The permanent and temporal (daily) street vendors preferably will not set up their tables or kiosks exactly in front of the shops which may block the entrances. They only utilize space in between shops. Steps and doorways are the ‘marks’ of public and private, mobile vendors will not enter beyond those areas. Mobile vendors and visitors also utilize the steps for sitting and take a rest. Those practices (sitting on the steps of doorways) are regarded as undesirable behaviour for some shop owners because they will block the visitors who will enter the shops. The second week of observation, signs to prohibit sitting behaviours were found in front some doorways. However, as the mobility and flexibility of the vendors are high, they still find a ‘crack’ of that control and keep utilizing the steps for sitting and resting. With their self-managed behaviours they will quickly disappear when the situation look crowded and the shop’s attendants come to control over the space.

Figure 2 Spatial distributions of loose parts and forms of appropriation on sidewalks

3.2 Corners

The strategic location of street corners also acts as a behavioural setting for urban appropriation; for example, the presence of semi-fixed elements such as animals and the containers brought by mobile vendors. They proceed as external stimulus (triangulation effect) which could attract different range of pedestrians (from school children, teenagers to adults) to slow down and stop in. Then, gradually informal interaction and exchanging information start to flow. Looking at those interactions from the corner of the street is like watching a series of movie’s scenes - a drama of everyday life on the street. That is why that place rarely empty at any different times a day. On the other hand, the shop owner gives a degree of looseness for anyone appropriates the space. The finding also reveals how the mobile vendors appear and disappear during the day to find the most attractive space and when a peak time of visitors.

3.3 ‘Vacuum’ Space

The unavailability of existing uses is regarded as a ‘void’ or a ‘vacuum’ in urban space. The lack of control from either security or shop owners make the space loose and then appropriated by street vendors to display their stuff with mat, tables or just simple put them on the ground. These semi-fixed elements within a few minutes will attract the passers by to stop in, look at and then buy the stuffs; those practices create a temporal crowd and interaction along the street. The grey sliding doors and the blank walls might be not interesting to look at by the pedestrians, but the presence of other elements in front of that area gives other texture, colour and odours to make the space unintentionally more attractive.
4 GLOBAL & LOCAL DIALECTICS

Observation on a sidewalk in front of Premier Plaza and Aston Hotel (Fig 3-4) shows how the ‘tight’ space become loosen by the presence of a mobile vendor that sells toys for kids. He utilizes the strategic location of the corner to attract customers. The sidewalk itself is subjects to monitoring by the hotel management. However, due to its impermanency, they can quickly pack and unpack their stuffs.

Figure 3-6 Spatial representations: mobile vending and hybridizing

Furthermore, it is found that both global and local urban landscape exists and hybridizes in Cihampelas street. The findings reveal that local and global commercial practices are starting to learn each other. The new shopping mall (Cihampelas Walk) is trying to resemble the traditional commercial street, with street vendor kiosks and sidewalks cafes (warung) (Fig 5-6). It is hard to conclude whether these forces (global and local) are competing, but spatially they are coexisting side by side, taking advantages by each practice. Cihampelas street, far beyond the presence of new shopping malls, already has a strong identity as a Jeans’ street and unique streetscapes. The combination of those two now becomes the new attraction of the whole street.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Study on Cihampelas street informs patterns relate to the interplay of loose space and urban appropriation in a glocalized Asian street. A creative perception of where is loose space along the street results in micro spatial practices from street vending activities and some behavioural actions from the visitors. Steps, doorways, space in between shops, corners and vacant spaces in front of closed shops and walls become a contested space and space for tolerance. Mobile vending and hybridizing are among spatial representation and practice of global and local dialectics found in this case. The interplay of fixed, semi-fixed and unfixed elements on the street, indeed, supports the continuity and liveability of the street, by creating the rich social encounter. However, the fact which cannot be ignored is the presence of new shopping malls have contributed to the increase of traffic congestion, visitors are likely to drive a car to get to the malls. This could threat the pedestrian culture in Asian street and now has become urgent concerns in Asian cities. Some solutions should be defined in order to achieve not only socially and culturally responsive development but also environmentally sustainable.

REFERENCES