



RIGHT An illustrated map by Pedro Barreto de Resende that shows how landscape elements were used as part of the Acehnese fortification during the siege of Malacca in 1629. Although the 16th Century Portuguese wall was surrounded by these massive fortifications, the siege nevertheless failed to recapture Malacca from the Portuguese (Source: António de Bocarro, Goa, 1635).

FAR RIGHT Dataran Pahlawan is now a leisure area for the public



Move On or Hold On A Conundrum in the Malaysian Historic Landscape Narrative

Written by LAr. Dr. Shamsul Abu Bakar
and LAr. Dr. Khalilah Zakariya

Bandar Hilir Melaka is an indulging location for those with a strong passion for cultural and historical richness. With more than 400 years of colonial history, one can experience unique architectural typologies and landscapes that have evolved since the Portuguese occupation. These extraordinary cultural and natural attractions revolved around the beauty of the historic buildings, remnants of old fortifications, boat sightseeing along the Melaka River, or a quick hike to St. Paul's Hill. The city was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, highlighting its tangible and intangible importance. This recognition carved a path for more structured preservation efforts and stringent urban development control.

*"A nation that forgets its past can function no better than an individual with amnesia."
David McCullough*

Nonetheless, the struggle to balance between the preservation of local history and the need to increase the state's economic revenue remain among the main challenges. These issues probably keep on haunting the decision-makers' judgments. Undoubtedly, many development proposals were approved and have impacted the indispensable value of historical and natural resources located in Melaka. One of the places that have been carved out from the map of Melaka is Padang Pahlawan. It was previously an open green field located adjacent to the A'Famosa fort. The term 'padang' translates into 'field' and 'pahlawan' into 'heroes'. Often, places are given names that carry certain meanings significant to their natural or geographical characters, or as a commemorative reference to historical events or prominent figures. The name Padang Pahlawan brings a deep narrative that plays a significant part of Melaka's history. This name originated from the name Padang Bandar Hilir.

If you were born in the 70's or 80's, you might be able to recall your experience of going on a school trip to the historic city of Melaka and stopping by this field to walk to the nearby historic sites. A recollection of the past might also bring you back to the scenes of bullock carts parked along the edges of the field. In addition, Padang Pahlawan was a site of national importance. It was where Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia's first Prime Minister, made the independence proclamation to mark the end of the

colonization period in 1956. During the colonization period, the *padang* was used for military training, and a ground for events and recreation. However, today, the *padang* is no longer in sight. What you will see is an elevated urban square renamed into Dataran Pahlawan. In 2004, the *padang* was converted into a commercial complex.

A place becomes meaningful when people can connect with it. It is a physical space that gives context to memories and histories. We do not deny that the narrative of a place is an ever changing process. However, when the structure of the place becomes disintegrated and starts to detach from its people, memories might also diminish. Gradually, what was familiar became unfamiliar and had to be reintroduced. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nor Zalina Harun, a research fellow at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, stated that the conversion of Padang Pahlawan into a commercial complex has impacted the people's livelihood. It has also "wiped out a person's knowledge of his or her past, sense of belonging and identity." She also raised concerns regarding the significance of Padang Pahlawan as a place that signaled the birth of our nation that has been slowly erased and left unrecognizable in today's society.



Have people totally forgotten about the meaning of Padang Pahlawan? Most have not. In a study that we conducted back in 2014, visitors were asked what the site means to them. Majority of the respondents related the square with the words 'to relax', 'tourists' and 'history'. A few of them responded "Heritage! Don't disturb" and "Don't take away our field". Is there hope to restore the narratives of Padang Pahlawan? The padang no longer retains any portions of its original landscapes, other than functioning as an open space for the public. Although people can still tell that the square has a historical value as the name Pahlawan is retained, the rich layers of stories may soon fade and disappear if no initiatives are done to reinforce the narratives of the historical landscape. Unfortunately, the loss of Padang Pahlawan towards current commercial use was only the tip of the iceberg. The importance of Padang Pahlawan and its surrounding areas were actually beyond personal reminiscences or limited to the context of our independence time frame.

Going back to more than 400 years ago, this site and its surrounding area were battle sites that have witnessed many wars in different centuries. Have we forgotten or did we know that the 1511 battle was the turning point that has changed and shaped the evolution of this country? Logically, these questions can be quickly answered. One can easily recall this topic in our history textbook. Yet, there is no landscape narrative to memorialize the sacrifices made by these warriors-soldiers who gave their lives in the decisive wars. Equally important is also the landscape characters that can reveal the invaluable insights into how empires of the past interact with their lands to form a city. What was located surrounding this field back then? Was it a strategic physical planning that played a crucial role in governing an empire, or was it a

planning decision that was made from optimizing the site's natural characters? One can probably find out from reading history books and analyzing old maps, but not from the site.

Based on our observation, it is difficult for most people to associate themselves with the dark event that brought down the Malacca empire at its pinnacle. And why is this? Our hypothesis is that the story is not properly told. We may question which part of history do we choose to share and display. But this gives us an opportunity to use our creativity in designing interpretive elements or spaces at historic sites and explore how design can offer a more memorable or immersive experience beyond the textbook. Monuments and memorials are classic ways of making memories into something fixed and permanent in the outdoor spaces. And as we move into the future, can histories and memories take on different forms and experience?

Lack of sensitivity and understanding towards battle site conservation and preservation also contributed to the loss of this type of historical spaces. As we can see today, the battle site is facing unprecedented threats to survive. It is almost no longer identifiable as they have lost most of their original landscape settings. In a larger context, the urban development and land reclamation activities have also severely impacted the historic view shed of Strait of Malacca that was once visible from the remnants of A'Famosa and the Melaka River. This includes the original coastline bombarded by the colonial battleships during the conquest of Malacca as described in "Sulalatus Salatin." Can we suggest that battle sites are a palimpsest of a nation's narrative then? The dark events which may have brought victory or defeat created layers of lessons that we can learn and pass to our future generation.

Why is preserving and protecting a battle site considered noble efforts anyway? According to Patrick W. Andrus, a historian from the US National Register of Historic Places, the battleground landscape is a fundamental part of modern states' national iconography. They are highly complex landscapes of commemoration where nature stood to witness deadly human conflicts. Meanwhile, Edward Tabor Linenthal, an American historian specializing in sacred spaces, stated the same notion in his book "Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields." Linenthal mentioned that the historic battle sites serve as a ceremonial center for various forms of veneration. This is where people seek experiences of patriotic inspiration through memorialized, preserved, restored, and purified environments. The narratives, for instance, are consistent with the traditional American societal perspectives that justify the preservation of patriotic landscapes since the American Revolutionary Wars. Similar narratives towards battle site preservation have also resonated in the European countries. These have encouraged government-led preservation efforts of historic battle sites such as by Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland, and many more.

Padang Pahlawan and its surrounding areas deserve and needs to be properly memorialize, narrated or curated. These sacred spaces of the nation should be carefully planned and managed as our utmost historical importance. What would it take to honor and commemorate these historical timelines then? For us, serious efforts are still needed to physically protect what is left and pay proper homage to the fallen warriors. Yes, we might not personally know them, but remembering what they have sacrificed is part of our responsibility. The stories of the past are filled with lessons that can allow us to appreciate the present and make better decisions. This would not be an easy journey and probably would become another battle left for us to fight for. Again, should we romanticize the historical struggles that formulated the birth of our nation or be drowned with the material world? Would it be worth it after all? Our decisions today mark the history of the future.



ABOVE View towards St. Paul Hill's from today's Dataran Pahlawan.
TOP Dataran Pahlawan is now a leisure area for the public
FAR LEFT Dataran Pahlawan functions as an open public space in the night time

LAr. Dr. Shamsul Abu Bakar is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Landscape Architecture Department, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). He is a Corporate Member of Institute Landscape Architect Malaysia (ILAM) and an associate researcher at Visual Assessment Laboratory (UPM). His research interests include visual resource assessment, visual pollution and landscape of conflicts. He can be reached at shamsul_lab@upm.edu.my.

LAr. Dr. Khalilah Zakariya is an Associate Professor from Department of Landscape Architecture, KAED, International Islamic University Malaysia. She specialises in landscape planning for tourism, with an emphasis on PLACE: People, Landscape, Architecture, Culture and Environment. She shares her work at placeresearcher.com and can be contacted at khalilah@iiu.edu.my.



Written by LAr. Dr. Shamsul Abu Bakar and LAr. Dr. Khalilah Zakariya