House, Self, and Society:

The Cultural Space of Identity in a Multi-ethnic Southeast Asian City

by

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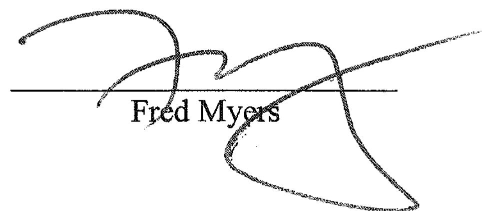

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Preface

This dissertation is based on 25 months of field research in Penang, Malaysia, conducted from 1997 to 1999. Penang is one of eleven states of the Federation of Malaysia located on or close to mainland Southeast Asia; the remaining two are on the island of Borneo. Penang is one of Malaysia's smallest states and its total land area of 1,031 square kilometers represents less than one percent of the country's total land mass (Goh 2002:146; Penang Statistics 1999). Its small size, however, has not prevented it from historically sustaining a high profile both within Malaysia and throughout the region. For many years, prior to the rise of Singapore and later Kuala Lumpur, Penang had the largest population of any metropolitan area of the Malay Peninsula; and in recent decades the rate of its economic growth has exceeded that of other Malaysian states. Penang state consists of an island in the Strait of Malacca -- Penang Island or Pulau Pinang (in Malay) – and a much larger strip of land on the mainland. The capital and historic center of Penang, George Town, is on the island, and it is here that I spent most of my time.

George Town itself is a small and densely compact city – only about 25 square kilometers. If one knew where the boundaries of the city really were and if it were not for the heat and the traffic, it would be possible to bicycle its entire circumference in well under an hour. Although much of the architectural fabric of central George Town remains intact from the era when Penang was a major entrepôt of Britain's empire in

Asia, today the urban area of Penang consists of a greater metropolitan area much larger than the limits of the city itself. High-rise residential towers, commercial complexes and industrial parks continue to rise on virtually every available piece of land on the island, but most of these projects are located well beyond the center of the historical city. I found that the actual limits or boundaries of George Town seemed to be of little account locally and, to my knowledge, they were not clearly indicated by signs on any road leading to the city proper – facts which I attribute to the structure of the city's municipal governance which is directly controlled by an island-wide municipal council appointed by the Penang state government. George Town proper is thus incorporated into a larger state administrative unit – the North East District (Timur Laut) – whose population continues to grow despite the widespread observation that the inner city seems to have fewer numbers of residents living in the city's old shop and terrace houses than it did in the recent past. In 1991, the population of Timur Laut was recorded by the census as 395,700; in 1998 it was estimated at 443, 700 (Penang Statistics 1999). Much of this residential growth, however, was in high-rise complexes located either on the fringes of the central city or in newly built-up urban areas just beyond it. The total population of Penang state was most recently estimated to be 1,234,400, with roughly half living on Penang Island and half on the mainland (Penang Statistics 1999). Though rural and semi-rural areas still exist, especially on the mainland, the state of Penang as a whole is largely

identified as urban or as a greater metropolitan area whose center remains the old waterfront city on the island.

As discussed in what follows, most residents of Penang I with were deeply attached to Penang as a place with a distinctive regional and urban profile. Penang has always been known as a place of great cultural diversity, but one of the things that make Penang different from the rest of Malaysia is that a majority of its people are ethnic Chinese and are not Malay. According to recent census figures the population of Penang was 52.9% Chinese, 34.5% Malay, and 11.5% Indian (Goh 2002:148), with even greater proportions of Chinese living in more strictly urban areas. Throughout its history and still today, urban Penang has been considered largely Chinese, both demographically and architecturally, while at the same time also being recognized as a place of diversity. The large ethnic categories – Malay, Chinese and Indian – that figure so largely in national politics and are themselves a subset of the even larger category "Malaysian," mask a greater level of specificity regarding the identities of the diverse groups of people who came to settle in Penang from the Middle East, China, India, Southeast Asia and the greater Malay world. Succeeding generations of the city's first immigrants usually kept identities associated with the particular places of their families' origins while at the same time also identifying with Penang as the place of their birth. Despite Penang's long-standing cultural diversity, or perhaps because of it, I found that there is a kind of Penang identity now shared by people of diverse ancestral backgrounds. This dissertation argues that this regional and urban identity,

now newly valued as "multicultural" but with more than two hundred years of historical depth, not only mutually reinforces the attachment the people of Penang feel for their city, its greater metropolitan region, and the state of Penang as a whole, it also contributes to the spatial meanings, uses and practices that inform residents' senses of Penang as a place and a place to live. This study is about those senses of place and the ways in which the social production of space, specifically urban residential space, is implicated in identities considered in a variety of senses and at a range of different scales.

Residential space and issues of housing are, and have been, particularly important to Penang, to its regional identity as a distinctive place, and to the senses its people have of themselves. Many of the people I knew and worked with in Penang held passionate opinions about these topics that they did not hesitate to communicate. Like many cities in Asia, Penang's growth as an urban center was long marked by a proliferation of single-unit houses: individual shop and terrace houses that were often designed and built according to very definite, culturally specific design principles. These structures, originally built to house extended families, single lodgers who came to the city to work, and/or households living above their own shops, still make up a good part of the architectural fabric of the city. These houses and their current occupants were the sites and subjects of my research. Like other places in a rapidly urbanizing world, George Town is a city currently in transition from old to new uses of urban space, and it remains uncertain what roles traditional forms of housing and

residential uses of urban space will continue to play in this process. Everyone I spoke with, it seemed, had an opinion on the matter and I found people from all walks of life quick to express their feelings about how the entire country, and especially their city, had recently and rapidly changed.

Many of the changes wrought by this new prosperity were expressed and experienced in the built environment and especially housing. New and often massively-scaled housing projects were regularly transforming familiar residential landscapes and situations. For many of the years in which Malaysia had maintained one of the highest economic growth rates of any nation, the state of Penang had exceeded even the very high figures indicating the country's overall rate of economic growth. One of the upshots of this prosperity was that universal home ownership – which most often meant a modest-sized unit in a new high-rise complex – now appeared to be a national goal. Yet this goal was still financially out of reach, or living in a high rise was considered undesirable, by many of the householders I knew, whose families had been accustomed to renting, often for generations, large terrace and shop houses in the city's center that they had never hoped to own. Rent controls on pre-war premises in Malaysia, of which Penang had the most of any state in the nation, had preserved many of the old houses of inner-city George Town, had protected its long-term residents and assured their residential stability, and had effectively diverted much new development outside the center. These protections, however, were due to end as of January 1, 2000. For many households still resident in

the city proper, the dawn of the new millennium thus meant facing the prospect that they might not be able to continue to live where and how they had for so long. Many felt they would not be able to afford the new decontrolled rents or even the down-payment required for the purchase of a government subsidized "low-cost" flat which, in any case, were not being built in sufficient numbers and were often far from the center of town. This had the effect of fostering an already vibrant local debate about the future of the city and how the quality of life of its residents would continue to be affected, for better and sometimes worse, by prosperity and urban development.

Concerns about housing and urban development more generally were further fueled when most new construction projects in Penang and elsewhere were temporarily stopped dead in 1997 with the onset of what came to be known as the "Asian Economic Crisis." A devaluation of Malaysian currency combined with a plunge in the shares market and inflation meant that the value of the savings of many modest-income Malaysians had declined by as much as forty percent. For those who cared about the city's past, however, and about efforts to preserve its often spectacular vernacular-style structures and the residential communities and small-scale enterprises they still housed, the crisis also provided a welcome opportunity to pause and reflect on where all the recent urbanizing was heading, and people began to more critically assess some of the material, social and environmental costs of the current urge to build and grow. Reports of stopped projects in the popular media made it doubly clear that many of the large construction projects that were transforming the city were conceived

and financed elsewhere and had been approved in ways that had little to do with the needs and concerns of an area's long-term residents. Many people in Penang had experienced, and certainly everyone knew about, long-terms residents of particular areas who had had no choice but to make way and move out in the name of "development," sometimes with little or no compensation. The Asian Economic Crisis thus encouraged many people to think regionally and to question the long-term effects of a "progress" that seemed to be defined solely in terms of economic gain and of a built environment that was increasingly beyond the reach of local community control. Would Penang go the way of so many other urban areas and lose its distinctive character by cutting itself off from the roots of a particular residential configuration that had nurtured not just cultural diversity but a valued tradition of small-scale enterprise and individual household entrepreneurship? How would the rise of a new emphasis on material values, new forms and flows of foreign investment capital, and a highly speculative property market -- all now expressed on a grand scale in ever larger building projects -- impact the way values and cultural ideals were being inculcated in succeeding generations? And how were these trends affecting the quality of everyone's life in the city?

Such were the terms of a widely popular discourse, often focused specifically on issues of housing and the entire built residential environment, that were expressed to me at every turn during my stay in Penang, both publicly by the media and privately by people from all walks of life. Trishaw drivers and food hawkers, artists and

architects, contractors and community activists all shared a love for their city and a concern about the future trajectory of its development. In what follows I present this discourse as one of the signifying practices that contributes to the mutual co-production of spaces and identities and to the senses that residents have of themselves, and of their city, their state and their nation as places to live. As I and others understand it, including many of the people I knew in Penang, the production of space in this sense is an on-going social and material process that accounts for the links between people and places.

The dissertation is in two parts. Following an introduction to issues of identity, housing and the built environment in Penang and in Malaysia, the first part (Chapters 2 and 3) presents an ethnographic account of the residential situations of three different neighborhoods of George Town and what their residents felt would be at stake in the area's possible transformation or in a possible displacement from their current homes and built residential environment. This account is thus not about processes of spatial transformation per se but about how long-term residents see themselves and others in and through urban residential space and how existing structures and their locations mark such things as ethnic identities, the expression of faith, the valorization of autonomy, enterprise, and sociability, and an appreciation of the values and opportunities presented by both residential stability and change through time.

The second part (Chapters 4 and 5) presents an account of how an extrapolation of many of these same values and spatial meanings were expressed in a larger arena and at a higher level of abstraction. These chapters concern two very different place-based voluntary associations that were formed by residents of Penang during the time of my field research to address certain problems associated with urban development. I show how these two groups shaped a public discourse in an attempt to achieve certain social goals and how a new awareness of urban space itself, together with recognition that this space is truly shared and is a place of diversity, became unifying organizational principles in their efforts to reach across and embrace ethnic, religious and socioeconomic differences. For members of these organizations, the urban space of Penang in its entirety was now the focus of a new form of place-based social action.

What these groups wanted to assure was that certain qualities of urban life would be retained with development, that the city's past would continue to be relevant to its future, and that the structure of state governance would officially recognize the value of local knowledge and the need for greater popular participation in urban planning processes. I show how and why, for both groups, urban residential space had become a consciously articulated focal point, not just for a regional Penang identity and a sense of local pride, but for a newly formulated concept of civic identity that would complement but not supersede existing expressions of ethnic and religious identities. For these activists, such a place-based consciousness of social

responsibility could and should overcome the potential divisiveness of a national political culture in which so much thought and action was still articulated in terms of ethnic identity categories inherited from a colonial past. I show how, by emphasizing certain pan-ethnic values thought to be ideally inherent in Penang's culturally multiple traditions and their expression in the built residential environment and by underscoring the responsibility of each to all, these activists were attempting to realize in everyday practice a national goal of harmony between groups that all too often seemed to remain confined to the domain of rhetoric. I show how, by focusing on shared urban space now newly valued as "multicultural" and affirming Penang's long history of cultural multiplicity, the activist organizers of these groups were publicly articulating what many other residents I spoke with were already experiencing and had more privately expressed: that life in Penang was about much more than leading economic indicators, that urban residents had often successfully and creatively incorporated an appreciation of diversity and difference into their everyday experience, and that the city and its people could show to the region, the nation, and the rest of the urbanizing world that progress and taking the lead could be morally and socially responsible and need not pertain solely to the material values represented by a high rate of economic growth.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

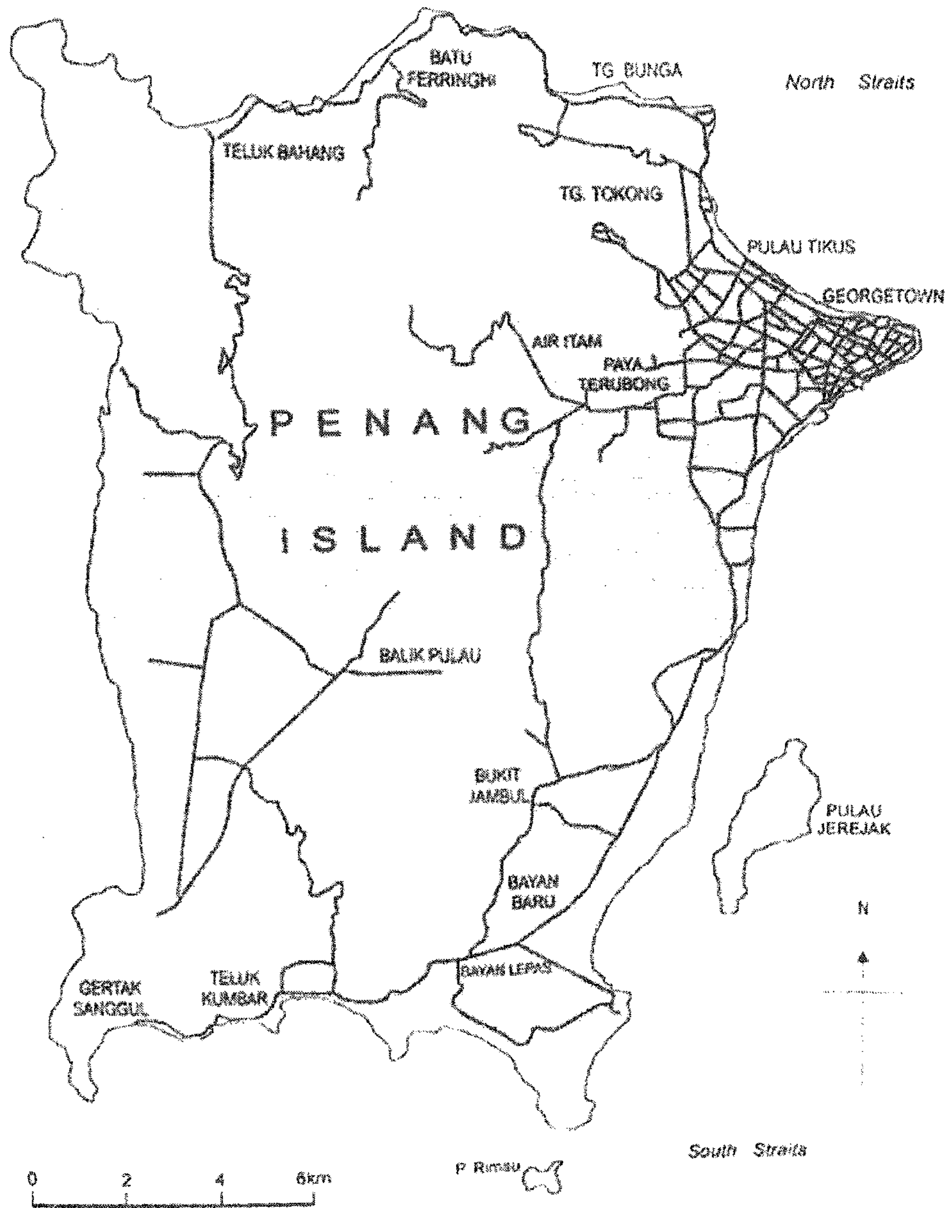
Overview

This study is an ethnographic analysis of the social production of space and identity in a culturally diverse urban milieu: the city of George Town,[1] the central urban core and capitol of the state of Penang in Malaysia (see maps in Figures 1 and 2). The specific spatial domain in question is urban residential space – the places, houses and neighborhoods of both individual and communal life in the city. The approach taken here is that this space is constituted, not only by specific structures in their physical settings, but by "senses of place" (cf. Feld and Basso 1996) that, I argue, people create and use in ways that help them to identify and understand both themselves and others in everyday urban life.

"Space" becomes "place" through action that invests it with human meaning (Tuan 1977), and the "production of space" (cf. Lefebvre 1991) I examine thus refers to "lived space" or place which can be defined as a combination of territory, social space and the values attached to both (Berdoulay 1989:130). Far from being an inert, ahistoric product, a place can be considered a continual "process of becoming" (Pred 1984). The particular processes analyzed here are those whereby "place reciprocally shapes individuals and society through human agency" (Rodman 1992:647). I argue that autochthony – the rootedness of people in a place – is not restricted to

Figure 1

Map of Penang Island



Source: Goh 2002

Figure 2

**Map of Peninsular Malaysia
Showing Location of State of Penang**

"pre-modern," relatively homogenous, small-scale, or agricultural societies, but is also salient in a contemporary, culturally multiple urban milieu such as George Town, where the lived space of the city is a key factor in the production of personhood and identity, cultural specificity and difference, and one's sense of place in the world.

As part of a burgeoning ethnographic literature on "space and place" (cf. Low 2003) and what is referred to by social scientists across disciplines as the "built environment" (cf. Lawrence and Low 1990), I offer a specific case study of what has been called the "reassertion of space" in recent social theory (Soja 1989). I treat the production of this particular residential space as a process that is simultaneously material, social, and symbolic. My starting point is the premise that spaces have always been "interconnected, rather than naturally disconnected" and that this provides a way to rethink "difference through connection" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:35) – the differences and connections between people and places, and between the old and the new, in a variety of social domains and at a range of territorial scales. I trace how such dynamics as the city's long history of cultural diversity, a current, nationally defined goal of rapid and specifically urban development, a political culture still inflected by colonial-era racial categories, and new flows of information and ideas both to and from local contexts, all converge in the built environment of George Town and its recent transformations. Looking at the ways in which urban space creates, reflects and sometimes challenges, not just economic opportunities and symbols of material prosperity but also a whole range of long standing cultural, religious and

social values, I trace local efforts to both maintain and reformulate cultural specificity and autonomy amidst diversity and change.

My principal focus is on the ways in which Malay, Chinese, and Indian residents actively negotiate both their own identities and those of others in and through the experience of residential space – both their own houses and a larger urban space marked by a proliferation of historic, ethnically-specific architectural forms, now subject to massive redevelopment. I analyze these spaces as contributing to the production of both old and new forms of identity, as sites for the recollection of histories and the reinvention of traditions, and as symbolic battlegrounds for occasionally conflicting interests among its diverse inhabitants. I interpret the built environment of the home, set within diverse spheres of influence, as both a medium and a ground for residents' creation of a sense of self, their sociability, the future trajectories of their children, and their ability to cope with the many physical and social changes brought about by rapid economic development.

Much of the material presented in this dissertation maintains a micro-level focus on very localized productive processes – at the level of individual residents and houses – but it is set within a larger series of processes that variously facilitate, constrain, or otherwise influence social action and meaning in the production of space. These processes have been recently theorized under such rubrics as "development," "modernization," "nation building," "transnationalism," "postmodernism," and "globalization" – all of which are particularly salient in contemporary Malaysia, and

especially Penang, where local production of both space and culture has always been subject to multiple forces originating elsewhere. With the possible exception of postmodernism, each of these dynamics is the subject of a popular discourse in Penang that is avidly discussed in the press, in coffee shops, at public meetings and in official government pronouncements. This discourse, I maintain, contributes to the production of a distinctly urban space and to what Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have identified as an inseparable nexus of "space, identity and the politics of difference." The senses of place at work in this discourse do not just refer to the here and now, but also to the places of past experience and memory (Casey 1987, 1993; Connerton 1989) and those which exist in the imagination (Lowenthal and Bowden 1975; Wright 1947). They both reference and help create personal, ethnic, religious, urban, regional and national identities and politics that all converge in the material and social fabric of the city.

Setha Low (1999) argues that theorizing the city is a necessary part of understanding "the changing postindustrial/advanced, capitalist/postmodern world in which we live" precisely because the "social relations, symbols, and political economies that are most manifest in the city" highlight the linkages between macro processes and the texture of everyday life (Low 1999:2). The current study of George Town thus ambitiously seeks to contribute to an anthropology that is *of* and not merely *in* the city (Low 1999:1-2; Gulick 1989; Jackson 1985). At the same time it carefully attempts to avoid the pitfalls of an essentialism that can all too easily arise from an

approach that sees people and a particular place as linked or assigns agency to places themselves and not human action.

In an effort to "empower place" as an anthropological concern in addition to the well-recognized power of "voice" in anthropology, Margaret Rodman asserts that "places, like voices, are local and multiple" (Rodman 1992:643). For each inhabitant, she notes, "a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places" and that "the links in these chains of experienced places are forged of culture and history" (Rodman 1992: 643). As a local Penang historian sees it, urban Penang has always been a "confluence" – a place where "peoples, institutions, movements, ideas, [and] cultural practices have regularly converged" and where "the flows of these arrivals have continuously linked Penang to social and cultural networks or economic structures, both regional and global" (Tan 2002:1). In the chapters that follow, I show how these flows -- the products of the city's unique history -- contribute to the production of a distinctly urban space that incorporates multiple senses of place referring to territory at a variety of spatial scales. These senses of place range from individual houses in particular neighborhoods to a commonly shared sense of the city and the state of Penang as a whole, set within even larger spatial categories politically defined as nation and region of Southeast Asia.

What initially attracted me to George Town as a potential site for research during my first visit there in 1988 was its historic, and often spectacular, ethnically specific vernacular architecture. Elaborately decorated Chinese temples, clan and

association headquarters, terrace and shop houses, Malay and Indian mosques, and Hindu temples all seemed to compete for visual attention in close proximity with each other and with British colonial churches, Anglo-Indian and Chinese art-deco style bungalows, mansions, and covered markets, and a much smaller number of taller post-World War II structures (Figure 3). As a Penang architect later expressed it to me, "walking in George Town is like turning the pages of history." Each cultural group that had arrived to seek their fortunes since the founding in of the first permanent settlement in Penang in 1786 – as a city – had left their mark on its material and social fabric. What was particularly intriguing to me at the time was that the city had retained most of its 19th and early 20th century, single-unit, residential/commercial structures and most of these appeared to continue to be used for the same purposes for which they were originally constructed -- to house small enterprises and families living above their shops. These shop and terrace houses made up the bulk of the city's built-up area, where few structures rose above two or three stories. The city thus seemed an excellent place, one with readily apparent historical depth, for study of the production of a space with multiple, culturally specific dimensions. I was interested to find out how, if, or to what extent, both ethnically specific structures and the culturally diverse urban milieu which they helped create mutually reinforced or challenged the identities and ways of life of the city's inhabitants, and what role, if any, a sense of history, which to me was so apparent in the built environment of Penang as place, played in this process.

Figure 3

View of George Town from Lorong Seratus Tahun (One Hundred Years Lane)

When I returned to the city in 1997, for what would be a period of 25 months of field research, I found Penang as whole much transformed. An explosion of new structures, many of them massive high-rise housing projects and shopping malls, marked a decade of double-digit economic growth. Most of these, however, were located just outside or on the fringes of the old inner city. Vehicular traffic had increased dramatically everywhere, but the city's central core, which radiated inland from the commercial waterfront and the 18th century Fort Cornwallis, was still very much the same. Scattered patterns of property ownership (cf. Goh 1979) and rent controls protecting long-term tenants of pre-World War II structures had diverted most large development projects elsewhere, effectively preserving much of the old inner city.

With housing situations and commercial development projects that were both "new" and ethnically unmarked in design surrounding their historic neighborhoods, I realized that the local sense of time that I wanted to incorporate into my study would have to refer to the future as well as the past. What roles did public expressions of ethnicity continue to play in an urban space whose greater metropolitan region was being visually and socially transformed by development? I was interested in such questions as whether or not it was important to inner city Malay and Chinese residents that they continued to live in Malay or Chinese style houses, and if the age or history of their built environment was significant to them. How did a member of one group feel about living in or in the midst of structures identifiable with an ethnicity not their

own – or in a high-rise? These and other questions concerning identity, time and the "lived spaces" of the city are addressed in Chapters 2 and 3 and are based on interviews with members of 103 households of various ethnicities in their homes in three different areas within the city. I found that ethnicity and temporal continuity of residence were indeed important residents of all ethnicities, in varying degrees, but so were other things, such as a sense of autonomy and easy participation within the larger, ethnically diverse space of the city as a whole. In Chapters 4 and 5 I go on to argue that this sense of autonomy and an awareness of difference within a particular space may not be things that always, or necessarily keep people apart. They are, in fact, what bring Penang's diverse ethnic groups together in various situations and at various times and they contribute to what I found to be a very strong regional identity and loyalty to Penang as place distinct from the rest of Malaysia, and even the world. Though most residents were well aware of the age of their houses and the fact that their neighborhoods had remained largely the same for decades, few appreciated either as being explicitly "historic." They were much more concerned about the future and their continued ability to live where and how they chose. In many cases these concerns combined a sense of autonomy and self determination by being self employed in a small scale enterprise, and the familiarity and easy access to urban space provided by low cost, long-term residence in a single-unit house that was home to multiple, and previous generations of family. These were the senses in which most of the people I worked with understood the place or places and the built environment

in which they lived. Within this conception, ethnicity was merely one dimension, and it was not the aspect that was the focus of most concern about the future.

In a widely cited essay Barth advocated that the critical focus of any investigation into ethnicity should concentrate on the boundaries that define a group and not "the cultural stuff" that they enclose (Barth 1969:15). For Barth, following Goffman (1959), ethnic identity is "a matter of self-ascription and ascription by others in interaction" and "the cultural features of greatest import are boundary-connected" (Barth 1998:6). Barth argues that it is these boundaries that constitute "the diacritica by which membership is signaled and the cultural standards that actors themselves use to evaluate and judge" (Barth 1998:6). But the "stuff" of culture cannot be so easily dismissed, and boundaries are not always what is most important to people. In Penang, people often both signal themselves and understand others in and through the stuff of material culture – not just ethnically specific architecture but also cuisine, dress, and the paraphernalia and performances publicly displayed and enacted on streets during religious festivals, funerals, and other public events or acts of worship. At the same time, however, the consumption and appreciation of many of these forms are not the exclusive domain of who or what may have produced them and do not necessarily result in boundaries that keep people apart. A Chinese millionaire and a Malay clerk may enjoy the same curry prepared by an Indian Muslim hawker at a roadside stall. All three may stop to view a Hindu procession or Chinese opera on the street and find something worthy of an appreciative comment in the spectacle. Penang

is not a case of different people going about their business in parallel universes. In a strictly territorial sense, though concentrations by ethnicity or class do exist, I show how in the old city these concentrations, which are themselves generally not exclusive to any one group, quickly trail off at the turn of a corner or within a few hundred feet and their "boundaries" are amorphous. I argue that such flows of difference, which pertain to people, places, and things and about which residents often comment, themselves contribute to the co-production of space and identities in Penang and that these identities are not always exclusively ethnic. They are also regional – and pertain to an identity whose focus is Penang as a greater metropolitan and distinctly urban space.

Sentiments of regional attachment often run high in Southeast Asia and Penang is no exception. Singapore geographers Kong and Yeoh go so far as to state that "all social life is 'regionalized and regionalizing' (Kong and Yeoh 1995:13). Both of these observations are particularly true in Penang, despite, or perhaps because of, its diversity. In questioning, observing, and spending time with Malay, Chinese and Indian residents, I found some significant differences between each group's practices and perspectives regarding where and how they lived – but there was also much common ground. This ground was literally the city itself and its greater metropolitan region, which residents understood as a place that incorporates their own ethnic and religious specificity within a larger sphere of diversity and difference. I show how this larger sense of place contributes to an identity that is distinctly regional and urban -- a

different level of categorization than ethnicity. In addition to examining the ways in which specific ethnic identities are created or reinforced along with the built environment, I also trace what amounts to a distinct, pan-ethnic, and place-based "Penang identity" that was strongly and sometimes passionately expressed to me through numerous examples and in a variety of contexts.

Some of my most meaningful conversations in this regard occurred as I traveled with residents both within and outside the city, when they offered me unsolicited comments about what we saw. Members of one ethnic or religious group would frequently point out to me, very often appreciatively, the things or activities of other groups that they said were distinctly "Penang," were likely not to be found anywhere else, not in China, India, or elsewhere in Malaysia in this particular form, and which they felt contributed to the distinction of Penang as a particular place. Together with local understandings of diversity in such matters as education and language use, I incorporate cross-group and wider territorial perceptions (not all of which were expressed in a positive light), into my account of the ways in which the social production of residential urban space in Penang contributes to the production of identity and difference at a range of levels. Recognizing that "the relationality of social location is inextricably imbricated with the relationality of geographical location" (Smith and Katz 1993:77) both within the city and beyond it, my goal is to examine local articulations of such relationships as they are produced, not only through discourse, but also a range of other socially constituting practices. Noting that

"the language of social and cultural investigation is increasingly suffused with spatial concepts" in a way that would have been unimaginable several decades ago, Smith and Katz note that "metaphorical concepts and uses of 'space' have evolved quite independently from materialist treatments of space," with the former often detached from any real territorial referent (Smith and Katz 1993:67-68). My approach is to bring metaphor and territory, meaning and place, together, and to treat them as reciprocally productive processes (cf. Myers 1986).

Though the spaces and places I discuss are materially real and do not exist solely in the mind, I find Malaysian anthropologist Shamsul A.B.'s (1998) metaphorical use of the term "epistemological space" very useful in this regard. Shamsul's usage refers primarily to a specifically political colonial and postcolonial consciousness, but I apply the term more broadly and literally also to include local meanings of the actual spaces of everyday life. Shamsul himself borrows the term from Bernard Cohn (1996) who presents the case that when the British came to India they "conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well" (Cohn 1996:4). Cohn argues that seemingly innocuous colonial bureaucratic procedures such as census taking solidified differences between people into rigid classificatory divisions that became popularly internalized. This process created an "epistemological space" in which certain categories of identity and difference dominated political culture and affected social life. In colonial Southeast Asia, this meant that what Hefner describes as a "permeable ethnicity" (Hefner 2001a:13), once

prevalent in coastal regions of the Malayo-Indonesian world, was transmuted into a system of officially defined racial and ethnic categories. For Shamsul, following Cohen on India, census taking actually "helped to invent, evolve, and consolidate" the social categories of Malay, Chinese and Indian in Malaysia (Shamsul 1998:40). He argues that this and other "officializing procedures" of colonial control[2] "drove home the point" that being a Malay, a Chinese or an Indian very much mattered, both formally in relationship to the state, and informally in daily life (Shamsul 1998:40). The result was that " 'difference' as a defining mode of everyday existence, as opposed to [any] . . . top-down 'homogenizing schemes' dominated the mind and practical life of the populace" (Shamsul 1998:40). In terms of the built environment of Penang, such "divide and rule" tactics as they have come to be called (Abraham 1997), combined with minimal colonial-era planning controls during the colonial era, meant that the city's newly prosperous immigrant communities were able to express their own specific ethnicities in what they built and how they lived. I argue that "difference" continues to inform everyday life in Penang but that in the post-colonial era of national independence (since 1957) the differences that matter are increasingly placed elsewhere than ethnic specificity. They include such distinctions as the differences between Penang and other places, and the differences between the "old" and the "new" in the built environment and the ways of life they represent.

Concerned with contemporary politics and not just political history, Shamsul extends Cohn's usage of the term "epistemological space" and further argues that

"when a British colony, like Malaysia (then Malaya), gets its independence it regains only its territorial space (perhaps partially) but not the epistemological space" (Shamsul 1998:37). Much of the social science literature on Malaysia, including that by anthropologists, is concerned with the continuing legacy of the specific racial or ethnic differences that mark this epistemological space. By far the greatest emphasis has been on the ways in which the categories of Malay, Chinese and Indian have been expressed in more or less exclusively political domains such as political parties, elections, and official economic or development policy. Though most treatments recognize that these categories affect "the mind and practical life of the populace," this observation is often left unanalyzed and unsupported by very much ethnographic data – an omission I aim to correct by considering if, how, or to what extent this postcolonial epistemological space continues to contribute to the production of meaning in the real spaces of everyday life.

Appadurai (1988) notes that certain places have come to stand for certain anthropological problems, with India identified with hierarchy, for example, or New Guinea with exchange. In such a stereotypical typology, Malaysia would be a place where the key problem has long been considered to be the political economy of a cultural pluralism. With a national government consisting of a delicately balanced coalition of four political parties, three of which have memberships based on ethnicity (Malay, Chinese and Indian),[3] polity in Malaysia has been described as "plural," (Embong 2001; Freedman 1960; Hefner 2001b; Nagata 1975; Shamsul 2001); as

"fragmented," (Kahn and Loh Kok Wah 1992); as a "mosaic," (Nagata 1979); or as a "caldron of ethnicity" rather than a "melting pot" (Nash 1989). Ethnic and religious difference has been seen as complexly articulated in such terms as patronage politics (Kessler 1978; Rogers 1977; Strauch 1983; Syed Husin Ali 1975); as business (Williamson 2002); as problems encountered by a development- or market-oriented state (Gomez and Jomo 1997; Jomo 1986; Loh Kok Wah 2001); or as a politics of representation of the specific identities, cultures, or religions of various groups (Kahn 1998; Mandal 2001; Maznah and Wong 2001). As Appadurai recognizes, however, stories other than those that dominate the literature on particular places can also be told, and attention to issues of space and place can provide a productive focus for an analysis that spans both the political and the social.

Three decades ago, Geertz maintained that that project facing newly independent states was "not. . . the simple replacement of primordial ties and identifications by civil ones. . . . [but] an adjustment between them" (Geertz 1973: 308). I maintain that this project continues, and that, in Penang, urban residential space has become a primary arena for this continuing adjustment, with some additional new terms. I argue that in the epistemology of this space "difference" continues to be "a defining mode of everyday existence" but the differences that matter are not always or exclusively placed along ethnoreligious lines. These differences include those between Penang and other places (including the regional urban identity discussed above), and differences in quality of life between familiar,

long-standing ways of urban living, and that which is "new" in the material and social fabric of the city's greater metropolitan region.

In postcolonial Malaysia, as in other newly independent nations, a "valuable new prize" as Geertz puts it – control of the state – did indeed stimulate ethnoreligious sentiments and, as he observes, "intense popular interest in the affairs of government" (Geertz 1973:270). However, with all groups in Malaysia having achieved certain levels of political participation and material prosperity in the decades since independence, many of the people I worked with were concerned, not so much with control of the state, but with the quality of their everyday life and, in some cases, a desire for increased participation in decision-making processes that affect this quality. A common sentiment was that, while many people were better off financially than they had ever been, this did not always or necessarily mean that their lives were better. Increased prosperity was not without material and social costs. There was much concern about the future sustainability of both old and new ways of living and what the future would be like if the country's "juggernaut of growth," as one Malaysian scholar (Goh 2002) puts it, were allowed to continue in its current form. Top-down planning decisions, made in complicity with moneyed interests and a property law in which any piece of land could be seized by the state and returned to the private sector for property "development," had resulted in the displacement and break-up of numerous viable and long-standing communities, both within the city and beyond it. Many of these projects were quickly and poorly built, had strained the existing

infrastructure and had resulted in increased traffic, flooding, and pollution. A national-level call encouraging universal home ownership meant that, for many renters of individual houses in the city, the only home they could afford to buy would be a substantially smaller unit in a high rise flat in a location often distant from their workplace. These tenants were concerned about the perceived social consequences of such a changed living situation, where doors to apartments were kept closed and where it was thought that young people, seeking escape from cramped quarters and no longer subject to communal supervision under the watchful eyes of neighbors, would likely wander into trouble. For many, moving to a high rise would also mean going into long-term debt for home and vehicle loans for which banks required a regular and predictable monthly income that was preferably salaried and not derived from the familiar, small-scale and self-managed enterprises with which many urban householders had long been engaged.

These prevalence of these concerns over changes in quality of life and lifestyle, and their focus on the built environment of residential urban space, do not mean that inner-city residents of Penang have become less politically engaged over the years, are nostalgic, or that so called "middle class" (cf. Embong 2001) issues are entirely replacing ethnic or religious differences as a "defining mode" of social or political life. Ethnic or "communal" politics (as it is called in Malaysia) continues, although many of my more articulate acquaintances in Penang – social activists, academics, journalists, and opposition party members -- frequently expressed to me the opinion

that it has now reached an impasse and the time has come for a new political culture based on shared concerns about the quality of everyday life. The logic here was that a national ideology promoting "harmony" between groups had been successfully and productively internalized by most Malaysians, but that the government's continued insistence upon seeing everything in ethnic terms was merely a justification for its centralized "divide and rule" power structure that some saw as a form of domestic neocolonialism. This power structure was perceived to have produced top-down planning policies that favored the interests of a new elite -- political favorites, foreign investors and big business -- over those of the public. The effects of these practices had disrupted long-standing residential communities, encouraged materialism over other values, and were generally compromising many aspects of the quality of everyone's daily life.

At the same time, however, the views of these commentators were not reactionary, and only rarely took the form of nostalgia. As one activist put it, few people regret that "it is no longer socially acceptable to sit under a palm tree all day." For many years Penang had proudly surpassed even the high economic growth rate of the nation as a whole, largely through a dramatic increase in high-tech manufacturing. Nostalgia, in their view, was an affliction of people in places that had more or less completely severed the continuity of their relationship to the past, such as Singapore, which had literally bulldozed almost everything that was old in its urban fabric. This development path taken by Singapore was seen by many in Penang as symptomatic of

the loss of individual and local-level autonomy and an overdetermination by the state over the disposition and use of urban space. Penang, in their view, had achieved its economic success while still managing to retain some sense of its roots. The question was whether this sense of the past and the sense of small-scale autonomy it embraced would continue to be relevant and sustainable with increased development and not be subsumed by a new and faceless standard of transnational consumer culture, as seemed to be occurring elsewhere.

These commentators articulated what was less succinctly expressed by many of my other informants: people did not oppose development per se but they questioned where it was all heading, and some explicitly sought ways to assure that its trajectory would be humane. Understanding the material and social fabrics of their environment to be deeply intertwined, they were concerned that spaces remain in the city, not just for cultural or ethnic specificity but also for diversity and a sense of autonomy -- personal, economic and regional – that had figured prominently in Penang's history. With the current transformation of the city's greater metropolitan region, it is these senses of place that have become the focus of a somewhat greater concern among residents than questions or problems of ethnicity or ethnically defined communal politics. Following the lead of the residents I worked with, I interpret the urban residential spaces of Penang as key sites, not just for the production, reproduction and reinvention of ethnicity, but also for the recollection and use of the past, the imagination of a possible future, and the ability to understand and cope with

change through time more generally. These spatial dynamics are themselves part of a broader political discourse that embraces identities other than ethnic and extrapolates issues of autonomy and self determination into concern for such larger issues as human rights and the desire for a more truly participatory democracy. I argue that the meanings and uses of urban space in Penang thus provide residents with significant ways to come to terms with the current realities of their own political history. Urban space also provides a key forum for attempts to transform contemporary Malaysian political culture, and, in particular, to overcome a colonial inheritance in which ethnoreligious concerns continue to be regarded, by some, as deeply divisive.

During my stay in Penang I found that, for residents, talk about new building projects was also usually talk about people and politics. In a recent essay Shamsul (2001) notes that post-colonial Malaysian politics and society has been characterized as "part authoritarian, part democratic," "semi-democratic," "quasi-democratic," or outright "authoritarian" (Shamsul 2001:223; cf. Case 1996; Crouch 1996). Descriptions such as these, with the addition of the popular term "money politics," encapsulate the gist of the kind of political culture that many of my informants spoke about when they described to me how and why certain new structures were being built in the city. Shamsul observes that, despite these widely discussed characteristics, a "new politics" is now emerging in Malaysia (Shamsul 2001: 221), the desire for which I found confirmed in many conversations with residents about urban space. Contemporary Malaysian political culture, Shamsul argues, is informed "not only by

colonially generated knowledge and ethnoreligious concerns but more and more by pluralistic and universal idioms and concerns" (Shamsul 2001:205). Identifying this trend as "an important shift" whose "evolution is far from finished or secure," Shamsul observes that this shift "involves a move away from the colonial-inherited categories of race, ethnicity, and religion to, for want of a better term, "interest-based" concerns" (Shamsul 2001:209). Reinforced by a popular discourse that upholds "multiculturalism" as a positive value, there is little doubt that ethnicity, whether or not it is defined according to the colonial-era categories of "Malay," "Chinese" or "Indian" (which mask a greater degree of cultural and ethnic specificity), will continue to be publicly expressed in Penang, even under changed material circumstances. What is far less certain are the issues of rights, participation, and quality of life for all. Ethnic articulation is not coming to an end in Malaysia, but the continued viability of a valued sense of individual and local autonomy and of self-determination that underlies ethnic articulation is far less assured. I argue that this tension is deeply spatial. It is being played out in urban space and in popular discourses about its transformation. With the prevalence of ethnic diversity in urban space largely assumed, it is often the expression of autonomy and self-determination – as well as real or possible threats to their continued existence -- that people see and comment on when they encounter both old and new features of the environment in which they live.

This valorization of autonomy, which is the subtext of much of public ethnic articulation in Penang pertains to other domains than ethnicity. Various expressions of

autonomy are understood and appreciated across ethnic, religious, and even class differences, and they contribute to the senses people have of both Penang and Malaysia as places to live. The salience of autonomy as a focus of concern is not restricted to the activities of one's own group, nor is it simply a matter of people versus the state. On the contrary, it could be argued that the state is a primary purveyor of a discourse of autonomy, explicitly in the form of nationalist rhetoric, and indirectly, in terms of the popular reactions generated by the unintended consequences of some of its development programs. Passionate statements by the prime minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mohamed Mahathir, appear on front pages and on television programs, very often on a daily basis. His pronouncements regularly express indignation over what he perceives as attempts to compromise the spirit of Malaysian self determination or the sovereign autonomy of the territory of the nation, whether by actions or policies originating in the West, or by what he brands as agents of its continuing imperial interests, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank. These charges were taken seriously by many of the people I knew in Penang, even, and especially, among those who felt that Mahathir was internally colonizing his own people in like manner by usurping local autonomy, centralizing planning decisions, and allowing his "cronies" to exploit development opportunities at the expense of popular participation and a greater public good.

Positive evaluations of autonomy and self-determination were expressed in many domains other than nationalist rhetoric, and these too, were often framed in

spatial terms during the course of a conversation. This sentiment was often tied to the appreciation of a certain temporal continuity to be found in many places in Penang as well as to a sense of autonomy that was at the heart of that space's ethnic articulation, whether or not the place in question pertained to the speaker's own activities or those of his or her own ethnicity or class. For example, a successful Chinese businessman, upon returning from a long stay abroad, told me that he was dismayed to find that there were so many tall new buildings around the island that, in many places, he found Penang to be unrecognizable as the home he once knew. He said that he knew he was home, however, when he was relieved to find that his favorite Indian barber was still cutting hair in his own tiny shop on one of the old city streets. In this case, "coming home" involved the appreciation of an urban space marked by the temporal continuity of both another individual's small-scale enterprise and the long-term association of a particular trade with a particular group not one's own. (Barbering was traditionally an Indian occupation.) In a similar vein, a local, ethnically Chinese historian told me that what he liked about living in Penang was that it was "the last bastion of traditional Chinese culture and practices" in the region. He felt this way even though he himself was only tangentially involved, if at all, in the practices he described as examples of this tradition.

Urban space in Penang has a certain moral content that is often tied to place-based expressions of autonomy. The expression of a sense of autonomy in various aspects of the built environment, or its usurpation by forces beyond individual or

group control, is often included in the meanings people hold regarding places and things they encounter in the city. Whether one's judgment is ultimately positive or negative, this moral content is often articulated in terms of autonomy and its continuity rather than ethnicity. Passing a new construction site, for example, would regularly provoke comments on what it had replaced. Many of these remarks would be framed, not in terms of nostalgia for the aesthetic qualities old buildings as ethnic expressions now destroyed, but by concern that the people who once lived or worked there would likely have had no choice but to move to make way for "development." These comments would sometimes be followed by harshly critical observations that those who were displaced had received only minimal, hard won, or no compensation from the developer, and little sympathy from the government. Stories of evictions and details about compensation were disseminated widely in casual conversations and press reports and such concerns were frequently expressed by my acquaintances whether or not they personally knew any of the people involved. Conversely, expressions of autonomy that had been sustained through time were frequently pointed out to me with great appreciation. These positive evaluations regularly extended across differences in class or level of education, as well as ethnicity. While riding together though the old inner city a journalist friend pointed out a roadside stall that was manned by a former classmate of his who had left school early and had been selling cold drinks on the same corner ever since. Unlike my friend, this man had never gone to college and his income had been extremely modest for over twenty

years. Nevertheless, my friend said that he was able to support three children and that he seemed to be very content. Admiring the man's independence and anxious about the possibility of losing his own salaried position due to corporate downsizing, my friend wistfully added that "there's certainly something to be said for being one's own boss."

This appreciation of and respect for autonomy as expressed in the activities of others was not restricted to people who could be called "middle class"[4] These sentiments were not more prevalent among any one group than any other, nor were they exclusive to Penang. If there was any common denominator it was that discourses about autonomy were often also discourses about the passage of time, and, in particular, concern about the future. Riding with three friends from Kuala Lumpur, all of whom were collaborators in a modern dance troupe (and who were, incidentally, Malay, Chinese and Indian) the conversation turned to an expression of concern about a recent ban on the raising of chickens in that city. These were people who had never raised chickens themselves and likely had no interest in ever doing so, but the gist of their conversation was that people should have a right to do so if they wanted or needed to for income or for self consumption, that state control over a once-popular domain of autonomy and self-sufficiency was unwarranted, and that yet another link with the past had been severed in what was now the country's largest city.

Not every change in the urban built environment was evaluated negatively by its residents. Some people in Penang, as elsewhere saw many new building projects in

the glowing, positive light fostered by a national discourse of progress and development. But many of those who thought longer and harder about the political and economic context of some projects identified a craze to build and novelty for its own sake as disturbing trends with serious consequences. Things were being built that, in the long run, few people wanted or needed. The concern here was with continuity in the direction of the future: projects were being realized without due consideration for their long-term viability or utility. An example many people gave were shopping malls, which were being built in increasing numbers throughout Penang. The newest one would attract many visitors, but usually only for a limited time, they explained. Interest in it would wane as even newer complexes opened, resulting in the closure of many businesses and loss of investments by individual proprietors who may have bought their own units in the older complex. The moral of the story here was that the big business of property development was trafficking in short-term novelty and in some cases exploiting small-scale entrepreneurs, and all at the cost of straining public infrastructure such as roads, water supplies, and drainage.

Just as change in the urban environment was not always evaluated negatively, not every expression of autonomy that people saw in the city was regarded favorably. Autonomy expressed without constraint or for its own sake was sometimes subject to harsh criticism. Among people directly concerned with architecture or planning, a new building would sometimes be cited as an example of a builder doing "whatever he wanted"[5] and producing something that was insensitive to the existing natural, social,

or architectural context. One type of structure that was broadly criticized in this regard, and not just by experts, was the pedestrian overpass, several of which had recently been constructed in various parts of town. Many people perceived these overpasses to be unattractive, little used, and dangerous at night, especially for women. Some further interpreted them as expressions of an unchecked autonomy that they deemed civically inappropriate. Some said one of the reasons for building them was that drivers in Penang do not like to stop and wait for anyone else to pass, but that perhaps they should be compelled to in certain places for the public good. Those who offered me more details about why they were built specifically interpreted them as expressions of the autonomy – to the point of imperiousness – of the government officials who had authorized their construction. The state had hired professional traffic experts, they said, but there was no telling the official in charge and their advice against the construction of overpasses was ignored. The overpasses were costly to build, required scheduled maintenance, and were especially inappropriate for women pushing strollers, the elderly, and the disabled. Moreover, who wanted to walk up and down the equivalent of several flights of stairs in the heat? A simple traffic light would have been a cheaper and more effective solution. But the boss was the boss, these people reasoned, and the power structure was such that he could, and did, end up building whatever he wanted, with results that were perceived as contrary to a greater public good. Similar sentiments were echoed in many other interpretations of how and why other new structures came to be built in the city. Charges of corruption,

cronyism or nepotism were sometimes included in the reasons people gave for the approval of certain projects – an official would be thought to favor his friends by giving them business -- but the gist of many of these critiques often involved dismay that someone had enjoyed an autonomous assertion of power regardless of the consequences and at the public's expense.

Urban space and the built environment are moral issues in Penang because space always has human content, and often a spiritual dimension as well. No space in Penang is ever truly empty. The belief that the ghosts of deceased inhabitants still linger in certain places and structures, especially houses, was widely held across differences in ethnicity, class, or education. This spiritual content of space is not always or necessarily thought to be diminished or reduced with redevelopment and the building of new structures. Among some Chinese and Indians, in particular, there is a belief that unsold or unoccupied high-rise condominium units become the abode of various spirits who must be propitiated and kindly asked to leave lest they bother the unit's new human inhabitants. Chinese contractors have been known to select a start date for new construction projects based on an auspicious time to propitiate the earth spirits already inhabiting the property, and the continuing need for these spirits to have a place to live is often provided by a permanent shrine somewhere outside the new building. During the festival of Hungry Ghosts, devotees believe that spirits are let out of the underworld and must be appeased with offerings. The most mischievous spirits are those whose connections with the living have been severed in that they have

no surviving kin in the area to provide for them; these include the spirits of Japanese and other unknown soldiers killed during World War II. On a more mundane level, who did or did not build something often figures into a building's meaning and continued significance. An activist for architectural preservation told me that the "nouveau riche do not care about preserving buildings in old George Town because it was not their ancestors who built them." He added that people who want to see old buildings preserved are likely the kind of people who would respect and want to take care of their parents in their old age. This latter statement indicates that the connection seen between people and buildings concerns a general moral principle (filial piety) and not just personal interest (in the form of a specific ancestral connection to a particular building). The moral content of space is expansive and not exclusive in that it spans time and can incorporate histories and people with which one does not have a personal connection. In some cases, such as the perception of pedestrian overpasses mentioned above, the links perceived between a feature of the built environment and a particular person or event can be quite specific and morally loaded. In another example, many people in Penang I spoke with continue to associate Komtar, Penang's first urban re-development project that resulted in one of the tallest skyscrapers in Asia, with Lim Chong Eu, who was Penang's longest-serving chief minister at the time of its construction. Some additionally see it as a continuing symbol of Lim's eventual fall from power, largely due to public dissatisfaction with

the extended period of its construction and delays in re-settling the hundreds of households and businesses it displaced.

The meanings that residents create and find in the built environment of urban space in Penang thus dovetail and confirm, in a materially spatial sense, the strictly political observations that Shamsul makes about the "epistemological space" of contemporary, postcolonial Malaysia. In the same essay cited above, Shamsul declares that "despite strong state intervention, the state-elite does not have a monopoly over power and political space, nor is material-market interest the only motivating factor in Malaysia's contemporary realpolitik" (Shamsul 2001:205). Just as Shamsul's metaphorical political space is moving away from ethnicity as a primary articulating factor, I argue that the real space of human habitation is providing a forum for the readjustment of social dynamics other than those that have been historically defined in Malaysia as ethnoreligious. A new civic consciousness is arising in which the tension lies, not so much between ethnic or religious groups as between political aspiration and political reality more broadly and inclusively conceived. A primary concern of this move is to strike some kind of balance between morality and the market. Capitalist enterprise and profit-making are not dirty words in Penang. As originally immigrant communities (even the Malays in Penang were originally from somewhere else) people realize that their forebears first came to the island to make money and to prosper. They were not simply seeking escape from harsh conditions elsewhere. Recent extensions of this impulse to profit in a grand scale onto the

familiar canvas of residential urban space are now perceived as potentially threatening to the human and moral content of that space.

Many of the residents of George Town were uncomfortable with the concept, prevalent only since a real estate boom little more than two decades old, that a piece of land may be worth more as an empty lot than with a house or building on it. Based on my conversations with members of 103 households still resident in single unit houses in the city, I found that appreciation of the use value of a property always overrode exchange value, even among owner occupants.[6] In the midst of a move to protect several areas of the inner city as "heritage zones" the developers association publicized in the press their estimation of the total monetary value of the land in question (3.5 billion Malaysian ringgit[7]) that would permanently be "lost" to development – a move that provoked a vehement reaction in some quarters. "How can they put a price on people's heads like that?" asked a friend of mine, angrily. His anger was based on the assumption, not that land is inalienable or that people should be prevented from making a profit, but that the disposition of urban space should rightly be defined first and foremost by the people who inhabit and use it and not solely by "material-market interest."

Media coverage of cases of eviction and displacement play upon popular ideas of morality, rights, and sentiments of attachment to family homes and familiar places. At the same time, however, with most of the large media outlets beholden to one or another national-level political interest or their business partners, "development" is

often presented in the press as an even deeper fundamental value, and the changes in ways of life that it represents, for good or bad, are often presented as inevitable. Discourses of "people before profits" do get heard, but the problem is that any political influence they may have is informal only and not built into the structure of governance. This contrasts sharply with the solidly structural role defined for ethnicity in Malaysian politics, with various quotas legislated for *bumiputera* (native Malays), and membership in three of the four parties in the ruling national coalition defined by ethnicity. Political power in Penang, as in the other states of Malaysia, is centralized in the state government, which, in turn, is constrained by an even greater concentration of power at the national level. Local-level municipal officials in George Town are appointed by the state government; there are no elections at a level more local than the state and the city has no mayor.[8] Popular participation in the politics of urban planning is thus restricted to the level of suggestion, with the ultimate decision-making authority wielded behind closed doors, and often only after any public discussion of a particular project has waned. With moneyed interests preventing the adoption of legislated local plans that would regulate zoning, construction and urban growth, this process is seen by some as disenfranchising the public and preventing its interests from being represented in the future course of the city. Some residents have also interpreted it as an affront to local knowledge, expertise, and creativity, as a challenge to Penang's historical identity, and as a threat to the values of autonomy and

self-determination as expressed in such traditions as small-scale entrepreneurship and single-unit housing.

I contend that recent local interest in quality-of-life issues associated with development of the urban built environment has fostered not only a renewed appreciation of Penang's history of social diversity but also an increased awareness that both the city itself and its problems are truly shared by all inhabitants. There is a desire that civic accountability in planning and genuine popular participation across the board be accorded clearly defined roles in the structure of governance, with the political prominence and an equivalent level of respect that has previously been given to questions and debates over ethnic interests. Shamsul (2001) identifies two events that have catalyzed a popular move toward a "new politics" that would transcend the confines of postcolonial ethnic politics in Malaysia: the "Asian economic crisis" that began in 1997 and the prime minister's abrupt sacking of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister (and Mahathir's anointed successor) and his subsequent arrest on charges of sodomy and corruption in 1998. These events led to the creation of a new pan-ethnic political party (which found a strong base of support in Penang, Anwar's home state), a groundswell of popular support for *reformasi* (the reform of old-style politics), and demonstrative demands by the public for a more truly participatory democracy.

These two events, which took place during the period of my fieldwork, dovetail with the two events that I consider to be catalysts for the articulation of

popular concern about the development of urban space in Penang. This first is, again, the Asian economic crisis, the impact of which had an immediate and dramatically visible impact on the built environment. Virtually every new construction project already underway immediately ceased. Cranes and pile drivers everywhere fell silent -- an event that publicly reiterated, even to those who had not thought very much about it, that the capital financing of most new construction was already well beyond local determination and intimately tied to a regional and global economy. The second event that intensified concern about the future of urban space was the impending repeal of the Rent Control Act of 1966, which was due to eliminate a rent freeze protecting tenants of pre World War II buildings as of January 1, 2000. With over 13,000 such structures, Penang had the largest number of rent controlled buildings of any state in Malaysia. The fear, shared even by elites who did not live in the center of town, was that the inner city, the place with the greatest concentrations of old buildings and tenants with modest incomes, would be largely devoid of residents and many small businesses by the start of the new millennium. All of these events regularly precipitated heated discussion among people from all walks of life in Penang. With that which I had come to Penang to study already in the forefront of so many people's minds, there were many occasions when I hardly had to ask any questions but just listen. With a focus on issues of housing and quality of life, people were acutely concerned about the future of their city and whether or not spaces would remain in everyday urban life for cultural diversity, autonomy, difference, and the

expression of multiple identities, all of which had figured so prominently in the history of Penang.

Everyone from Elsewhere

Although small groups of Malay fisherman, traders, and pirates from the greater Malay world had settled on the island of Penang on and off from early on, few traces of their presence remain, and most of the documented history of Penang begins with the founding of the city of George Town, where everyone was from elsewhere, including the Malays.[9] Right from the start, and continuing on into the present day, this city has been known as a place where multiple cultures, a penchant for building, ambition, and a desire to make money have all come together. For Penang's early immigrants, this was a place where one could pursue opportunities for economic gain not generally available to them in their homelands, but it was also a place where multiple expressions of both ethnicity and faith could also freely flourish. This history has worked to create a distinctive and strongly held sense of place among its current inhabitants, who see Penang as connected to, but also distinctly different from other parts of Malaysia, the larger mainland region, and the rest of Asia and the world.

George Town was founded in 1786 by Francis Light, an independent English trader and adventurer affiliated with the East India Company, who managed to persuade the Sultan of Kedah, who held loose suzerainty over the island, to allow him to settle the island. Light's interest in the area was to establish a foothold from which to counter Dutch dominance of the lucrative Sumatran trade along the Straits of Malacca, and the Sultan was attracted to Light's promise of assistance against an

impending attack by the Siamese. Plans for a permanent settlement quickly materialized. Legend has it that Light fired gold coins from his ship's cannon into the jungle to encourage its immediate clearing, not by any native residents, but by the Chinese and Indian traders and the few Malays that he had already brought with him (Hoyt 1991: 15). Within weeks of landing, Light had laid out several streets, and in August 1786 named the new city after King George III, the island after the Prince of Wales, and the main artery after William Pitt, Britain's prime minister.[10] The town grew immediately and attracted ambitious settlers from around the region, including Sumatra, China, and nearby Malay states on the mainland. Immigrant ambition found immediate expression in the ability to construct one's own houses, warehouses and shops in the cosmopolitan milieu of a free port. By October, two months after the city's founding, Light reported, in a statement much quoted by Penang historians, that

> our inhabitants increase very fast, Choolias,[11] Chinese and Christians. They are already disputing the ground, everyone building as fast as he can" (quoted in City Council of George Town 1966:1)

The new inhabitants not only increased but prospered, and the town quickly grew to attract not just experienced entrepreneurs, but also coolies and contract laborers from more rural areas of southern China, southern India and the Malay archipelago. Before the rise of Singapore, Penang had become the most important trading center in the region and a major entrepôt for the transshipment of rubber, tin, pepper, and other forest products. In 1826, along with Singapore and Melaka, it became one of the Straits Settlements and was administered as part of British India until 1867 when the Settlements became a separate colony (Andaya and Andaya 2001).[12]

With money readily flowing and a variety of opportunities both available and achieved, successive waves of immigrants made their mark on Penang's urban fabric. Today, the old inner city of George Town is vibrant with the architecturally realized expressions of its diverse inhabitants, who were able to build what their forebears could only imagine. Ornate Chinese clan houses, and temples, Indian temples, Malay and Anglo-Indian style mosques, Straits Chinese townhouses and opulent Palladian style mansions incorporating Chinese or Indian motifs are among the more prominent monuments competing for visual attention. The bulk of the old inner city, however, consists of decidedly more modest, two-story Chinese-style shop and terrace houses. This diversity in building was facilitated by a British colonial policy of indirect rule and, for the most part, a hands-off approach to city planning. Identifying three main groups of people, the early administrators named a Kapitan (Captain) for the Chinese and the Klings (Indians) and a Penghulu (headman) for the Malays, through whom most local-level civil and religious matters were administered. Concerned primarily with business and trade, and with the symbolic center of their empire located elsewhere, the British built little that was imposing or particularly expressive of their power and certainly did not seek to impose a social order through architecture in the ways Rabinow (1989) and Wright (1991) have described as inherent to French colonial policy. Their most notable imposition of city planning, apart from eventually banning *atap* (palm leaf hatch) as a roofing material in the inner city because it was found to be too combustible, was that shop houses were required to have a "five-foot-way" – a connecting covered walkway for pedestrians created by an overhanging second story. Much of everything else was left to local and individual determination, allowing a great deal of room for autonomous expression in the creation and use of

urban space, which, in many cases, historically meant the public display of ethnic specificity.

Newly arriving immigrants to Penang found networks of needed social and economic support in associations based on ethnicity, clan, guild, religion, dialect, or district of origin in a homeland. Many of these associations built their own headquarters buildings that prominently proclaimed the group's identity, whether by architectural style, signage, or a combination of both. New arrivals would often be housed in the headquarters building or perhaps be offered an opportunity to rent beds, rooms, or shops in other properties owned by the organizations with whom they had claimed affiliation. Many of these associations, and their buildings, continue to contribute to the ethnic articulation of the city's urban fabric, and their changed functions in an era of reduced immigration is discussed in Chapter 4.

Single unit terrace and shop houses were also often designed to express the cultural origins of their original builders and these more modest buildings, whatever their structure, could easily be customized to express the specific identities or origins of their current residents through the addition of signage or religious paraphernalia. A popular practice among the Chinese in Penang was to display, in calligraphy on a pair of paper lanterns hung outdoors on either side of the front door, not only the family name but their district of origin in China and in some cases the specific village of the household's ancestors. Although this practice is no longer followed, Chapters 2 and 3 discuss how the ethnic and/or religious identities of a house's residents can often still be ascertained by looking at publicly displayed decorations or accessories that have been added above, or near the entrance.

Though urban space and society in Penang remain highly articulated in terms of ethnicity and religion, new frameworks for urban social action and a different focus for identification are now emerging that are truly pan-ethnic but still tied to the meaning and use of urban residential space. For the first time in Penang, opportunities for organizational affiliation and the public expression of identity are being created based solely on residential proximity. Whereas ethnically specific networks and loyalties had once provided most of the bases for social action and self-realization in George Town, it is the city itself that has now become the rallying point for new forms of organization and possibilities for identification that cross ethnic lines. Informed by a consciousness that urban development has created many problems that are truly shared, concerned residents of Penang have founded a number of urban advocacy groups that seek to foster an additional focus for personal identity that complements but does not supercede, existing ethnic and religious identifications: that of responsible resident in a shared urban space. In a city where ethnically diverse and inclusive community organizations are relatively new phenomena, this focus for identification goes well beyond any simple "civic" awareness. It is a deeply moral stance. Drawing on an international discourse of global environmental/ecological concern but customizing its content to suit local needs, these groups do not oppose development but seek to assure that its trajectory is humane. They are concerned that spaces remain in everyday urban life for both cultural diversity and autonomy and they seek to publicly highlight what amounts to a common multicultural identity rooted in the history of a particular metropolitan region. In Chapters 4 and 5, I analyze two such groups as creative twists on existing forms of cultural capital, formulated in response to a series of social pressures that are generated locally, nationally, and

globally. I trace the articulation of this new form of unifying social consciousness in which the material and social fabrics of the city are still understood as deeply intertwined and publicly expressed in urban residential space.

Identities and Identifications

One of the consequences of Malaysia's postcolonial political trajectory is that, in its basic outlines, ethnic identity is non-negotiable and a matter largely relegated to definition by the state. The social categories established by British colonial administration remain the official ones into which all citizens must fit upon registering for the identity card that all adults must carry. One is either "Malay," "Chinese," "Indian" or "Other" – designations that, in this order, broadly reflect numerically descending levels of the nation's ethnic populations but which mask a greater complexity of possible identifiers.[13] (A recent census put Malaysia's population as 55.2% Malay; 33.9% Chinese; 10.2% Indian; and 0.6% Other (Information Malaysia 1998:67). Through religion is not part of the definition of any other category, being Malay also means that one is Muslim. "Malay" is defined in Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian constitution as "one who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, [and] conforms to Malay custom (*adat*)." This definition, in which ethnicity is defined by religion, language, and custom, allows for a certain fluidity of membership within the category "Malay," but only within strict, if unstated, racially defined limits. People from certain parts of the world with Muslim traditions

(such as India, Indonesia, and the Middle East) can "become Malay" (*masuk Melayu*), often within a generation or two, if they meet the defining criteria and if their personal appearance allows them to "pass" as Malay. Conversely, it seems that no person whose appearance is obviously Chinese, even if Muslim, can ever be considered truly Malay.

Mixed marriages between the major ethnic categories (with the exception of one spouse being "Other") are rare in Malaysia. If a non-Muslim of either sex wants to marry a Muslim, conversion of the non-believer to Islam is required. Though historically many people from what is now known as Indonesia have assimilated to become "Malay," most additions to the category in recent decades have been Tamil speaking Muslims from South India who register their bi- or multilingual Malaysia-born children as "Malay."[14] Prior to World War II, some Chinese immigrants to Penang and the Malay peninsula did manage to attain a certain degree of local assimilation and became, not Malay but "*peranakan*" (native born), also known as "Baba-Nonya" or "Straits Chinese" who created their own customs, cuisine, dress, and a language and literature (Baba Malay) that combined elements of Hokkien (a Chinese language), Malay, and English. Muslim/non-Muslim constitutes the most rigidly defined and least fluid categorical difference between people in Malaysia, where proselytization of Muslims to other religions is prohibited and Muslims are subject to a separate set of Muslim *syariah* laws in addition to the civil code (cf. Peletz 2002).[15] Among non-Muslims there is considerable variation within and casual fluidity

between Taoist, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian practices, with some worshippers engaging in practices or worshipping deities from more than one tradition, especially at times of major public religious festivals. Among the Chinese, in particular, religion is often a matter of individual personal choice and does not simply replicate the particular combination of beliefs and practices of one's parents. For example, it is not uncommon for one or more children of Christian parents to consider themselves primarily Taoist or Buddhist, or vice versa.

Being Malay has certain advantages that are the products of a political history more recent than colonialism. Malays themselves are subsumed under the larger category of "*bumiputera*" (literally, "sons -- or princes -- of the soil"), which includes other native groups, not all of whom are Muslim. These groups include the *orang asli* ("original people" or aborigines) of the interior of peninsular Malaysia (Nicholas 2000; cf, also Denton 1979, 2000; Roseman 1991), and the Malay-related groups of the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, many of whom are now Christian. The status of bumiputera carries with it certain privileges, such as favorable quotas in government employment, national universities, business licensing and start-up loans, and housing.[16] These privileges were originally promulgated in the New Economic Policy (NEP), legislated in 1971 in the aftermath of riots between Malays and Chinese on May 13, 1969, an event which is now considered a watershed in Malaysian history in that it assured that ethnicity would continue to inflect the nation's political culture for decades to come (cf. Comber

1983). Subsequently redrawn and extended in 1991 as the New Development Policy (NDP), the aim of both policies was to ensure that, with economic growth, a greater share of the country's wealth would go to the nation's demographically dominant bumiputera, specifically the Malays, than to the Chinese, whose economic dominance was already well established. At this level of categorization, ethnic identity is both defined and controlled by the state largely as a matter of economic and development policy, with the categories still based on colonial-era precedents.

Efforts to build special considerations for "native" peoples into the structure of government, however, predate Merdeka ("Freedom" -- independence from colonial rule). Malay nationalists, seeking constitutional recognition of a special status for Malays as indigenous people, rejected Britain's first move (in 1946) toward an independent Malayan Union, in which all citizens would have equal rights, and succeeded in replacing it with a proposal for a Federation of Malaya in which Malays would have certain constitutional rights not more generally shared. A subsequent alliance between the Federation's three major parties -- all communally based -- (The United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC)) succeeded in winning national independence for the Federation in 1957. In 1963 the states of Sabah and Sarawak (on Borneo) and Singapore (just south of the Malay peninsula) joined the Federation under the new name "Malaysia."[17] Singapore subsequently left the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 in opposition to the terms favoring Malays in the constitution and amidst

Malay fears in other parts of the Federation that Singapore's predominantly Chinese population would eventually upset the new nation's delicate ethnic balance (cf. Andaya and Andaya 2001:256-300). Goh observes that in the post-war years of national independence, the Malays specifically came to be identified as "the distinct cultural core" of Malaysia in national-level politics (Goh 2002:44), with other groups, including the orang asli, sometimes struggling to assert their interests and status as bumiputera in the new nation.

In Penang, however, the social and political dynamics of such nationally defined ethnic identities play out somewhat differently from the rest of Malaysia. This difference, I suggest, contributes to the sense that people have of it as a place. Numerous informants expressed to me their appreciation of the fact that Penang is distinctly different from the rest of Malaysia -- it is connected to the mainland and to mainstream national politics, but also separate from them. Part of the difference has to do with a statewide Chinese economic and demographic dominance in contradistinction to Malay political and demographic dominance at the national level. But I suggest that it also has to do with a different historical trajectory, in which a sense of "everyone from elsewhere" originally facilitated, and continues to shape, a distinctly urban energy and sense of place that has recently come to be specifically identified and valued as "multicultural."[18] Penang has always been a bastion of multiple differences, oppositional stances, and a center for social and political movements. Chinese and Indian nationalists had bases in Penang, from whose local

communities they sought moral and financial assistance, and Penang even briefly considered its own separatist movement for independence from the Federation of Malaya. More recently, two of the three major Malaysian national opposition parties[19] (the two that have multi-ethnic memberships) – the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Keadilan (Justice Party) have strong bases of support in the state. The ruling party in Penang state politics, Gerakan, which originated 1968 as an opposition party but is now part of the ruling national coalition (Barisan Nasional), is also the only major party in the coalition that is not ethnic-communally based. Although Gerakan is dominated by Chinese, its political outlook and membership policy has always been multi-ethnic. Penang is the only Malaysian state to have always had a Chinese chief minister. The nation's most established opposition publication, *Aliran*, whose staff of deeply committed political commentators regularly seem anxious to declare the end of a era of communal ethnic politics, is based in Penang, as are numerous national, regional and international-level non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose memberships are drawn from all three major groups in Penang.

Despite the availability of a greater range of categories with which to identify both oneself and others, the terms "Malay," "Chinese," and "Indian," have entered popular parlance in Malaysia as a convenient and "politically correct" cultural shorthand that only a few find objectionable.[20] Even though someone may have knowledge of a greater degree or cultural or ethnic specificity than these terms indicate, there seem to be few occasions when it is necessary to identify oneself or

others with greater specificity than "Malay, Chinese, or Indian." Significantly, and perhaps ironically since these terms continue to have such political salience, I found that people in Penang largely accepted these broad, nationally defined ethnic categories culturally, but not politically. Among the Chinese in Penang, it is not often important whether one is Hokkien, Cantonese, or Teochew, the three largest Chinese ethnic groups in Penang. Although most Penang Chinese I spoke with could tell me to which of these groups they belonged there were also some who could not. For most purposes, being "Chinese" sufficed. I found that the occasions on which one's specific Chinese ethnicity did matter were moments of lifecycle transition, such as weddings and funerals. At these times, perhaps due to the influence of ritual specialists often hired to arrange and oversee these events, it was important to many people to have specifically Hokkien, Cantonese, or Teochew rituals, foods, priests, paraphernalia, and performances.[21] Politically, however, being Malay, Chinese or Indian did not automatically mean that one was a member of, or supported a specifically Malay, a Chinese or an Indian political party. Political affiliation (like matters of religion for many Chinese) is a matter of individual choice and loyalties based solely on ethnicity are not assured. Chinese are a majority in Penang, and their influence is felt in every domain; but Penang Chinese can be very divided politically (cf. Hallgren 1987) and the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) often struggles to maintain a foothold in the state. Thus, although the nationally defined ethnic typology does have real affects, these affects are not always exclusively or directly political –

they pertain, perhaps above all, to the "epistemological space" of everyday life in which people are conscious of diversity, of difference, and of where they stand in various schemes of things beyond themselves.

This epistemological space can be defined as the total of a number of processes whereby people find, create, contest, and/or experience the spaces and places in which they live. I maintain that, in Penang, this space is at least partially informed by what I am calling "demographic consciousness." People are generally conscious of which group is on top numerically in what domain, where various concentrations are located, and where they themselves stand in relation to an accounting at various scales of territory.[22] Throughout Malaysia, and not just in official government pronouncements, use of the phrase "Malay, Chinese, and Indian" has become a politically correct way to reference the country's multicultural diversity and to indicate a sense of inclusion by naming the country's three largest and most prominent groups. This set of categories, which is almost always mentioned in this particular order, reflects an awareness of the relative size of each group. According to a recent census, the population of Malaysia was 59% Malay, 32.1% Chinese, and 8.2% Indian (Information Malaysia Yearbook 1998:67) – figures that I was no longer surprised to have roughly quoted to me in the course of casual conversations after they had been mentioned more than a few times. In Penang, however, the numbers are different. In 1990 the state of Penang was 52.9% Chinese, 34.5% Malay, and 11.5% Indians (Goh 2002:148), with everyone cognizant of the fact that most of the Chinese were

concentrated in and around George Town which was still largely a "Chinese" city, both demographically and, in the old inner city, architecturally as well.

Demographic consciousness in Penang thus exists at two territorial scales: Malays are a majority nationally, and Chinese are a majority locally. The tension between these two reckonings, I argue, contributes to the epistemological space of George Town's residents in various ways that are further discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Many Chinese, for example, appreciated the fact that both the city and the state of Penang were "largely Chinese." According to one Chinese resident I spoke with, this dominance was what made Penang not only different from, but "better" than the rest of Malaysia. At the same time, however, this demographic fact did not prevent many of the Malay residents I spoke with from expressing to me an equally strong sense of attachment to and identification with Penang as place – something that was also often framed in moral terms. Both Malay and Chinese residents of Penang were part of a secure majority in one scheme of things, but they could also know what it was like to be part of a possibly beleaguered minority at another scale of reckoning. Malays were dominant demographically and politically at the national level; Chinese were dominant locally in each of these domains but were dominant only economically when the entire country was considered. Numbers mattered. In either case, this demographic consciousness or imagination was predicated on an awareness that difference was not something distant, but was very close to home. Diversity in Penang thus meant that most people could know what it was like both to have strength

in numbers and to be a member of an ethnic minority. Indians were also part of this picture. Nationally, they were the smallest of the three major ethnic groups but urban Penang has one of the largest concentrations of Indians in the country, with their numbers exceeding those of Malays in the city itself.

Despite the fact that Malays and Chinese in Penang were not united, either among themselves or with each other, by any clear consensus politically – they did not constitute "communities" in any unified sense -- I argue that this majority/minority interface contributes greatly to the epistemological space of everyday life in Penang, and, in particular, to the ways in which certain material environmental aspects of Penang's history of development are locally understood. For example, many residents of Penang, and not just those who were Chinese, felt that national policy had revoked Penang's centuries-old status as a free port, was planning a new regional airport in a neighboring state that would render Penang's current international airport obsolete, and was generally diverting funds for urban infrastructure away from Penang in favor of Kuala Lumpur -- all because Penang was "too Chinese." Whether these charges are true or not, they underscore the extent to which relative ethnic demography figures into the meaning of space in Penang and contributes to residents' understandings of it as a place to live. Several local historians and academics further specified that, in this regard, Penang had once posed something of a symbolic problem for the new nation. Following the departure of Singapore from the Federation in 1963, George Town became Malaysia's largest city but it was (as it still is) identified as "largely Chinese,"

both demographically and in terms of built fabric and material urban symbols. According to these commentators, this did not sit well with a national agenda to develop cities and a greater urban profile as symbolic of Malaysia's achievements and status within a community of nations and, as part of this move, to foster an increased urban presence for Malays. The understanding here was that federal subsidies were diverted away from Penang toward the development of Kuala Lumpur as a "world class" capital city with which Malays could comfortably identify and which would itself be identified as "largely Malay." With Chinese urban enterprise already well established, Penang was thus perceived by some of its residents as contributing more in tax to the national government than it received in support for its own urban development.

This tension between two groups in Penang, each differently defined as dominant – locally dominant Chinese and nationally dominant Malays – has regularly played out within the urban fabric itself. Religious presence is sometimes the main point of contention. For example, in the 1970s, controversy erupted when the devotees of the Kek Lok Si temple, reputed to be the largest working Buddhist temple complex in Asia and located just outside George Town, proposed the construction of a 118-foot-high statue of the Chinese goddess Kuan Yin that would have stood higher than the minarets of the Penang State Mosque, some distance away (Lee 1986:38a or b). In this case, the Chinese eventually compromised and reduced the length of the statue's legs after construction had already started, resulting in a somewhat awkwardly

proportioned goddess. More recently, amidst concern that Muslim presence in the inner city was now much reduced since the days when the city was a thriving center for Islamic publishing, education, and pilgrims departing for the Hajj, a project was launched to restore *wakaf* (Muslim endowment) properties in deteriorating condition, retrieve them from inappropriate use and/or non-Muslim tenants, and return them to the Muslim community for educational, residential and commercial use (Nasution 2000). The result would visually and materially reassert a history of Muslim presence in an area where many people and things were Chinese.

The issues and discourses over such publicly symbolic structures and places are dramatic and clear, and, in rare instances, can become highly charged.[23] Contestations over specific individual monuments or exceptionally symbolic places, however, are not my primary focus. I am concerned with the meanings and uses of spaces and structures in a more everyday sense -- as places to live. Attention concentrating largely on what are now rare cases of overt cross-ethnic or cross-religious contestations over exceptionally significant monuments or sites runs the risk of misrepresenting an important dimension of what living in Penang is all about: that people who identify themselves in very different ways have largely succeeded in both living together and expressing who they are in an urban space that is truly shared and that incorporates difference. If features of this space are being contested at all, the lines of conflict are increasingly being drawn, not on the basis of ethnicity or religion, but out of concerns over everyone's quality of life, issues of popular participation in

planning the future disposition of urban space, and the continued viability of a sense of local autonomy, self-determination, and the city's long history of diversity.

I maintain that these multiple concerns, together with demographic consciousness and an awareness of ethnicity and difference at various territorial scales all filter into the epistemological space of everyday life. It is this level of meaning that is my focus. The following is an example. Standing beside a young man, barely in his teens, as we both watched a Taoist medium in trance ignite a six-foot-tall pyre of joss papers in the middle of the street (a common occurrence in Penang), I repeated an observation that I had heard from some of my other neighbors – that, in Singapore, open burning, even for religious purposes, is prohibited. Caught up in the spectacle, he replied enthusiastically: "But this is Malaysia! This is Chinese culture! You can not say no!"

Several things were being expressed in this comment that, to me, are indicative of the way in which the meaning of space in Penang is about much more than the simple expression of ethnic or religious identities; it is also about autonomy, diversity, and identities that are also national and regional. Many Malaysian Chinese I spoke with were appreciative of the fact that they were Malaysians and were Chinese in Malaysia and not Indonesia, where Chinese were subject to mob violence, or Singapore, where, despite a Chinese government and demographic majority, a higher economic status and a higher degree of administrative efficiency than in Malaysia, the state was perceived to have a controlling hand in too many aspects of everyday life.[24]

Unlike Indonesia, Singapore, or even China, in Malaysia "you can not say no" to Chinese culture: Malaysian Chinese had the security of being a recognized minority with certain rights to autonomous expression in public space and on the national scene.[25] These Malaysian Chinese were well aware that Chinese dominance at a national level was not always or necessarily a good thing for "Chinese culture." In commenting that "you can not say no" the young man was expressing an awareness, not just of Malaysia's cultural diversity and own place within it, but also that states elsewhere *were* saying no to something he valued about the space of his everyday life. Other devotees compared Penang favorably with China itself, and felt that Chinese religious practices were much constrained and diminished in China under the People's Republic. If you wanted the "real thing" – specifically certain ritual activities perceived to be no longer performed in China – you had to come to Penang. In Malaysia and especially in Penang, state control was perceived to be much less pervasive than in China or Singapore, and people were allowed, within certain limits,[26] to pursue and publicly express their own identities and differences. Despite the Malaysian's state's great attention to ethnicity, or perhaps because of a certain caution this attention may engender, spaces were left open for these differences and the "stuff" of culture that was important to people.

It should be pointed out that specifically religious and ethnic identities defined in terms of descent are not the only, or even in all cases the primary forms of personal identity construction in Penang – hence the title of this dissertation, which does not

confine identity to ethnicity. Penang has always been known as a regional center for education, attracting students from throughout Southeast Asia. As discussed in Chapter 3, by far the most common form of unsolicited self identification I encountered was not one's ethnicity but the kind of education a person had received – specifically in what language – with people referring to themselves as "English educated," "Chinese educated" or "Malay educated." Each of these types was thought to have produced not only a different body of personal knowledge, but a somewhat different outlook toward many topics. Although this form of identification is linked to ethnicity, it is not in itself an ethnic identifier defined in terms of descent, nor is the language of one's education any clear indicator of the kind of cultural or religious activities one would engage in later in life. For example, many of the devotees at one of the Taoist temples in the area where I lived, where Hokkien was the lingua franca, were educated in English at the Methodist Girls' School. English educated people generally expect that Chinese educated individuals know more about Chinese history, literature, traditional practices, and religion – an observation that I often, but not always, found to be the case. One former teacher at the Penang Free School, reputed to be the oldest English language school east of Suez, told me that he could sometimes ascertain that people were Chinese educated solely by their appearance and body language, even before he heard them speak.[27] The primary language of one's education, however, is not destiny in Penang, nor is the particular language one speaks most often. Chapters 2 and 3 further discuss the implications for identity construction

of the complex linguistic situation in Penang, where most of the people I worked with were multilingual (knowing at least three languages), and many of the non-Malays were literate only in a language they did not speak most often, such as the many speakers of Hokkien who were literate only in English and/or Malay. Different members of the same family, whatever their ethnicity, would often know, speak or read, in various combinations, different groups of languages. Differences in education and language use were particularly prevalent across generations, an observation I interpret as contributing to the valorization of a sense of individual autonomy that I found prevalent, to various degrees and in different ways, among all groups. Awareness of, and tolerance for, an individual's particular brand of multilingualism and linguistic competency also figured into people's interactions with strangers and thus contributed to a consciousness of diversity and difference in the meaning of public urban space.

Identities and identifications in Penang also embrace dimensions other than those defined by ethnicity, descent, religion, education or language. As outlined in the overview above, most people I met in Penang expressed a very strong identification with it as a place, which they often expressed in very personal terms. This was a sentiment that was widely shared, regardless of one's ethnicity. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, residents provided a variety of reasons for feeling this way. Among those few who said they would prefer to live elsewhere, the primary reasons they cited were that they would like to return to the place where they were born, or had kin in

other locations. Social relations, especially those of family, were also the most commonly mentioned reasons for wanting to stay in Penang. People make places, and in this case a characterization of "the city" as a site of alienation and anomie certainly does not apply. In outlining a theoretical approach to "place attachment," Altman and Low state that "the social relations that a place signifies may be equally or more important to the attachment process than the place qua place" (Altman and Low 1992: 7). This certainly holds true in Penang, where residents' senses of place are largely people centered, and within this sense, various specific features of the built environment are evaluated, not so much for their aesthetic or physical form, but for the social life and values they are perceived to embody, facilitate, or constrain.

In numerous casual conversations with city residents, the subject of "Penang" itself – its unique social, architectural and natural features, variety of food, even the distinctive character of "Penang people" – kept cropping up as a keenly described topic, with finer distinctions often made between people and features of the island and city compared to that of the mainland. Recurring themes identifying a distinctive type of "Penang" personality often referred to such traits as thrift, enterprise, practicality, and cost-consciousness, with the tenor of the conversation often turning toward amusement in citing examples of the lengths to which these traits can extend.[28] Sometimes the Chinese people of Penang were particularly singled out as having these traits but they were also regularly assigned to residents of all ethnicities. I heard such sentiments expressed in various ways by all groups, including elites, when referring to

both themselves and others. This set of traits was often cited in contradistinction to perceptions of the traits of people from other parts of Malaysia. Although large-scale permanent immigration to Penang ceased at mid-century, and most of the people I met were either born in Penang or were very long-term residents, many of the personality traits cited as distinctly "Penang" have been discussed by researchers as characteristics of immigrant communities. Although most residents I spoke with considered themselves Malaysian and not immigrants, it is worth mentioning that Malaysia's long-standing Prime Minister, Mohamed Mahathir, has often cited a similar combination of traits as a characteristic of Malaysia's immigrant communities and as something that native Malays would do well to emulate (for an example see Mahathir 1970). Cities were the sites where every immigrant first arrived and where many stayed. Valorizing such traits for Malays is concomitant with a national agenda to emphasize a renewed development of urban centers as symbolic of a progressive, "modern" or "new" Malaysia, which is also what Malays themselves should now become. In this thinking, the characteristics of cities and of people are thought to go hand: in order to advance, Malay identity should now be detached from the rural lifestyles previously associated with Malay culture.

Significantly, the outlook expressed by my informants in their attachment to, and identification with Penang as a place usually encompassed, not just the city as whole but something larger, either the whole island or the entire state of Penang – a greater metropolitan area of which their own homes and neighborhoods were merely a

part.[29] Malaysians, not just from Penang, are often very state-loyal, or at least state-conscious (with "state" here referring to states within Malaysia).[30] I found that many people answered the question "Where are you from?" by naming a state and not a specific city, town or village within it. "Penang people" may not be unique in this regard, but this consciousness does dovetail nicely with recent approaches to urban studies that prefer to consider cities, not as self-contained territories, but as foci for a larger series of connections and flows emanating back and forth between urban cores, greater metropolitan regions, and even larger spatial units. In Chapter 5, I describe how this larger conception of urban space, combined with a distinctively Penang-based social and civic consciousness, plays out in the concerns expressed in a citizen-based initiative for sustainable development in which participants were concerned about local quality of life and the impact of state and national policies within a larger metropolitan space.

Despite such a highly articulate sense of local identity, where territory and the built environment is concerned, spatial divisions or boundaries between places did not seem to figure largely in the perceptions and concerns of my informants. Based on directed questions and the drawing of "mental maps" of the immediate areas where they lived (see Chapters 2 and 3), most represented their residential space as focused on one or more significant buildings, often a mosque or a temple, with the boundaries of neighborhoods left undefined. With the significant exception of Hindu residents of "Little India," (Chapter 3), questions about boundaries had little meaning. Many said

there were no boundaries. In Penang, territorial boundaries, markers, or dividing lines are not much considered or contested, simply because they do not exist in most peoples' experience. What *is* considered and sometimes contested is the "stuff" within a territory – features of the built environment whose style, form or use publicly proclaim the social, cultural, religious, or historic presence of a specific group. Material evidence of various presences, and not necessarily a demarcated turf, is what concerns people. Within an urban fabric marked by a proliferation of culturally multiple symbols, what people appreciate, seek or contest are not boundaries between each other but material representations or embodiments of their own interests and identities.

Housing and Houses

A focus on residential space and specifically on issues of houses and housing, which is the approach taken here, can provide a way to expand analysis beyond an exclusive concern with discourse (whether shared, competing or contesting) to include other forms of signifying practices whereby people create meaning in where and how they live. Housing involves more than a material construct or a practical means of shelter. In addition to being a highly charged symbol, laden with cultural values, a house is the primary site for the socialization of new members of society and a key means for the production of both public and personal identities. As one theorist puts it, "housing. . . speaks to us about one of the most enduring problems in social science:

the relation between the individual and society" (Duncan 1989: 248). Through the design, construction or customization, and use of a house, people create for themselves a social space that both mirrors and helps shape their experience and their outlook on the world. These functions have been widely documented and theorized, but for the most part only in small-scale societies. Bourdieu (1979) outlined a broadly structural approach to the cosmological concepts and gender ideals embodied by the Kabyle house, and Cunningham (1964) saw specific social structural relevance in the "order" of Atoni houses. There is an extensive body of literature on "the house" in Southeast Asia, but, again, most research has concentrated solely on village contexts (see, for example, Waterson 1990).

There are a number of reasons to focus specifically on single-unit houses in an urban Southeast Asian context, which is the emphasis here. Until very recently, individual houses constituted the bulk of the fabric of most Asian cities, including Penang, where there continues to be little or no separation between residential and commercial districts. George Town today still predominantly consists of pre-war two-story, Chinese-style attached shop and terrace houses, and a very much smaller number of wooden *kampung* (village) Malay type houses. These are the types of houses where most of my informants lived. Along the coastal periphery of the inner city there are a number of colonial-era mansions built by Penang's first generations of Straits-born elites, but many of these have recently been replaced by hotels, shopping complexes and luxury high-rise condominiums (sometimes in combinations of all

three uses).[31] Further inland, but also somewhat distant from the old inner city, there are patches of greater concentrations of high-rise housing complexes, and many of these are mid-range or government subsidized low-cost projects.[32] Due to the rising cost of land in the inner city and rent control protections for tenants of pre-war buildings, most of the effects of Penang's twenty-year-long building boom – its "juggernaut of growth" as Goh (2002:145-171) puts it – were felt along the city's edges and especially in areas even further distant. Here, entirely new satellite townships, where high-rise residential housing complexes represented a new form of urban density, were carved into hillsides and replaced valleys, padi fields, orchards, and entire villages. The hundred or so households I spent some time with, though not unaffected by the changes wrought by "development," thus represent a certain continuity with Penang's not-so-distant past, at least as far as housing is concerned. Many had lived in the same house for generations, or had been born there. Those who did not own their own houses (and most did not) faced the possibility that where and how they had lived for so long might no longer be possible, with rent control scheduled to end as of January 1, 2000. If property developers had their way, which at many points in Penang's recent political history it appeared that they would, similar massive development projects could entirely transform the city and eliminate most current residences. The issue of housing was thus a hot topic during my stay in Malaysia and uppermost in the minds of many residents, whether or not they were otherwise explicitly concerned with architecture or the preservation of the city's many

old structures now considered significant as examples of historic vernacular styles or as "heritage."

Noting that one of the definitions of culture is that it is an interpretive process, Low and Chambers observe that "people read and respond to space and spatial arrangements in culturally appropriate ways, using cues from the past, the present, and their perceptions of the future" (Low and Chambers 1989:301). With the members of the households I visited so evidently poised on the brink between the past and the future, I wanted to know what they made of their houses and the place or places in which they lived. Given the historical specificity of the style and form of their houses – which marked almost all of them as either "Malay" or "Chinese" as well as "old" – to what extent, if any, did they interpret these factors as significant to their own identities and in what senses? For many, if not most of the Malays, that fact that their houses were identifiably "Malay" was important, but for Chinese living in Chinese style houses, the equivalence between house form and their own ethnicity was not so much a concern, a difference I interpret in Chapter 3. What all residents I visited with and spoke to shared to varying degrees was a deep appreciation of various aspects of their housing situation that might be largely "unseen" but which they felt their houses and their locations facilitated, such as convenience, personal comfort, proximity to public services and religious facilities, and, for some, a sense of both community and the continuity of certain connections to the past. Knowing that they were living in a house or in a location where previous generations of their family had lived was often

quite important to residents. By and large, most households I studied were not poor. If the consumption of consumer goods can be taken as an indicator, then most could be considered "middle class." In many cases, however, it seemed that this level of consumption was made possible only because the cost of their housing was so low.[33] What was also shared (somewhat less so among the Chinese) was a general lack of concern over living in a house that was expressive of any particular economic status. As already mentioned, for almost all residents, use value always overrode exchange or status value.[34]

Rapoport maintains that the perception and evaluation of housing involves ideals – of the imagination of an ideal housing situation in an ideal environment, often expressed in terms of housing preference (Rapoport 1989:xvii). Posing to residents the hypothetical situation of financial concerns not being an obstacle, I asked them what their ideal type of house would be and in what location. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, responses varied, but a large number of respondents indicated that they preferred the type of house they already had, and the location they already were in, most certainly in Penang. Much of this dissertation is about cultural ideals as enacted and expressed through housing ideals – ideals realized, compromised, threatened, or yet to be achieved – in a milieu of rapid, and transforming, social and built environmental change.

Housing issues can both bring people together and keep them apart, sometimes in unforeseen ways. During the period of my field research, new housing

developments, their locations and prices, as well as the transforming social and environmental effects (especially that of traffic) of the island's massive building boom were widely covered by the media and avidly discussed in coffee shops, hawkers centers and markets. Newspapers and billboards were filled with glowing advertisements for new housing projects and property fairs were regularly held in shopping mall atriums. Ownership of one's own unit in these new projects was not only encouraged, it was often the only way to participate in this widely promoted trend since few of the new residential projects were rental properties. In the midst of all this activity, however, there was also an acute concern by many that the new designs and housing situations could also foster new divisions between people. Row houses at street level had long been popular among people with a wide range of income levels, and this meant that one could not always ascertain a household's economic status by the look or location of its house. The recent segregation of many new housing projects by price (and therefore income level), however, appeared to be increasing the tangible expression of class differences.[35] The design of most high-rise residential units, whatever the price, usually did not permit the same easy flow between public exterior and private interior spaces that many residents of the old city had long valued, and it seemed to some that, for better or worse, high-rise living placed a new emphasis on privacy over communality. Unlike much of the "old" city, most of these new projects were ethnically unmarked in their architectural design, but this neutrality of style in itself was not a focus of concern among my informants. Individual units in

high-rises could be easily customized to express the identities of their occupants. Chapter 3 discusses how the balconies and entryways of high-rise flats and condominiums are often customized in ways that indicate the ethnicity, or most often specifically the religion, of a particular unit's occupants. The issue was not so much that the expression of economic status would override everything else but rather concern with what was perceived as a major difference in lifestyle that the new housing situations represented.

Conversely, new housing projects, or proposals for them, can also bring people together. The state government, perhaps acting out of a realization that social cohesion among high-rise residents might be difficult to achieve otherwise, encourages the formation of voluntary associations among residents of high-rises (both condominiums and rentals) and provides them with sample charters for their organization that they are free to adapt or amend. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, such residents' associations, whose memberships are based solely on residential proximity, are a relatively new phenomenon in Penang. Numerous temporary associations of either a certain area's long- term residents or recent purchasers of units in new projects are constantly being formed to unite against, on the one hand, the threat of eviction, and on the other, non-performing developers who follow the state-sanctioned practice of selling units in new housing projects and requiring payment before they are built. These associations often unite people across ethnicities in common cause against the standard ploy by developers to negotiate compensation with

each tenant or purchaser separately. Most of these associations are temporary and specific to a particular location or project but there is one that has had greater territorial scope and longevity: SOS (Save Ourselves) whose English name can be considered a mark of ethnic non-exclusivity (cf. Mandel 2001: 160). This group was formed in 1999 to represent the interests of tenants in all of Penang's more that 8,000 rent controlled units and continued to operate as of 2002 (SOS (Save Ourselves) 2001). The issues raised by such groups are not always exclusively pecuniary; they often make moral appeals to both the state and to developers in the name of a common "humanity" or "heritage," with strategies that are sometimes nevertheless ethnically framed. For example, the predominantly Chinese and Indian residents of a *kampung* (village) threatened by a highway project elected to name a Malay resident as their spokesperson because they unanimously felt that a Malay would have greater clout with the state development corporation responsible for the project. The understanding here, and elsewhere in Penang, was that the Penang state government, though Chinese dominated, "bends over backwards" to please Malay interests under pressure from national policy and politics. Whether old or new housing situations are involved, shared residential space is becoming an increasingly significant focus that can unite what might be otherwise disparate interests.

Research into the machinations of such residents' associations can provide a fruitful line of inquiry into the specifically political-economic dimensions of the social production of space. Most recently, Goh (2001) has detailed the convergence of

national, state, and local-level interests in a struggle by Portuguese-Eurasian tenants of a kampung area on the outskirts of George Town owned by the Catholic Church, whose administrators sought to replace the village with a condominium and commercial complex. She provides a thorough analysis of the various political forces, ideologies, and economic interests at work that produced the final outcome: non-resident Portuguese-Eurasian elites usurped the representation of residents' interests and settled their case against the developers in exchange for the construction of a "heritage house" – a meeting hall for their own Portuguese-Eurasian Association on the grounds of the new complex. Though very revealing of the power structures that produced this particular spatial outcome, which is, of course, representative of similar transformations occurring throughout Penang, my focus is both broader, and differently placed. Studies of temporarily organized, single-issue tenants' movements that emphasize more or less exclusively their positions in a broader political economy run the risk of neglecting to detail or analyze just what it is that people are fighting for in struggling to retain their homes and neighborhoods. Residents' interests include certain long-standing quality of life concerns not exclusively tied to either economic interests or even ethnic identity. More "bottom up" than "top down," my approach concerns the on-going production of space in a more long-term, less dramatic and everyday sense. I am interested in what residents understand to be at stake in urban housing and not the process of urban transformation per se. Moving from an analysis and fine-grained presentation of residents' own interpretations of their existing

housing situation and senses of place, I then turn to a discussion of associations of residents whose aims are very different than other residents' groups formed to fight eviction or negotiate displacement compensation. More expansive in scope, both territorially and temporally, these associations in one way or another take all of Penang to be a field of social action and seek to ensure that a certain moral content and quality of life, which they see as embedded within its distinctive sense of place, are sustained in the city's future spatial transformations.

Methods, Materials, and Chapter Summaries

Apart from this chapter and a conclusion, the dissertation is in two parts, each consisting of two chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 are entitled "The Importance of Houses" and Chapters 4 and 5 are entitled "The Moral Ecology of the City." Research is based on 25 months of field research in George Town, from 1997 to 1999, when I lived in one of the neighborhoods that is the focus of Chapter 3. During this period I participated in numerous household, community, and religious activities throughout the city and my perspective was enhanced by numerous interviews with residents of many different areas. I also interviewed and had many informal conversations with local architects, planners, historians and historic preservationists, journalists, educators, government officials, activists, community leaders, association members, temple officials and devotees, and members of the congregations of various mosques. My understanding of the inner city was enhanced by my volunteer work for the

"Community Participation in *Waqf* [*wakaf* in Malay] Revitalization" project, organized by Penang Heritage Trust and supported by UNESCO's "LEAP" program.[36] I also gained valuable insight into the issue of rent control by serving as a volunteer member of a committee formed by the Penang State Government to discuss the possible negative social effects of the end of rent control and to consider ways to mitigate them. I was invited to participate in a series of roundtable workshops convened as part of the "Sustainable Penang Initiative" sponsored by Penang's Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI). These roundtables were designed as a "think tank" to advise the state government on development policy and their findings, together with the results of several additional initiatives that they spawned, were presented to Penang's Chief Minister as the "Penang People's Report" (SERI 1999). Material gathered during this project provided much of the material for Chapter 5.

"The Importance of Houses" chapters present an ethnographic account of the issue of housing and what life was like for residents of three different areas of George Town at the time of my research. The discussion here primarily concerns who these residents were, how they created and saw the places where they lived, and what they felt was at stake in the possible redevelopment of their neighborhoods. The three areas were chosen to be roughly representative of the three main groups historically resident in George Town: Malay, Chinese and Indian. Although no urban neighborhood is ethnically exclusive, the first consisted primarily of Malay residents,

in the second most were Chinese, and the third was ethnically "mixed," consisting of Chinese, Indian Hindu, and Indian Muslim residents. These neighborhood accounts are based on my participation in numerous household and community activities throughout Penang, many conversations, and survey interviews with members of 103 households, conducted on-site in or just outside of each respondent's home. Further details of method are discussed in the appropriate chapters. One of my aims was to compare the perspectives on houses and living situations offered by people living in different places who self-identified both similarly and differently. The results revealed some significant differences between Penang's three major ethnic groups, but also much common ground. Many respondents of varied ethnicities and in all three areas expressed similar perceptions and appreciations of urban space, of the past, and about expectations or concerns regarding the future.

Chapter 2 concerns Kampung Dodol, a predominantly Malay urban *kampung* or village where most residents were in the unusual position of owning their own Malay style houses but not the land on which they were built, which was *wakaf* – Muslim property endowed for community use. This situation, however, did not exempt the area from possible redevelopment since the state-level administrators of *wakaf* properties in Penang have regularly proposed high-rise commercial development of these properties that would eliminate their existing patterns of use. As a demographic minority in George Town, these Malay residents were perhaps the most concerned of all the residents I spoke to that they should continue to be able to live in

a style of house publicly identifiable with their own ethnicity. But residents here were concerned about much more than visuality or the structural form of their houses. I show how, in the midst of social and material change, residents of this kampung organized to attempt to bring their current social reality closer to the cultural ideal and long-standing values that a kampung and its architecture was thought to embody and represent. Malay kampungs throughout Malaysia are rapidly disappearing with widespread urbanization and new development projects, despite the fact that "the Malay house" has assumed great symbolic importance on the national stage as an icon of Malay identity. Likewise, the "idea" of a kampung as a site of family and community cohesion, authenticity, and as a refuge from various stresses of modern life remains significant to the nation's imagination, even while actual kampungs are quickly becoming obsolete. I preface my treatment of this neighborhood with a discussion of these broadly relevant symbolic issues and discuss how residents actualize their own versions in practice and how they perceive and appreciate their living situation. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the spatial imagination and rationale at work in the creation of a new residents' association in the kampung and its long terms goals and why the founder of this organization, as well as many other residents, identified near-by high rise flats as the source of many of the village's recent social and environmental problems.

Chapter 3 combines discussion of two additional neighborhoods (including the one in which I lived) and compares them to the practices and perspectives of the

residents of Kampung Dodol. Somewhat different concerns were expressed here, where most residents were long-tern renters. There was, however, much that was similar. Many household members in all three areas worked as hawkers (the selling of food or other items from small individual stalls), and common issues discussed in this chapter include the coding of structures, not only by ethnicity but whether they are "old" or "new," and the ways in which ethnicity, autonomy, and a sense of urban space play out through the preparation and public consumption of hawker food, an important activity in Penang. With Chinese architectural styles dominant in these two neighborhoods, and Chinese residents constituting a majority of George Town's population, Chinese householders in both areas were less concerned about the public expression of their ethnicity in built form than they were about their continued ability to afford to live and work in a familiar place in the center of town. In this chapter I continue a discussion of the value residents place on long-term residential continuity in the same location and how religious and social values are spatially expressed in the layout and immediate environs of one's home. I also analyze various ways in which a sense of autonomy as far as housing is concerned and a certain demographic consciousness of diversity and difference are materially expressed and experienced in the built environment of residential urban space.

In Chapters 4 and 5, both entitled "The Moral Ecology of the City," I go on to analyze two very different organizations or social movements formed during the period of my field research. In each case, problems associated with the development

of urban space provided a direct inspiration for their formation. Chapter 4 presents how a broadly ecological sense of place – that links people and the built environment to the natural world and to questions of morality -- was formulated by residents of an inner-city area who mobilized an action committee when excavation for a nearby shopping mall caused their pre-war homes to crack and subside dangerously. This event precipitated a renewed public awareness of the area's natural ecology and its history of urban development. The committee's fair degree of success in organizing subsequently led it to propose, not only new state-level legislation, but also an "International Neighbors Day" whereby they advocated what amounted to a new form of civic identity not bound by ethnicity or nationality but focused on the idea that place and territory on a wide, even global, scale should be considered truly shared. They hoped that their proposals in this direction would help mitigate social conflicts and other kinds of problems in many other places and regions of the world than just their own. This chapter is based on interviews with residents, my attendance at several of their meetings, and several months' worth of extensive press coverage about the situation. This chapter also serves to illustrate some of the complex issues and range of social interests involved when development projects transform the cityscape, residents claim a right to contribute to the planning process, and projects are nevertheless approved without much public input or civic concern.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the issues and actions taken up by the "Sustainable Penang Initiative," a local "think tank" project in which diverse groups of

participants were invited by a research arm of the Penang state government to assemble in roundtables to discuss and formulate what they considered to be "good," "bad" and "mixed" news indicative of Penang's current state of development and whether or not these trends were sustainable into the future (SERI 1999). Convened to provide suggestions for the state's newest version of its "strategic development plan," some of the more significant upshots of the initiative took the form of overt calls for local elections and a clearly legislated structure for future public participation in planning decisions. I attended all but one of the working meetings of this project, which extended over the course of a year. Five major themes were discussed by residents of Penang, invited national- and international-level scholars and activists that were seen by organizers and participants saw as deeply interconnected: ecological sustainability, social justice, economic productivity, cultural vibrancy, and popular participation. In each case, the Penang residents often turned the discussion to what it was that made Penang such a distinctive place, and how this sense of place, which they saw as rooted in a history of diversity and multiculturalism, would likely be compromised and perhaps lost if certain development trends were allowed to continue unchecked.

In these two chapters I discuss how both of these "new social movements" are innovations in Penang, and how they represent efforts to move beyond a postcolonial political culture still bound in many ways by ethnicity and authoritarianism. Historically, ethnically specific networks and loyalties had provided most of the bases

for social action and self-realization in Penang, with established immigrants creating webs of social and economic support for both themselves and new arrivals in associations based on ethnicity, clan, guild, religion, dialect, or place of origin. Today, however, it is the shared urban space of the city itself that has become the rallying point for new forms of organization and possibilities for identity that cross ethnic and religious lines. For the first time ever, people in Penang are beginning to organize solely on the basis of a shared sense of place and a willingness to address problems that commonly arise within a particular space. Though Penang is currently known as a center for ethnically inclusive NGO activist groups that target specific issues such as women's rights, domestic violence, and consumer protection, until recently there have been no inclusive urban residents' neighborhood associations formed to address long-term, place-based concerns. I show how these two additional organizations or movements, initially convened to address very different problems arising with urban development, nevertheless develop stances similar to each other and to the Kampung Dodol residents' association. Their rationales are based on a newly significant understanding that the diverse material and social fabrics of the city are deeply intertwined and that urban residential space is something that is truly shared.

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[1] As discussed in the following section, the city was named after George III, Britain's king at the time of its founding in 1786. This name variously appears as one or two words but the official name of the city is George Town -- two words. The use of George Town as a name is commonly confined to official usage. The oldest part of

the city is usually referred to informally as "Tanjung" (Malay for "cape" or "promontory") and the city as a whole, including its greater metropolitan area, is most often called simply "Penang" ("Pinang" in Malay). "Penang" is the name of both the island ("Pulau Pinang" in Malay – "Betel Nut Island") on which the city is located and the state of Malaysia of which it is a part, which also includes a strip of land on the mainland.

[2] Shamsul includes among such officializing procedures the Malay Reservation Act, which reserved certain land for Malay use, the setting up of a Department of Chinese Affairs, and government-approved toddy shops for Indians (Shamsul 1998:40).

[3] As discussed later, the parties in the Barisan Nasional (National Coalition) are the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Gerakan, in which membership is not ethnically defined.

[4] During the time of my research the use of the term "middle class" was largely confined to scholarly or academic contexts and was not prevalent in popular discourse or the media. I do not recall anyone who self-identified as middle class or identified others as such in the course of casual conversation.

[5] Builders and developers were usually spoken of in general terms as male.

[6] An exception would be the case of certain freestanding bungalows on rather large pieces of property in prime development locations that were not part of my study areas. I heard many reports that offers to buy these properties were often too attractive for their owners to refuse.

[7] Following the devaluation of the Malaysian ringgit (RM) in the midst of the Asian economic crisis that began in 1997, one ringgit was worth approximately $US 0.25, considerably less than its previous long-standing value of $US 0.40.

[8] The president of the state appointed Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (MPPP), the Penang Island Municipal Council, performs many of the functions associated in cities elsewhere with the office of mayor.

[9] Evidence of early Malay settlement includes several old *keramats* (sacred tombs), and scattered mentions in the accounts of early British administrators. An insistence that there was a prior Malay presence in what is now an important urban area is a matter of importance to some Malays. A Chinese version of this idea is the belief that a certain depression in a rock at one of the tips of the island is the footprint of Cheng Ho, an admiral of China's Ming dynasty. This rock has now been incorporated into a temple to Cheng Ho. An Indian Hindu interpretation of this same rock feature is that it is an even earlier footprint of the god Ram.

[10] After Malaysian independence this central thoroughfare was renamed Jalan Mesjid Kapitan Kling (Kapitan Kling Mosque Street) and is now promoted by the Penang state government as "Harmony Street" because along its short length there is a mosque, Chinese and Indian temples, and a Christian church.

[11] "Choolias" are Indian Muslims. Another main street in George Town is Chulia Street.

[12] Penang was the administrative center of the Straits Settlements from their establishment in 1826 until 1832, when the seat of the colonial government was transferred to Singapore.

[13] A government yearbook lists 64 ethnic populations of Malaysia based on the 1991 census, with each assigned to one of the major categories. "Chinese" encompasses the following groups: Cantonese, Foochow, Hainanese, Henghua, Hokchia, Hokchiru, Hokkien, Khek (Hakka), Kwongsai, and Teochew. "Indian" includes Bangladeshi, Jaffna Tamil, Malayalee, Pakistani, Sikh, Sinhalese, Tamil, and Telugu. "Others" include Eurasians, Europeans, Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese. (Information Malaysia 1998 Yearbook: 64-65).

[14] Although much of what is now Indonesia and Malaysia once constituted a "greater Malay world," Indonesians are now considered foreigners in Malaysia. Up until the Asian economic crisis (which began in 1997), Indonesians constituted the bulk of Malaysia's temporary, low-wage foreign labor force, with most Indonesian men working as construction laborers and women working as maids.

[15] Islam is the official religion of Malaysia but freedom of worship is guaranteed in the constitution.

[16] A percentage of units in all new housing developments are reserved for bumiputeras who are also given discounts, favorable loan rates, and credit financing options occasionally as high as 100% of the purchase price. After remaining unsold for a period of time, developers can petition to release bumiputera-reserved units for general sale.

[17] This expansion of the Federation was opposed by Indonesia and resulted in a military "*konfrontasi*" (confrontation) between the two new nations.

[18] Penang Heritage Trust, the organizers of "The Penang Story," an international conference held in Penang in April 2002, asserted what they considered to be Penang's distinctive brand of "multiculturalism" and advocated the establishment of "Penang Studies" as a demarcated field of scholarship.

[19] The third major national opposition political party is Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS), organized to establish an administration based on Muslim principles. Its stronghold is in the state of Kelantan on peninsular Malaysia's east coast. A government handbook lists a total of twelve political parties as components of the Barisan Nasional (National Coalition), and 23 opposition parties (Information Malaysia 1998 Yearbook: 647-650).

[20] For example, an acquaintance whose grandparents were Mandailing, a culture group from Sumatra, resisted registering his children as Malay despite the recommendation of the official taking the information who advised that it would be beneficial to do so.

[21] Additionally, resting places for the dead are perhaps the most ethnic-exclusive and segregated sites in Penang, with cemeteries, columbaria, and crematories often separated according to religion as well as specific ethnic sub-category.

[22] The following is an example of this consciousness, which was sometimes expressed to me in terms of amused speculation: a retired teacher, who was Chinese, asked me what would happen if all the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia would agree to go back to China in exchange for allowing all the Muslims in China to settle in Malaysia. The result, he said with a laugh, would be that there would be far more Chinese than Malays in Malaysia – many more than there are now. The undercurrent of this story was a tacit criticism that demographic consciousness could easily be taken to absurd lengths in matters of policy. It also expresses something of the absurdity of the categories themselves and of the emphasis on one social aspect, such as religion, over others.

[23] In 1998 violence erupted in Penang between Muslims and Hindus over a mosque and a Hindu temple that stood side by side. Although it is not possible to reconstruct with any precision what precipitated it, one story has it that the brother of one of the temple priests had converted to Islam and to spite him, bells were rung in the temple at the times of Muslim prayers. Apparently reinforcements were called in from outside Penang on either or both sides and gangs attacked both the temple and several other mosques. Another story has it that Hindu sentiments were inflamed by the circulation of a videotape about the Ram Janmabhumi movement in India which resulted in the destruction of the fifteenth-century Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya held by members of the movement to be the birthplace of the god Ram who sought to build a Ram temple on the site. For a treatment of the Ram Janmabhumi movement see Rajagopal 2001. Interestingly, the Penang state government came up with a spatial solution to the problem: the temple was given state land, quite some distance from the mosque, on which to relocate.

[24] Chinese people that I knew in Malaysia had a long list of criticisms of Singapore, such as its strict fines for littering, a ban on chewing gum (lest it dirty the streets), a policy emphasizing Mandarin over other Chinese regional languages, and a move to change family names in these languages to Mandarin. An example of state control in Singapore that was considered particularly ludicrous was a plan to offer state-sponsored computerized match making for adults still single after a certain age.

[25] Malaysia has very strict rules about public assembly, such as the requirement that a permit be issued for any public event attended by three or more people. In practice, however, this requirement is rarely followed or enforced and public religious events are generally given great leeway.

[26] Local municipal regulations in Penang stipulated that temple activities that made use of public spaces such as streets should cease by midnight. I found this rule to be scrupulously adhered to, except on rare occasions when rituals required the burning of

offerings at specific times later than 12 a.m. Temple devotees seemed generally aware that their use of public space was a privilege not to be taken lightly: when their activities spilled out onto the street volunteers were often assigned to direct passing traffic – an implicit recognition that public space remained public and was shared by others. The state also required permits for temporary structures, such as stages, that were erected on the street during religious festivals.

[27] Other people told me that they could sometimes tell whether someone was Hokkien, Cantonese, or Teochew, the three largest Chinese groups in Penang, solely by their physical features.

[28] As an example, one acquaintance told me that "Penang people" take the quality and cost of street food very seriously. "They will have a heated argument with a hawker over a five cent rise in the cost of a *roti canai* [bread with curry sauce]."

[29] This outlook is perhaps facilitated by the control of all local urban municipal services at the state level following the suspension of more local elections throughout West Malaysia in the 1960s. Penang state is divided into two administrative districts governed by appointed councils: *Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang* (MPPP), the Penang Island Municipal Council, which administers the entire island, including the city of George Town; and *Majlis Perbandaran Seberang Prai* (MPSP), the Seberang Prai Municipal Council, in charge of Penang state territory on the mainland. There are thus few legal reasons to demarcate the limits of the city. Though such limits are defined in surveys and maps, I do not recall seeing signage on any of the roads into or out of George Town indicating the boundaries of the city.

[30] The political history of the Malay peninsula contributes to this consciousness of state and to state loyalties. Prior to, and during the colonial period, much of the current territory of West Malaysia was ruled by local rajahs, some of whose descendents retain their titles today. The current Federation of Malaysia includes these former semi-autonomous states, each with its own political history and in most cases, its own Ruler. Penang does not have a Ruler, but a non-royal Governor, who assumes a similar ceremonial and religious role as the state's head of Islam. Additionally, each state government also asserts its own identity by regularly flying the state flag and displaying the state's colors in various venues. The press also regularly stimulates inter-state comparison and competition by reporting on the economic accomplishments of different states based on annual state government reports.

[31] Several factors contributed to a willingness on the part of Penang's old elite to sell off their estates. Among them are the diminishment of some family fortunes with succeeding generations; the often spectacular prices offered by developers for prime waterfront properties; a perception that large estates are costly and difficult to maintain; and the desire, more prevalent in recent years, to no longer live in an extended family household. Many elite families previously based in large family

estates broke up after World War II into smaller units and moved to more modest free-standing bungalows or semi-detached houses in the suburbs.

[32] For an overview of low-cost housing policies in Malaysia see Salleh and Lee 1997 and Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) 1997.

[33] Most of the Chinese households were tenants in rent-controlled premises. Most of the Malay households owned, and many of the families had also built their own houses but these were located on *wakaf* (Muslim endowment) land they did not individually own and for which they paid a nominal monthly rent. This situation did not ensure that their tenancy was secure. Tenants of *wakaf* properties are regularly displaced by development projects undertaken by the primary (but not the sole) administrator of *wakaf* in Penang -- Majlis Agama Islam Pulau Pinang (Penang Island Islamic Religious Council). See Chapter 2.

[34] Some residents explicitly expressed appreciation of the fact that, at least for the time being, they need not buy into what amounted to a national call for universal home ownership, which in their case would mean a much reduced living space, in a high-rise complex far from the center of town, with monthly payments they could scarcely afford. (Rental apartments are scarce in Penang). As one resident put it, "living in a high rise flat would be miserable."

[35] For example, neighbors of mine in Penang, a husband and wife who owned their own terrace house and were not interested in living anywhere else, were nevertheless highly knowledgeable about the economic statuses represented by new housing projects. They once took me in their car to the other end of the island and, along the way, discussed among themselves the relative prices of units in most of the new high-rise projects we passed.

[36] This project sought to restore neglected Muslim endowment properties (*wakaf* in Malay) in the vicinity of the Kapitan Kling and Acheen Street mosques in the historic city center and return them to community use in accordance with Muslim principles and with local participation. LEAP stands for UNESCO's "Program on Integrated Community Development & Cultural Heritage Site Preservation in Asia & the Pacific through Local Effort." I worked for the project as an informal advisor, workshop facilitator, and as the coordinator of a survey of households resident on *wakaf* properties in the area. For a report on the project see Nasution 2000.

Chapter 2

The Importance of Houses: An Urban Kampung

Introduction

Houses are particularly salient forms of material culture, loaded with symbolic content crucial to processes of cultural reproduction and socialization, to the development of personhood and ways of living, and to the continuity or evolution of world views. Houses are more than the products of particular designs, materials, or construction methods. Together with the spaces and places they create, the ways in which these spaces are used, and the ways in which they are furnished and decorated, houses are cultural forms ripe with social meanings both indicative and reinforcing of such things as class, status, gender, ethnicity, faith, and aspiration. Dwelling itself is a historical process in and through which various "material ideologies" (Miller 1987) are played out.

This chapter discusses how a particular residential space in the city of George Town – the houses and spaces of everyday life in Kampung Dodol, a primarily Malay urban *kampung* (an area within the city with village-style architecture and arrangement of space) – are considered by its residents to embody an ideology representative of certain key social and cultural values identified as Malay. It argues that autochthony, the rootedness of people in a place, is not exclusive to small-scale societies in rural village settings but is also an urban

phenomenon. It makes the case that the expression of identity in the built environment, though embodying a "material ideology" tied to particular places and things, involves not just what is publicly visible in a space or material structure but also what is experienced, shared, remembered, known to still exist or hoped yet to be achieved, even though these additional aspects may be largely unseen (cf. Blu 1996). This chapter further argues that the spatial imagination of residents of Kampung Dodol, though rooted in attachment to a particular place that is relatively homogeneous socially and ethnically, is nevertheless expansive and inclusive -- it is able to incorporate change and creatively cope with social differences. I show how this imagination, in assuming space to have a certain moral content, resists a national trend in Malaysia to emphasize the investment and exchange value of housing and land. Residents here valued their houses and the village of which they are a part according to other criteria of their own. These criteria at times extended beyond the expression in the built environment of their own ethnic or religious specificity. I show how who or what is included in villagers' conceptions of their own residential space cross-cut externally imposed municipal or administrative borders and are based on such criteria as familiarity, shared experience and values, and residential proximity.

Ethnicity and religion are but two factors in the creation and imagination of the village as a moral space. The expression of a certain sense of individual and local autonomy, at least as far as villagers' housing situation is concerned, is

equally, and even occasionally more important. Among other research findings, I discuss the rationale and goals of a residents' association that was newly formed just prior to my first visit to the village. I show how place-based concerns -- and not just ethnicity, national origin, or religion -- have become a newly significant organizing principle in efforts by residents to assure that the moral content of village space remains positive and continuous with a valued past. I also show how organizers see their efforts as relevant to people and places beyond the village itself -- as a needed corrective to what is perceived as the negative values they see so easily embodied or encouraged in "new" and different types of housing, such as high-rises, which were surrounding and beginning to encroach on the village.

Like kampungs elsewhere, not all of which are Malay, Kampung Dodol is a people-centered place clearly created by and for those who live there – something which residents were aware was not always the case in other kinds of housing. Every house in the village was originally self-built or at least self-designed and most appeared to have originated in a period spanning the late 19th to the first decades of the 20th century. Their construction was subject to few outside administrative or municipal building-code constraints but generally followed the norms of a long-standing and widely familiar cultural type that a local architectural historian has called an "autonomous housing solution" (Lim 1987:10) indigenous to the region. Like most of the people living here, the houses here and the village itself were "Malay" and identifiable as such by both insiders and outsiders. But

visible style or form alone are not what makes "the Malay house" recognizable as a type; it is also the continuity of a tradition of self-building, and, as will be seen, a certain moral content of residential space whereby residents see their own houses as inseparable from the wider social setting and location of the kampung as a whole. Residents here still considered their houses to be Malay despite years of constant renovation that incorporated new materials and styles. The expression of their own identity in the built environment was not something that depended on very many specific details or any "purity" of structure, materials or design – it was not simply or even primarily a purely material aesthetic. Though residents appreciated that their houses and the village itself were "Malay," one basic feature of both – a tradition of single-unit housing – was something that was shared with other groups in the city. Up until recently, life in separate one- and two-story houses was the norm in George Town, as it was in many cities in Asia. As residents were well aware, however, it was quickly becoming the exception, and the distinction between "old" and "new" housing situations was becoming a somewhat more pressing concern among city residents of all ethnicities than the expression of their own ethnic specificity in the built residential environment.

Study of the current role of single-unit houses with a larger built environment provides perhaps the best fulcrum for an examination of the changes in culture and society brought about by rapid urbanizing development in Penang and throughout Malaysia. Public discourse about the future of the city and the

nation, as expressed in the press, in coffee shops, and in academic and in government circles recognizes that one of the most acutely felt "pressures of development" centers on the issue of housing: primarily the quantity, quality, availability and cost of housing units in new projects. But the debate also regularly raises serious questions about possible changes in lifestyle and quality of life brought about by a trend toward high-rise living that itself was a product of an increased commercialization of housing and the rise of an investment housing market as part of a national policy of economic development. With so much that was familiar now materially transformed, the issue was whether certain valued cultural and social community traditions could continue to survive in such a changed physical environment.

The residential built environment of the entire island of Penang consisted, until very recently, almost entirely of single-unit houses: kampung houses, terrace and shop houses, and the bungalows or mansions of the elite.[1] Similar patterns of residential building types can be found in cities throughout Asia, where the historical growth of urban centers was marked, at least until recent decades, by a growing sprawl of individual housing units and not multiple-unit high-rise structures.[2] In 1991, 92% of all dwelling units in Malaysia were individual houses (1991 Housing Census, cited in Goh 1997:76). As discussed below, most of the residents interviewed in three different areas of George Town were renters of either a single house or the land their own house was built on, and most said that if

they had to move and there were no financial constraints they would prefer to live in the same kind of house they were living in at the time: a single-unit structure. A serious housing question in Malaysia today, however, is whether single-unit housing can remain a viable option within the reach of the average citizen. The directions in which Penang's housing development and real estate market are headed may make living in such a house unsustainable for those already doing so and unattainable for a new generation of residents, despite increased prosperity. Rising land prices on the island and the end of rent controls in Malaysia as of January 1, 2000 mean that residence in a single-unit or free-standing house anywhere in Penang is quickly becoming the prerogative of only the very rich – or those fortunate enough to have bought early. Local and national housing policies and development agendas encourage universal home ownership but this does not usually mean the construction or preservation of individual houses. In 1980 single-unit houses of various types made up 85% of the housing stock on Penang Island; in 1995 the proportion dropped to 57.4%, concomitant with a near doubling of the total number of housing units (see Figure 4).

Despite dramatic increases in personal income over the course of two decades of economic growth, for those residents still renting single houses or land in the city home ownership most often mean the possibility of purchasing only a low or medium cost high-rise flat – usually much smaller in size than their current homes and in locations far from the city center. In 1996, with the two exceptions

of Johor Bahru (Malaysia's border city near Singapore) and the Petaling district near Kuala Lumpur, the prices of double-story semi-detached and terrace houses in Penang were the highest in the nation in 1996 (Goh 1997:93). The upshot of this building and real estate boom has amounted to a radical transformation of the built residential environment, with serious implications for urban life and culture. Local critics seriously question whether the trend toward high-rise living is socially,

Figure 4

Penang Island:
Number and Type of Housing Units

	1980 (73,411 units)	**1995** (132,457 units)
	%	%
Detached	**37.0**	**21.4**
Semi-detached	14.3	9.3
Terrace and shop houses	42.7	26.7
Flats, apartments, condominiums	**14.1**	**41.3**
Other	--	0.9
Total	100	100

Sources: 1980: Malaysian Housing Census Report, cited in Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (Penang Island Municipal Council) 1984:80.
1995: Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (Penang Island Municipal Council) 1998:9-2.

environmentally, or even economically sustainable, and even whether it is culturally appropriate. The current chapter, and the one that follows, discuss what is at stake for residents still living in single-unit houses in the city, for whom the meaning of their place in the city is not predominantly or even significantly about the expression of economic status in housing or even any financial concerns as participants in a housing market.

Three different areas of George Town were chosen for study because they represent home to a spectrum of the major ethnic groups that contribute to urban life in Penang. The residents of the first area, the subject of the current chapter, were predominantly Malay; in the second they were mostly Chinese; and the third area was ethnically mixed but primarily Chinese and Indian. The latter two areas are discussed together in the following chapter, which also treats some points of comparison between all three neighborhoods and their residents. The three areas also represent different types of single-unit housing that, until recently, had made up the bulk of the city's built-up fabric. The first consists of freestanding kampung-type houses originally constructed in wood in what has come to be known as "traditional Malay style;" the second consists mostly of Chinese or Straits Chinese-style terrace houses (attached row houses, usually with a pair of windows flanking a central doorway); and the third consists of a mixture of terrace houses and shop houses (whose ground floor facades usually open completely to the street, with living quarters ordinarily behind and above the shop).

The plan of the current chapter is as follows. A discussion of method pertinent to all three study areas is followed by a brief visual introduction to Kampung Dodol as a particular kind of urban residential space in a particular place. This is followed by a discussion of what kampungs mean in contemporary Malaysia and how this meaning is often marked by a disjuncture between their long-standing symbolic significance and contemporary social reality. Next comes discussion of what amounts to both a popular and a locally academic ideological discourse about what a specifically Malay kampung house is or should be, followed by an outline of Kampung Dodol's status as *wakaf*[3] – a Muslim endowment property. After presenting some basic information about who the kampung's residents are and how they live, I then go on to discuss their perceptions of residential space and how their appreciations of the places they create and inhabit do not revolve primarily on any externally defined boundary, strictly material aesthetic, the accumulation of economic status though home improvements or consumer goods, or even any particular detail of form or design. Instead, they concern the moral and social content of space as sites of current sociability, social memory, and the expression of identity and faith. In a section on residents' "mental maps" I discuss what villagers see as the most important features about their houses and what they find significant in the immediate vicinity of their homes. Broadening the scope of discussion to include temporal as well as spatial dimensions, I present residents' understandings of the past and concerns

about the future as they are expressed in their built residential environment and I include a discussion of some residents' assessments that, while their kampung may have "heritage" significance it does not necessarily have "historical" significance to future generations.

Finally, by way of summary of the themes already discussed, I analyze the expansive and socially inclusive spatial imagination at work in the goals, activities, and organizing principles of a newly formed residents' association. I show how the founders of this new kind of organization, like many of the residents who became its members, projected their anxieties about material and social change onto both changes in the built environment and a new generation of youth, and how they saw certain problems associated with both as linked. These residents found a new significance and a broadly applicable unifying principle for their organization in their conviction that residential space -- and not just that of their own kampung -- is truly shared. I show how, in reaffirming and reformulating what was good about their own living situation and asserting its relevance even to different people living very differently outside the village, organizers were attempting to bring an increasingly disparate social and material reality more in line with a familiar, long-standing, and still valued cultural idea or ideal of housing that they felt was in danger of getting lost in the rush to build and "develop."

Method

The current chapter and the one that follows, concerning three different areas within the city of George Town, are based on participant observation of numerous household activities throughout the city, my experiences as a resident of the second study area, a qualitative survey questionnaire, and numerous interviews and informal conversations with informal conversations with local architects, planners, historians and historic preservationists, journalists, educators, government officials, activists, community leaders, association members, temple officials and devotees, and members of the congregations of various mosques. For each of the three neighborhoods studied, a questionnaire with over 100 items (Appendix A) was completed for each household during a personal interview with a member of that household at his or her residence.[4]

Houses visited were not selected randomly but on the basis of contiguity in the first two neighborhoods (with almost every house in a specific area visited) and on the basis of the availability and willingness of residents to be interviewed in the third neighborhood, where I sought respondents representative of an area of the inner city somewhat larger than the first two areas. During the course of the study I was invited to work on a project[5] to revitalize *wakaf* (Muslim endowment properties) in the inner city and I volunteered to supervise a survey of households resident on these properties based on the questionnaire I developed. (For a report on this project see Nasution 2000). With the collaboration of other members of

this project, I incorporated additional questions regarding proposed uses of *wakaf* properties into the interviews of Muslim residents and added additional Muslim households resident on *wakaf* in the inner city to my selection of houses visited in the third of the areas I discuss.

Each interview was conducted at the home and in a native language of the respondent, either by myself or, in most cases, by a paid assistant whom I accompanied on all but a very few visits. Many residents of George Town are bi- or tri-lingual, and the linguistic diversity of my assistants assured that a suitable language was available for each respondent to be able to speak freely in a language with which he or she was most comfortable. The languages used, in approximate order of frequency, were Malay, Hokkien, Tamil, Cantonese, Teochew, Mandarin, English, and Gujarati. All visits were conducted during daylight business hours, when it was likely that women would be home, ensuring that women's opinions and responses would be well represented. (46% of all respondents – 47 -- were female). Many of the questions asked were designed to be open ended, and I was primarily concerned to elicit qualitative responses. My primary assistants in each neighborhood were female.[6] These young women were both personable and genuinely interested in the issues raised, and there were many instances when their interviews evolved into heartfelt woman-to-woman conversations that I would not have been privy to without their enormous help.

Each household visit lasted between 30 minutes and just over an hour, with 40 minutes being average. With only a very few exceptions (in which the interview was conducted outside at the front door), every interview took place inside the respondent's home. In most cases we were immediately and warmly welcomed, and sometimes served refreshments, such as tea, soft drinks, and sweets.[7] While my assistant was asking the questions and completing the survey form (I encouraged each of my assistants to write down actual phrases and statements exactly as given), I would take notes on the physical structure and furnishings of the house, sketch the layout of the visible rooms, and take note of any household activities observable from my vantage point. Respondents were encouraged to continue whatever activity they were engaged in at the moment, such as child care or cooking. Prior to the point at which more subjective questions were going to be asked, we asked permission to tape record responses. Forty-five percent of all respondents, 46 out of a total of 103 for all three areas, said yes. My assistants then later transcribed and translated a selection of these interviews that were not conducted in English. We also asked each person interviewed to describe verbally and to draw a "mental map" showing the location of his or her house, including any prominent features in the immediate surroundings. Respondents were also asked to identify or say something about 13 photos of a variety of buildings in the city, including some well-known heritage sites, public places, and other structures variously identified with Malay, Chinese,

Indian and British colonial cultures. At the end of each session, I would ask permission to take some photographs of both the interior and exterior, and sometimes we were invited to see the rooms upstairs. I also personally interviewed on several different occasions the headman of Kampung Dodol who was instrumental in the creation of its new residents' association. The status, activities, and influence of this man in the village are explained in a later section.

Kampung Dodol: An Urban Village

Speeding along on Jalan Perak[8] (Perak Road), the longest street in George Town and a major artery with few traffic lights, the urban village popularly known as Kampung Dodol is easy to miss, even though the road bisects it. (See map, Figure 5). Most motorists here are on their way South, heading toward the new shopping, residential and industrial complexes that have sprung up on the island in the last twenty years. Perak Road, which was recently made one-way along this stretch to facilitate this flow, is one of only three major roads out of the city in this direction. Perhaps motorists have had to pause for traffic at the nearest major intersection, just past a small bridge crossing the remnants of the Penang River (invisible from a vehicle), where there is an old mosque very near to the edge of the river and the road.[9] To the left, at the corner of Jalan Sungei Pinang (Pinang River Road), are a few abandoned kampung-style houses, now gutted and empty; and to the right a large sign points the way to a similar house that has been

Figure 5

Map of Kampung Dodol and Vicinity

completely reconstructed and is now a museum: the birthplace of P. Ramlee, Malaysia's famed singer, composer, director, and its most famous film star, from the era of the 1950s and 60s. Near this corner is a new high-rise apartment complex with a small parking area in front and a row of shops at ground level. Just past it, continuing along Perak Road and on either side of it, is Kampung Dodol, so-named because a number of its residents were once famous for the production and sale of *dodol*, a sticky cake made of coconut and glutinous rice wrapped and steamed in a mulberry leaf. This is where my assistant and I visited and spoke with residents of 40 households that represented approximately three quarters of all village households resident on the west side of Perak Road..

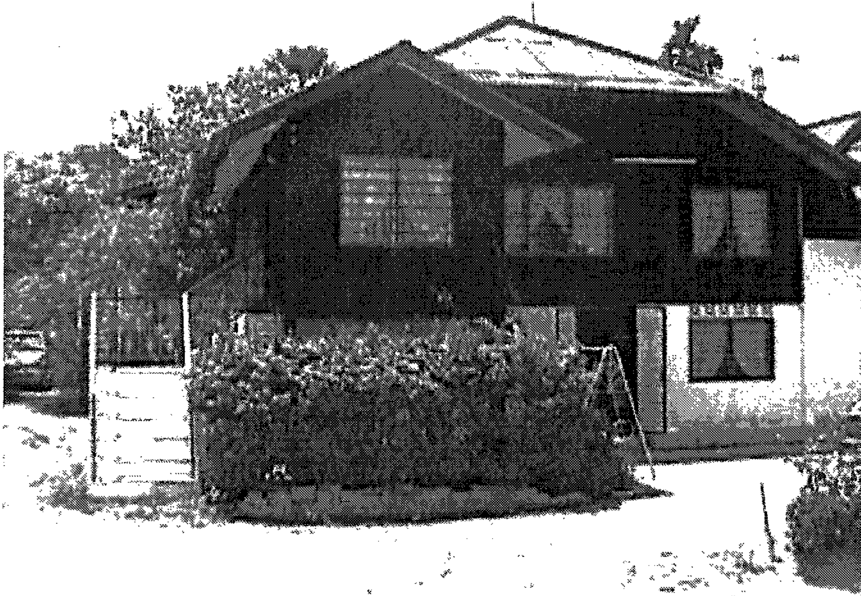
Only a few of the houses of Kampung Dodol are visible from this road. Most are Malay-style[10] kampung houses, originally on stilts and constructed primarily of wood, but most have been so completely renovated and enlarged that the form they likely took when first constructed could not be easily ascertained without some thought (Figures 6 and 7). What is most readily visible to passersby, and that which occupies the highest grounds on both sides of the road, are two large expanses of Muslim burial grounds, immediately recognizable as such from the distinctive style of the tombstones. Hundreds of graves are each marked with a pairs of yard-tall pillars indicating the head and foot of the gravesite, flat with a leafy design on top indicating the grave of a woman, or round, with an onion-like finial, for a man. Presiding over this territory, set back from the street on the west

Figure 6

Malay Houses in Kampung Dodol with Minimal Renovations

Figure 7

Malay Houses in Kampung Dodol with Extensive Renovations



side of Perak Road and on very slightly higher ground, is the modern Hashim Yahya mosque, the center of much of village life. There is another mosque, the Wancik Ariffin, older and smaller, further down the road and also in the village, but it is not as often used for daily prayers. Extending behind and below the Hashim Yahya mosque, and hidden from the street, is the densest residential part of the village, with some houses no more than ten or twenty feet apart. This is the area where we spent most of our time.

When structures are outlined on maps a kampung can usually be distinguished from other built-up areas because the individual houses of which it consists generally do not line up neatly along any road or axis. They follow a logic of their own. This layout, certain aspects of the houses' original forms and the style of the recent renovation, combined with a location near a mosque, a burial ground, and a river, all indicate that this is a Malay kampung. Individual one-, two-story, or split level houses, constructed primarily or at least initially of timber, are scattered randomly along an amorphous network of winding paths that are just wide enough, if you are careful, to allow the passage of a car. Although built according to the same basic design principles and renovated in similar ways, each house is quite different, and most display many years of constant change and new additions. Here, the rumble of traffic on the main street has suddenly been superceded by peace and relative quiet. The sounds of birds chirping and children playing freely on the paths or at open doorways are interrupted only by the roar of

a motorbike on one of the pathways, or the tinkle of a bicycle bell announcing the arrival of an itinerant ice cream seller pedaling his three-wheeled cart. The heat of the day minimizes other possible activities, but many houses are cooled, at least visually, by tall palm and mango trees and bright swaths of deep purple bougainvillea or red *bunga raya*, the national flower of Malaysia (Figures 8 and 9).

Apart from several residents who worked as gardeners on other properties, no one I spoke to ever worked the land for a living. This was an urban village; its inhabitants had been part of an urban economy for generations, working primarily at service jobs, as small entrepreneurs, or in combinations of both. At the same time, many appreciated that they had more space and lived closer to nature than many other people who lived in the city. There was room enough to plant flower gardens and fruit trees, and some were raising chickens. As discussed below, kampungs represent and are thought to embody some very particular things in Malaysia, including a certain simplicity and closeness to nature, easy sociability, a spirit of autonomous and mutual self-help, and a strong sense of village cohesion. They also now represent something old remaining from the past. Up until very recently, remnants of kampungs very similar to Kampung Dodol stood interspersed within and between many of the city's more regularly laid out environments. These areas represented what many areas of the city had looked like before successive waves of development had transformed them in the course of 200 years of urban history.

Figure 8

Scenes of Pathways in Kampung Dodol: Exterior Social Space

Figure 9

Scenes of Pathways in Kampung Dodol
Showing Enclosed Ground-floor Renovations

Balik Kampung – Return to the Village

Prior to the spread of Western architectural ideas in Southeast Asia, and even well into the colonial and post-colonial periods, kampungs and the basic design features of kampung houses – stilts, wood construction, a pitched roof – were standard forms of the built residential environment, prevalent even in cities. As Penang and other cities in the region grew, the distinctive forms of the kampung and its houses held their ground. Up until very recently, many kampungs or now-isolated examples of kampung houses remained within the city's urban fabric. The time depth of the style, however, and recognition that it had an urban as well as rural history are not currently so important to people in Malaysia as the way of living kampungs and their architecture continue to represent. Kampungs occupy a special place in the hearts of many Malaysians, but their symbolic significance is not without ambivalence. This ambivalence is not engendered out of nostalgia for something distant and lost (there are still kampungs throughout Penang and Malaysia) or any coherent devaluation of the old in favor of the new, or vice versa. Rather, it seems to have more to do with keeping the "idea" of a kampung in a special place in the rush of more pressing concerns over other business elsewhere. For many, a kampung has more importance as a symbol than as a reality.

As citizens of a nation that has only recently seen very much urban growth, many current inhabitants of Malaysia's cities either remember what life was like

growing up in a village environment or know someone who does (very likely an older relative). A village is often associated with many of the things that are good -- but old -- about a way of life: the closeness of family and friends, home cooking, fresh air, friendly neighbors, and a certain social and physical ease reinforced by a free-form spatial layout in which boundaries between public and private spaces are often unmarked and usually permeable. All of these features, but especially the latter (which is perceived to facilitate an easy interaction between family, community, and nature), can be easily lacking in the bustle and "newness" of urban life, where traffic and pollution, buildings and barriers clearly marked as private or commercial, and the pursuit of individual gain appear to be more contemporary norms. Unlike Singapore, where the last kampung was re-developed in the late 1980s (Chua 1994:31, n.1), villages still feature prominently in the Malaysian landscape, even in urban areas.[11] Although a kampung way of life is strongly associated with Malay culture, Chinese and Indian kampungs also exist throughout the Malay peninsula, and for each culture group there is an annual holiday[12] when it is expected that one should "*balik kampung*"[13] -- "return to the village" of one's ancestral home, whether or not this home is in fact a village house. These are times when the values associated with village life are renewed and reinforced. Homes are spruced up both inside and out, extended families re-unite, open houses are held for friends and neighbors, and festive foods are consumed in an atmosphere of celebration. Newspaper and television reports

never fail to comment on the mass exodus of celebrants from urban areas during these holidays, on the extensive traffic jams this often causes, and, in special feature stories, on the importance of the values associated with "returning home."[14]

Villages are thus often seen as safe havens from the stresses of a more "modern" urban lifestyle. Apart from, but concomitant with, their distinctive arrangement of residential space, perhaps what is most valued about a kampung is the social cohesiveness and a certain sense of self-sufficiency that a village is popularly thought to represent. This sentiment is perhaps most strongly felt among those who no longer, or have never lived in one. As one life-long urban resident told me, "Who would dare to snatch a woman's gold chain in a kampung? The entire village would be on top of the culprit in a minute." Recognition of the cohesiveness and self-sufficiency of villages also has a darker side, as can be seen in the belief, expressed to me by several inner-city residents, that urban kampungs can be sites of gang-related activities and thus should be avoided. More common, however, is the belief that villages can foster a kind of xenophobia that might have dangerous consequences for outsiders unfamiliar with the length to which village cohesiveness might possibly extend. More than one acquaintance of mine in George Town warned me that should I ever be driving though a rural kampung and happen to get into, or witness, an accident on the road, I should not stop but keep driving until I found a police station at which to ask for help, lest a group of

villagers gather, assume the outsider to be guilty, and take matters into their own hands.[15] A village can indeed be a safe haven, however, for those who belong. In a country which has no unemployment insurance and few, if any, termination benefits in low-level labor contracts, the ability to balik kampung is an important form of social security. Casual laborers, laid off or between jobs, can often return to their families' village homes where there is always something to eat, often something productive to help out with, and where small loans from family and friends as well as credit from local merchants are likely to be available.

Despite being rooted in valued traditions and associated with many of the things that are good about the past, specifically rural villages also represent many things for which there is increasingly little patience in contemporary Malaysia's booming economy: long hours of agricultural or fishing labor, social immobility, low expectations, rigid gender roles, poor sanitation, isolation from new venues for consumption and entertainment, and inadequate educational and employment opportunities. Urbanism itself has come to represent the converse of each of these and the effects of a two-decades-long flight to more urban metropolitan areas by young generations can be seen in village landscapes throughout peninsular Malaysia. Accompanying Sharil,[16] a Malay friend, on several of his visits to his home village in a state bordering Penang, I saw acre after acre of abandoned and dry padi fields, quite a few empty houses, and an aging population, with few middle-aged residents.

Sharil's story is representative of many young Malays who have left their villages to work in the city. Arriving in Penang about eight years earlier, he found a bed to rent in an extra room in a house in a Malay kampung near the city and worked for several years assembling electronic components in a nearby factory. Tiring of the repetitive nature of the work and of the requirement of a bi-monthly alternation between day and night shifts, he then worked successively as a sales clerk in a bakery, as a waiter at a Pizza Hut restaurant, and as a kitchen assistant at a factory canteen that also provided him with a place to stay. He told me that when he first arrived in the city, his speech betrayed him as a "kampung boy" but he had since learned to speak "more correctly" like they do in the city. One of the youngest of seven children and the only one who is still unmarried, he knows the full names and exact ages of each of his 15 nieces and nephews. With his father now too frail to work, his mother was tapping the family's small freehold plot of rubber trees by herself and his oldest brother (his only sibling remaining at home -- living in a separate house built across the yard) grows vegetables for sale in the local market. Although both houses now have electricity and sinks with running water, personal bathing and the washing of clothes takes place in the river behind the house and cooking is still by wood fire.

Inside their traditional-style house, Sharil pointed out to me with pride that he was the one who had bought and brought home the family's first television, their first radio-cassette player, their wood frame-and-cushion settee and set of

armchairs, and the Formica display cabinet in the kitchen area. His older siblings could not afford such purchases, he said, because they had had children at young ages. Sharil enjoys movies, the many admission-free performances often put on in the city,[17] nice clothes, and long jaunts with his friends just hanging out, people watching, or window shopping in the malls and streets of central George Town. He told me he had never liked tapping rubber, which he had had to do every morning (and not just on weekends) once he had completed primary school in the village, where his favorite subject was math. His attitude toward his family village was perhaps best summed up in his comment to me shortly after our arrival in his village during my first visit: "Sometimes I am happy when I come here," he said, "and sometimes I am bored." This comment perhaps best expresses the double-edged feelings that many urban residents have toward kampungs and the ways of life they represent.

The Ideology of the Malay House

A set of meanings complementary to those pertaining to kampungs is attached specifically to the most typical form of domestic architecture found within them – the Malay house. Though "*balik kampung*" has come to mean "going home" for any culture group in Malaysia, specifically Malay-style kampung houses provide contemporary society with an important symbol inextricably linked to a specifically Malay indigenous identity. Design elements

originating in vernacular Malay domestic architecture seem to appear whenever, or wherever, a graphic symbol of "Malayness" is required, very often in contexts far removed from their original uses and most commonly in cities. Images or schematic renderings of Malay houses, rooflines or details of their carved woodwork appear on postcards, postage stamps, tourist brochures and government reports, and they adorn restaurants, airport terminals, bus stands, toll plazas, food courts, and high-rise condominiums. A Malay house represents many of the same values that are associated with village life in general, but its visual distinctiveness has facilitated the multiple new uses it now assumes as an icon of Malay identity. The current popular use of fragments of Malay architectural design as a free floating signifier masks, or perhaps marks, a decline in the status of the original cultural and residential context in which Malay houses were produced.

The symbolic importance of the Malay house as a type has as much, if not more to do with the ingenuity and sociability it is thought to embody and foster, than with its iconicity. At its most basic, a Malay house is distinguished by three elements: an open plan, pitched roof, and the stilts on which it stands. Traditionally constructed entirely of indigenous materials, usually local hardwoods, each of these elements is widely understood by local architects and historians to be an ingenious folk adaptation to a sometimes difficult natural environment as well as a perfect expression of such cultural values as self-sufficiency, local autonomy, modesty in public expression, and resourcefulness

(Lim 1987). These were also the values that were expressed to me in various ways by residents of Kampung Dodol. The open interior plan, usually with no separate bedrooms and little or no furniture, is thought to emphasize sociability over privacy as well as simplicity of lifestyle and restraint in the acquisition of material goods. It also provides a flexible, multiple-use space that can easily accommodate large numbers of people for a *kenduri*, or ritual feast, held on such important events as weddings, births, circumcisions, deaths, and at the end of the fasting month. The steeply pitched roof (traditionally of *attap* – a kind of palm thatch), wide overhangs and high ceilings not only insulate and cool the interior from both the heat of the sun and the driving force (and noise) of the rain, their forms provide a means for the public expression of regional identities. Stilts not only protect against floods, ants, and wild animals, they provide a sheltered open space beneath the house and increase the flow of air though the interior above, as do the sometimes elaborately carved wooden grills and shutters set into the walls. When thrown open, these perforations allow those inside, especially women, to observe and to continue to participate in village goings-on while engaged with indoor domestic chores. The design of the Malay house has a long history, and its basic elements are thought to have been influenced by two main sources: Khmer or Cham traditions from the North, filtered through the Malay kingdom of Patani (in what is now southern Thailand) and, from the West, the artistic traditions of the

Srivijaya empire of Sumatra. Both of these influences pre-date the tenth century (Vlatseas 1990:9).

Both popular and academic discourses about the Malay house, however, have more to do with its future and its status in the present, than with the past. Its symbolic importance as a type resides not in its antiquity or even so much its indigeneity but in the ways it is considered to express a locally autonomous self-sufficiency in ways that may no longer be popularly pursued or possible to sustain. In academic architectural circles this discourse variously pits locality on the level of the nation or the region against "the West," and sometimes tradition itself against modernity. Within this rubric traditional regional practices are also presented as currently under-valued in the nation's rush to develop. At times these practices are explicitly advocated as potentially problem-solving correctives to what is understood as a specifically Western (European and American) brand of modernity. Speaking of the Malay house as if it were an endangered species, Lim Jee Yuan, an local architectural historian who taught in the building and planning department of Penang's university, notes that this "threat of extinction" is caused by a "loss of confidence in the traditional Malay house" which is "due to the overglorification of modern westernized houseforms in Malaysia" (Lim 1987:6). Concerned over the future of the Malay house, Lim was part of a team that constructed one as a showpiece on the university's campus, so that students might better understand and appreciate its design principles.[18] In a book published in the

aftermath of research for this project, Lim sums up what he considers a current trend:

> The traditional Malay house has lost its status in the village, replaced by new but not necessarily better houseforms. Villagers look to these new houseforms as models and status symbols without looking again at their traditional houses for inspiration (Lim 1987:6).

In this statement, Lim places the blame for the lack of regard for the Malay house squarely with the villagers themselves. I find such a blanket statement unwarranted, as least as far as Kampung Dodol is concerned. Though residents here did look to other house forms in the on-going construction and reconstruction of their houses, I found that they did not generally regard these other forms as "status symbols" and that whatever status accrued to their houses did not primarily pertain to their material form – a significant finding that I discuss in the next section.

Lim's observations were made in the wake of a debate by Malaysian architects, initiated in the early 1980s, regarding the search for a "Malaysian" identity in architecture. This architecture would be "modern" without mindlessly reproducing the modern forms of West, many of which were perceived to be inappropriate to both local climate and culture. At the same time, it was thought, local forms should not be slavishly copied without understanding their function and use. The gist of the argument was that more attention should be paid to the autonomous social production of dwellings in their historic cultural and

environmental context -- an agenda that was not being advanced by superficially formal gestures toward "traditionalism," such as the placing of small, non-functional, "Malay" pitched roofs made of synthetic materials on the tops of high-rise housing complexes which had become something of a trend at that time.

Endeavoring to halt the de-valuation of the Malay house by showing its "sophistication and design superiority" and by "documenting scientifically its design principles and its housing processes" (Lim 1987:6), Lim sought to place it within a global tradition of "autonomous housing solutions," which he claims continue to serve, without the assistance of professional architects, the housing needs of the majority of the world's population "through traditional and new settlements in . . . rural areas and through spontaneous and self-help housing in . . . urban areas" (Lim 1987:10). For Lim as well as others, an understanding of the traditional design features of the Malay house can thus "throw some light into the development of a modern autonomous housing model which is based on the needs and aspirations of the users, rather than being imposed by others onto the users" (Lim 1987:10). In Lim's view, the Malay house assumes an even greater symbolic load than being an icon of identity: it is a bastion of hope in a post-colonial world dominated by the West:

> The philosophical base of the traditional Malay house is basically very different from that of the conventional westernized modern houses: the environmentally-respectful against the nature-conqueror; the conserver culture against the consumer culture; use-values against exchange values;

> decentralization against centralization; and basic needs against luxury needs (Lim 1987:10).

Architectural idealism and post-colonial critiques aside, most of the people I spoke to in Kampung Dodol would agree that these were indeed the basic principles of "the Malay house," including their own examples. In many ways, Kampung Dodol is indeed an example of "spontaneous, self-help housing" in an urban area since most households originally built and continued to remodel their own house according to their own specifications.

However the aesthetic purity that Lim values so highly -- timber construction using all natural and local materials – was not so much a concern among villagers, who continued to regard their houses as "Malay" despite their addition of new forms and materials.[19] Buildings age, grow, and their forms change as owners adapt them to their changing needs (Brand 1995). One of the basic design principles of the Malay house is that it can be easily expanded, renovated, and even moved (Carsten 1995).[20] The houses of Kampung Dodol, and in many kampungs throughout Malaysia, today reflect generations of such practices, and can be said to constitute a new form of vernacular design. This new tradition incorporates a bricolage of modern materials chosen in response to certain new municipal constraints as well as changing ideas about status, hygiene, convenience and aspiration. The availability of these choices, in turn, is made possible by a general increase in household purchasing power in the last two

decades. These changes create somewhat different interior living spaces, and often radically different exterior aesthetics that could be further identified as a modern (or perhaps postmodern) vernacular.

While the "original" Penang-style Malay house may have expressed certain Bugis influences (Loh 1997:11), these traces have been all but obliterated in Kampung Dodol, where all but a handful of houses have been almost completely renovated and enlarged with such materials as concrete block, louvered glass windows, poured concrete ground-level floors, and corrugated zinc or asbestos roof sheeting. These many changes meant that Kampung Dodol's houses would likely never be championed by architectural preservationists or historians, for whom original materials and a certain aesthetic purity are still active concerns. Despite the symbolic importance of the Malay house as an example of local autonomy, the primary material of its original construction – wood – now has negative connotations in some quarters as a pre-modern, "poor man's" material used by urban squatters and those not wealthy enough to afford other materials. These meanings can override the significance of wood as a local indigenous material, and the continued presence of at least some wood construction in the houses of Kampung Dodol actually contributes to their officially low status as housing units. "Timber" and "half-timber" houses are the defining characteristics of what the 1980 census categorized as "temporary" dwellings. In that same year, 31% of all housing units on Penang Island were considered "temporary," with 40%

of these in the George Town area (Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (Penang Island Municipal Council) 1984). Despite the efforts of professionals such as Lim, and of villagers who continue to improve their houses but value them for reasons that may not be primarily about either form or materials, a continued place for the Malay house in the city's future is tenuous at best.

Kampung Dodol as *Wakaf* Property

Unlike the residents of the other two neighborhoods surveyed, most of whom were renters, the residents of Kampung Dodol were in a somewhat different but equally precarious situation in that they owned their own homes but not the land on which they were built. There is no private ownership of land in Kampung Dodol; the entirety of the village consists of various properties known in Malay as *wakaf* (from the Arabic *waqf*). According to Muslim law, *wakaf* property, which may be moveable or immovable (material goods or land), is the inalienable property of God.[21] Usually donated by a wealthy patron who need not be Muslim, *wakaf* properties are held in trust for the benefit of the Muslim community. Donations of *wakaf* most often take the form of land, with the income it generates going toward the maintenance of a particular mosque, community purposes, and the support of religious activities. *Wakaf* lands are, in effect, communal property, and they are administered by family members or trustees appointed by the original benefactor. Depending on the provisions of the endowment, these trustees are

entitled to a portion of any proceeds deriving from the property, but the basic purpose of any income is to provide for charity for the poor, and to support schools, mosques, almshouses, infrastructure such as public water supplies, and other community purposes (see Zain 1982; Nasution 2000). With the exception of the areas occupied by the burial grounds, the two mosques, and a new multi-story apartment with ground-level shops on Perak Road, the entirety of the *wakaf* land of Kampung Dodol was being used for residential purposes. Under the original terms of its development as a *wakaf* property, ostensibly poor Muslims were able to rent lots from the trust on which to build their own houses. The rentals charged were modest and, based on current rates, appear to have increased only rarely, if ever, from the original charges established at the end of the 19th century.[22]

Kampung Dodol consists of at least two separately endowed *wakaf* properties: The Hashim Yahya *wakaf* and the Kapitan Kling *wakaf*.[23] The former property (the site of all but three of the houses visited in the current survey) is now the largest *wakaf* property within the city limits of George Town, following the progressive diminishment of the latter due to municipal appropriation of properties for public purposes.[24] Needless to say, such land within the city limits is now extremely desirable as a development site, and the fact that it is *wakaf* does not exempt the site from the possibility of re-development. Kampung Dodol and other *wakaf* sites have been the subject of a plethora of development feasibility studies that outline proposals to displace the current tenants in order to make way for such

things as commercial complexes, hotels, food courts, craft centers for tourists, and additional high-rise flats (Salleh and Tahir 1985; Ngah 1987; Ngah 1992; Bakar 1998). The gist of these studies is that the land is currently under-utilized, returns little income, and should be re-developed to ensure greater Muslim presence and participation in the urban economy. Many residents felt that it was only a matter of time before the entire kampung would be re-developed into something else. The fact that the village had not already been relegated to history is likely due to the particular circumstances of its location somewhat distant from the center of town and the fact that two different trusts were involved, each of which had established a somewhat different relationship over time to state efforts to control all religious trust properties. These relationships, as well as the bid toward centralized state control in the name of "development," both date back to the colonial era.

In 1905, British administrators had established the "Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Board" with the ostensible purpose of "rationalizing" control of religious endowment trusts and centralizing their administration. From a British point of view such consolidation was justified because of the frequent legal disputes among trustees and their descendants and because of the numerous subdivisions, self-built structures and uses of land in the heart of the city that, to colonial eyes, were unsightly and unsanitary. The perception here was that

> there is a large quantity of so-called "charity" lands in the town of Penang which can easily be distinguished by the poor class of houses which occupy them. These houses are in most cases, a disgrace to the town (Hand Book of the Mohamedan and Hindu Endowments Board 1932: 30).[25]

Although Penang's municipal authorities had successfully acquired portions of previously endowed properties for the construction of public amenities such as roads, a school, a market and a police station, the rationale was that a centralized administration of such properties would facilitate municipal development.[26] Though such a move was of doubtful legality from the standpoint of Islamic law, many, but not all trustees relinquished control over religious trust lands to the Board. The Kapitan Kling *wakaf* was a prime target for the Board's actions (cf. Nasution 2002), and this part of the village's land has been under external centralized control since 1905. The Hashim Yahaya *wakaf*, however, continued to be administered by descendents of its original trustees for a much longer period of time.[27]

Shortly after Malaysian independence in 1947, the functions of the Mohamedan and Hindu Endowments Board pertaining specifically to Muslim properties were taken over in Penang by the Majlis Agama Islam Negeri Pulau Pinang (The Penang Island Muslim Religious Council), whose development goals are seen by some to be similar to that of the colonial-era Endowment Board. Criticisms leveled against the Council are that its tactics are heavy-handed, administratively non-transparent, historically and environmentally insensitive, and,

above all, non-compliant with the principles of *wakaf* as outlined in Islamic law. In this view, decisions by the Council to develop *wakaf* properties are being made without sufficient input from the community, and the result has been to wrest both the control and the value of the land away from the local communities that *wakaf* endowments are meant to benefit.[28]

Many of these criticisms were articulated in the course of discussions generated among members of the Muslim community resident on wakaf properties during a UNESCO-sponsored project, for which I worked as a volunteer (see Nasution 2000). The focus of this project was on restoring and revitalizing both the material and social fabric of *wakaf* properties in the central part of the old city and raising awareness about the basic principles of *wakaf* and the potential that existed for their abuse. Workshops were held, and committees formed that addressed such concerns as legal advice for tenants affected by the end of rent control, the cleaning and restoration of neglected tomb sites, and the circulation of a petition regarding the future use and protesting the possible closure of the Campbell Street market (built circa 1900 on what was once *wakaf*). Though the basic issues regarding the insensitivity of a centralized administrative board whose members were not local residents dovetailed with criticisms expressed to me in Kampung Dodol, many of the concerns of residents in the two areas were very different. Muslims resident in the inner city were concerned about such issues as poverty and run-down living conditions, the fragmentation of the community of

faithful and the loss of more prosperous members to the suburbs, as well as the general diminishment of a specifically Muslim presence in commercial and residential venues in this part of town. The idea was that bringing the administration of the area's *wakaf* properties more in line with Muslim principles would alleviate many of these problems. Things were very different in Kampung Dodol. Here most households continued to live where they had for generations, with many declining opportunities to live elsewhere. Houses were in good repair, tombs well kept, neighbors, on the whole, were mutually supportive, and there were few basic features of the built environment that were not clearly identifiable in some way as Muslim. As many residents themselves told me, in Kampung Dodol things had continued much as they had for decades. There was a sense here in which the village – perhaps because it *was* a village – had been able to go its own way despite, or apart from the centralized administration of *wakaf* in Penang.

Although the power to weigh in on the ultimate disposition of village lands was no longer in their hands, descendants of the original endower or trustees of the *wakaf* properties that constituted village territory continued to live in Kampung Dodol, where they had prominent social positions. For example, at least as late as 1974, the imam of Hasim Yahya mosque was the great grandson of one of the original trustees (Abdul Kahar et. al 1974). Regardless of the "official" administration of village lands, residents continue to recognize local sources of authority, even though these authorities are now more moral than legal. One

source of such authority is vested in the informal office of *penghulu* or *ketua kampung* (village headman). At the time of the survey, the holder of this title was a descendant of the donor of one of the properties and he had inherited this position from his father. He was an important man in the village and appeared on a weekly radio show, broadcast by telephone from his house, which was built by his father. This house was one of the largest in the area and one of only a few in the village that had not seen much renovation. People often came to him for advice, and he was one of the driving forces behind the recent creation of the kampung's first residents' association as well as its first chairman. As discussed later in this chapter, this association was formed because residents felt that certain problems that had arisen in the village required taking administrative action on a number of moral and material matters into their own hands.

Whereas mutual "self-help" might have been something that was spontaneously achieved in kampungs in years past (cf. Lim 1987:10), the rationale for the creation of this association was that certain village problems now needed to be addressed less casually -- through a formal organization with elected officers. The scope of this organization transcended any territorial or administrative divisions between the two *wakaf* trusts that made up the village's territory. It reached out to embrace not just the sole Chinese household in the village (whose head was a member of a special committee) but also former residents who now lived elsewhere. Above any other agenda or criterion for membership, the sense

that residential space was truly shared by all who lived in a particular place constituted the key focus for this organization. This residents association of Kampung Dodol (and the role of the headman in its formation) is further discussed later in this chapter as an example of a new form of place-based activist organization that arose in Penang for the first time during the period of my field research. (Two others are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.) Though the organizers of the three groups I go on to discuss never met, what they have in common is that they see material environmental change in moral terms, they make serious attempts to incorporate social difference into their organizational rationale, and they seek ways to assert a very localized sense of autonomy and self sufficiency into a larger space of state officialdom, which they may or may not explicitly oppose. These themes will be returned to again in Chapters 4 and 5 in a discussion of the two other organizations that had more self-consciously political goals than the residents association of Kampung Dodol.

The People of Kampung Dodol:
Identity, Household Composition and Economy

Forty houses, representing home to 302 residents, were visited in Kampung Dodol. All but three of these were in the immediate vicinity of the Hashim Yahya Mosque on the west side of Perak Road. (See map in Figure 4[29]) Respondents included 23 women and 17 men. Basic socioeconomic information collected

during conversations with residents here and in the other two study areas revealed that certain perceptions regarding urban residential life are not always true. Popular opinion, expressed by some residents of Penang who no longer live in the city, has it that living conditions in urban households are either over-crowded due to the persistence of extended-family living arrangements and the taking in of boarders, or emptied out due to a lack of interest (or ability) on the part of younger generations to continue to live in the city. Neither perception has very much basis in fact, as far as the households I visited were concerned. Household sizes in Kampung Dodol did range from one member (an elderly man living alone in a large house) to 18 (an extended family with many children) but on the whole they reflected national averages, with an average of 7.5 residents per house.[30] No house took in boarders who were not related to the household although several said they had done so in the past. There were 23 extended family households and 17 single-family households.[31] As discussed further in a later section, residents of Kampung Dodol were generally aware that, in comparison with other types of residences elsewhere, they enjoyed more spacious living arrangements than many, and perhaps most other people in Penang.

Given the current prominence in Penang of a multitude of new housing developments located in semi-urban areas outside the city, there is also a widespread perception that older residential areas – in both inner-city and rural areas -- are largely the domains of aging populations sometimes thought to be too

entrenched or too poor to take advantage of "newer" housing arrangements. The survey also revealed this perception to be unfounded, at least as far as Kampung Dodol is concerned. Most residents in the houses visited were relatively young. More than half (50.9% -- 154 residents) were under 30 years of age; 68.5% (207 residents) were under 40.[32] This youthful population, however, did not belie the facts that the kampung represented an "older" way of life that was fast disappearing in Penang and that the age of the village was something generally appreciated positively by old and young alike. Based on prices of rental properties outside the city, many households appeared to be able to afford to live elsewhere, albeit in smaller quarters. Several households had already purchased houses or apartment units outside the city but were currently renting them out and preferred to remain in the kampung.

The individuals interviewed for the survey ranged in age from 80 to 18, with 42 being the average age. Judging by the universal ease with which respondents recalled the ages of all household members, personal age was an important social identifier.[33] A young man interviewed in the largest household visited, for example, could easily pinpoint the exact ages of all 18 people living in his house. In most cases, but not all, the oldest resident family member was considered the head of the household, regardless of whether this individual was male or female.[34] Educational level was approximately inversely proportional to age. Many older residents with no formal education or only a primary school

experience had children who had completed higher levels in school and grandchildren who were currently surpassing the educational level of both grandparents and parents by studying at professional schools or at the local university.

As discussed in Chapter 1, people in Penang are generally conscious of relative demography at a range of territorial scales, such as who or what ethnic group is numerically dominant locally, statewide, and nationally. This consciousness informs the "epistemological space" of urban residents, despite the fact that there is little or no spatial segregation by ethnic group within the city. Concentrations by ethnic group do exist but, as discussed later in this chapter, territorial boundaries between concentrations are not of much local concern. It seems that no urban residential area is completely exclusive ethnically. Indian Muslims are more prominent in urban areas than Malays, and it was perhaps for this reason that people who did not live in Kampung Dodol but who knew it was located off a recognizably Muslim burial ground, often assumed that most of its residents were also Indian Muslim. However, this was not how most of the residents I spoke to identified themselves.

While every respondent identified his or her household as Muslim, 28 said their household was Malay and 3 identified themselves as Indian Muslim. Respondents in 8 of the remaining households specified different ethnicities for individual household members, with the following combinations: "Malay and

Indian Muslim" (4 households); "Malay and Indonesian" (1); "Malay and Javanese" (1); "Malay and Indian Muslim and Pakistani" (1); and "Arab Yemeni and Achenese" (1).[35] One respondent identified the entire household with the dual ethnicity "Indonesian-Malay." Thus, though homogeneous religiously, with much of the village's communal life focused on the mosque, there was some variation in terms of ethnicity.[36] This variation was also reflected linguistically. The languages, or combinations of languages most often spoken by household members were identified by the residents interviewed as Malay (25); Malay and English (8); Malay and Tamil (3); Malay, English and Tamil (1); Malay, English and Indonesian[37] (1); Malay, English and Javanese (1); and Malay, English, Tamil and Hokkien (1).

Total household incomes were less easy to ascertain than ages of residents, in part because most households had multiple sources of income. With a few exceptions, incomes were modest. Most working adults in Kampung Dodol at the time of the survey worked at semi-skilled or unskilled occupations such as taxi driver, food hawker, or retail assistant, but there were a number of teachers, nurses, and government employees as well as several independent entrepreneurs at a larger scale than driver or hawker. With one exception falling well outside the curve (a businessman with multi-level marketing activities in Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Indonesia who reported a personal monthly income of RM10,000 (approximately US$2,500)[38]), the highest personal income reported was RM5,000

per month (in two cases: a clothing shop owner and the son of the businessman just mentioned). The next highest personal monthly incomes cited were RM3,500-3,900 (for a taxi driver), RM3,000-3500 (for a police administrator), and RM2,000 (for a finance officer). Most personal monthly incomes, however, were considerably lower. Respondents cited the following ranges as the highest personal income in the household: RM 1,000-1,500 (in 9 households, for occupations such as factory worker, caterer, postman, library assistant, and security guard); RM500-999 (in 13 households, for jobs such as small trader, jewelry salesman, house cleaner, airline employee, hospital worker, and driver); and RM200-499 (in 7 households, for positions including clerk, gardener, grave digger and shop assistant). At the lowest end of the scale, a 75 year-old retired muezzin living alone reported a monthly pension income of RM150.[39] Several women pensioners had small at-home businesses, such as dressmaking and the selling of lotions and medicines.

Only 11 households were single income. Most respondents said that every family member who works contributes to household expenses; in several cases family members no longer living at home still made contributions. Of the 62 women living with their husbands, 27 were working and 35 were housewives (sometimes described as "*suri rumahtangga*", literally "queen of the household"). Despite generally low incomes, virtually every respondent described his or her standard of living as "ok" (and as "*sederhana*" – "medium"). There were two

exceptions: the retired muezzin living on RM150 (US$38) per month said his standard of living was "low"; and a housewife in an extended family of 11 with what she said was a combined monthly income of RM200-400 (US$50-100) felt that their standard of living was "poor."

Personal incomes may be modest or low, but the combination of multiple incomes within a household (together with the village land's special status as *wakaf*, often meant that many residents of Kampung Dodol could not only afford to educate their children at higher levels, they could also purchase a range of consumer goods associated with a lifestyle that could be called "middle class." Every household visited had a refrigerator and at least one television set; all but one had at least one telephone; 70% (28 households) had a VCR; just over half had at least one car (see Figure 11). As discussed in the next chapter, however, residents of Kampung Dodol had considerably fewer consumer goods per household than the residents of the predominantly Chinese area that was also surveyed – a finding that, in this case, confirms popular perception that ethnic Chinese in Penang are often better-off than their Malay counterparts. A telling indicator in this comparison is means of transport: residents of Kampung Dodol relied more often on less expensive vehicles such as motorbikes and bicycles, and households there had more of these and fewer cars than in the "Chinese" neighborhood. Like their counterparts in the other two neighborhoods studied, some households could simply not afford to consume more. In all three areas,

Figure 10

Kampung Dodol:
Consumer Goods Owned by Residents

(40 households)

Item	**% (number) of Households**	
Refrigerator	100%	(40)
Washing machine	75%	(30)
Oven	38%	(15)
Air conditioning	5%	(2)
Telephone	98%	(39)
1 cell phone	28%	(11)
2 or more cell phones	10%	(4)
Television	100%	(40)
Stereo/radio	88%	(35)
VCR	70%	(28)
CD player	18%	(7)
Computer	8%	(3)
1 car	43%	(17)
2 cars	8%	(3)
3 or more cars	3%	(1)
1 motorbike	43%	(17)
2 motorbikes	23%	(9)
3 motorbikes	13%	(5)
4 motorbikes	5%	(2)
1 bicycle	38%	(15)
2 bicycles	10%	(4)
3 bicycles	8%	(3)
4 bicycles	5%	(2)

however, but especially so in Kampung Dodol, many residents seemed to resist taking too much stock in the acquisition of material goods.

While the recent rise of a "middle-class" in Malaysia was an issue largely confined to academic or governmental circles, the rise of "consumer culture" was something that was regularly fore-fronted in popular consciousness. Few of the people I met or read about in newspapers in Penang ever identified themselves or others as "middle class," but everyone seemed ready to comment critically upon, or at least ponder, an increase in the number of venues throughout the city that represented and encouraged new opportunities to spend and consume. Many people throughout Penang were wary of the possible negative social effects of translating the region's prosperity into a desire to consume material goods at ever increasing levels. Much of this criticism was directed at young people whom many thought were becoming too materialistic, too involved in wasting time at shopping malls, and overly interested in acquiring brand-name products that were not locally produced. This issue of youth as a focus of anxieties about material and social change and the consequences of prosperity will be addressed again elsewhere in this chapter, but it should be noted that few of the people I spoke to in Kampung Dodol, including teenagers, expressed a desire for more material symbols of wealth, or even thought of consumer goods as significant primarily of economic status. I found that memories of a time when even common consumer

items were not so prevalent in the village to be very close to the surface, even among young people.

The following is an example. A 27-year old housewife took me upstairs to show me a large console television set, purchased before she was born, that she said had been the first in the village. With a mixture of both pride and amusement, she said that neighbors used to come to the house every evening to watch it, and that her family was also the first to have a telephone and a radio/record player -- items that had also encouraged neighborly visits. Her amusement, I assume, stemmed from recognition that such items are now considered standard household equipment. But their significance to her was not that her family was the first to have them, but that they had provided an occasion for a sociability that transcended her individual household. It was this sociability, more than the assertion of economic status through personal possession, that made the acquisition of the television significant enough to be passed down as a memory to a new generation.

The social economy of Kampung Dodol can not be understood apart from the sense of it as a place -- its setting in a wider context that was distinctly urban and the special housing situation of its residents. The economic base of Kampung Dodol was never agricultural. As far as I could determine few, if any, of the previous generations still within the memory of its current residents had ever engaged in subsistence production. This was not a case of "rural to urban"

migration or a "transition" between two ways of living that continues to dominate much of the literature on development. Most households had been resident in Kampung Dodol for a very long time and were very stable in terms of residential mobility. Thirty households (75%) said that previous generations of their family had lived in their house, and the average length of family residency was 29 years. Apart from easy access to a wide range of employment opportunities provided by the city, this long-term residential stability and the special status of the village territory as *wakaf* were perhaps the most significant factors contributing to recently higher standards of living and material consumption in Kampung Dodol. Both of these factors meant that, for most households, housing costs were negligible. When asked what they liked about their house a number of residents began by mentioning that it was their "own house": there were no monthly mortgage payments to be made (necessitating regular salaried employment) and little or no rental payments. These advantages were the cumulative product of both the history of the village as *wakaf* property endowed many years ago, and long-term family residency which in most cases meant that that previous generations had borne the expense of building or buying the family house.

Thirty-seven (92.5%) of the 40 houses visited were owned by the occupants; only three households were renting. Among the owners, 25 (67.5%) said they had inherited their house and ten (27%) said they had purchased it.[40] Although constructing the original house would have required a modest capital

investment, even this expense was spared to those current generations (67.5% of current owners) who had inherited. Even for those who had purchased, prices were low. One household said that they had purchased their house in 1968 for RM8,500, and others quoted prices as low as RM1000, RM6,000, and RM7,000.[41] Apart from utilities, the only other monthly housing expense was the small rental fee for the plot of land on which each house stood.[42] (No tax assessments on *wakaf* properties were levied by the state government.) These fees ranged from RM4 to RM10 per month, with five households saying that they paid no rental fees at all because they were descendents of either the original endowers (in four cases) or a former caretaker of the mosque (one case).

With housing expenses so low, most residents could afford to improve and expand their houses, and most houses in the village were the products of years of gradual renovation that were undertaken as household finances would permit. Some residents said they had ended up almost entirely rebuilding the original house. One of the first features to be changed appears to have been the stilts on which many of the original structures stood. As explained above, this area was usually walled in with concrete blocks, a concrete floor was laid, and glass louver windows were installed in the resulting new common room that could be tightly shut.[43] This process appears to have been completed for most houses by the 1980s, concurrent with contemporary Malaysia's first dramatic increases in economic growth. The additional protection from rain and wind offered by the

new materials meant, in turn, that that a more hygienic environment was created for further acquisitions of durable consumer goods such as electronic appliances, stereos, VCRs, rugs, and upholstered furniture. These modifications of house form itself over time thus do reflect increases in the level of material consumption over the same time period. Without laboring over a definition of what is meant by the term "middle class," it can be said that many of the residents of Kampung Dodol were well on their way toward achieving some of the lifestyle features often associated with that term, at least in terms of domestic material culture. Kahn (1996) notes that the current rise of a middle class in Malaysia is something that warrants increased attention by researchers; I maintain that the shape it is taking may not always replicate expected patterns found elsewhere.

For example, as far as so-called "middle-class values" are concerned, few people in all three of the areas I studied considered either their houses or renovations to them as "investments." Use value always overrode exchange value in their estimation. This sentiment generally held true even for the residents I spoke to who owned both their house and the land on which they lived and could freely sell both. Residents of Kampung Dodol and elsewhere had not renovated their houses in the expectation of any future financial return, nor did most seem particularly concerned with any symbolic improvement of their social status for doing so. They just wanted to be more comfortable. Their home improvements were thus not forms of small-scale capitalist production or status seeking

mechanisms such as have been discussed in primarily Western contexts (cf. Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999; Clarke 2001; Miller 2001). Instead, as the following section of this chapter discusses, residents preferred to think of their houses as places within a larger social context that, ideally, embodied a certain moral content. It was this moral value, sometimes unseen but nevertheless tied to the built environment, that residents felt should be continued or restored and above all projected into the future, especially for the benefit and the moral reproduction of succeeding generations. In this view, the village's housing situation was seen, not as a site of consumption, but as a site of production that was not exclusively economic or even merely symbolic – it stood as a counter to the increasing commodification of housing throughout the country and the loss of autonomy in housing situations that this trend was perceived to entail.[44]

This stance did not mean that residents of Kampung Dodol were oblivious to where they stood in relation to a housing market and financial pressures beyond their control. As discussed the previous section, the special status of their village as *wakaf* was no guarantee that their houses would not be demolished and the village redeveloped. The housing market constitutes a substantial segment of Malaysia's growth economy. Promotional campaigns for new projects on billboards, in the newspapers, and on television, and real estate fairs held in public venues such as shopping malls meant that many Malaysians, especially those in urban areas, were well versed in current values, prices, loan terms, and the

monthly costs of housing. Many residents of Kampung Dodol were thus keenly aware of the value of their houses, and that living in such spacious environs was quickly becoming the exception, not the rule. Just over half (23 of the forty householders interviewed) were readily able to name a price as the current value of their house. These figures ranged from a high of RM200,000 to a low of RM30,000, with just over RM69,000 being the average price quoted. Fewer respondents (13) could specify the original cost of their house, but for those who could, differences between original costs and current values were cited as ranging from a three-fold increase to a 500-fold increase. Although no questions were asked about indebtedness, these figures likely represent the total equity that residents believed they had in their homes. One of the features of vernacular Malay house building traditions is that the design of a house permits its easy incremental expansion or renovation as need arises or resources become available. This feature makes possible an avoidance of debt that is in keeping with Muslim principles. At the same time, this absence of financial liens on their houses and the readiness with which current values were quoted does not necessarily mean that residents considered their homes as investments easily translatable into cash. Although sales of houses on *wakaf* properties do occur, expectation is that profit making should be minimal, since *wakaf* trusts were designed to help the needy. Rather, my sense is that residents had values in mind primarily because they felt their tenancy to be somewhat insecure and were preparing to name a price for

compensation, should they be asked to move. For many, these anxieties were justified. On a return visit to Kampung Dodol in April of 2002, bulldozers were in the process of demolishing many of the houses in which I had been warmly welcomed and my many questions patiently entertained.

The Shape and Perception of Residential Space

With use value of their houses and housing situation overriding exchange value, most residents of Kampung Dodol were unconcerned that their houses might be indicative of any kind of socio-economic status. Other meanings were at work in their likes and dislikes, perceptions and aesthetic appreciations of where and how they lived. Living near the mosque, proximity to nature and to urban amenities, practicality, and above all sociability were what residents most valued. Though the basic form of their houses was important to most residents as an expression of their Malay identity (this is discussed in the following section), setting was generally more significant than structure, with most everyone appreciating that their house was part of a larger residential ensemble. Though intimately tied to an appreciation of their kampung as a place and features of its built environment, theirs was not primarily a material aesthetic. Few specifics of design detail were what mattered. Much of what was valued was largely unseen, commonly shared, and additionally tied to a sense of long-term residential continuity, built up over many years. Memories of family and notable village events, the expression of faith, spaciousness, and a certain easy

sociability facilitated by this space were all more important than any individualized expression though purely visual means, despite the fact that houses here were all originally self-built or commissioned.

Unlike houses on more publicly accessible streets closer to the center of George Town, where colonial building codes regulated heights and setbacks and where series of similar structures often indicate construction by the same owner/developer, the self-built houses of Kampung Dodol are all unique and visually different. The significance of this uniqueness, however, is as an expression of autonomy, not individuality. Each household had built or expanded when and how it could, while creating a structure that remained but one example of a type – the Malay house – the meaning of which was discussed in a section above. In the absence of any grid or any clearly named streets providing an external identifier of location, it is each house's distinction (for a variety of reasons) and uniqueness within a recognizable type that provide the primary points of orientation for anyone walking along the network of paths that wind their way through the village. Additional points of reference can be found in the sparse number, but great variety of fruit trees maintained by different households, such as banana, mango, rambutan, starfruit, coconut and *jambu*. Gardens, paths and open doors flow easily into and through one another creating a visual experience of the village as an organic whole largely free of boundaries. Each house is distinct, but there are few exterior embellishments -- no decorative facades putting a public face on any distinction between front and back,

public and private. Apart from traces of occasionally elaborate open-work wood carving still surrounding some upper story windows, materials are basic and seriously practical: cement blocks for a recently enclosed ground floor space, original wood construction inside and out on the floor above it, and a pitched roof of corrugated iron or asbestos. From the outside, each house's visual distinctiveness appears to be more the product of the practical circumstances of its renovation and addition than any quest to express an identity separate or apart from anyone else's nearby.

When I asked what residents liked about their houses, their responses initially varied but many eventually overlapped with each other during the course of our conversations. Most said that what they appreciated most was the physical, social, and/or religious setting of their house, or the fact that they and/or previous generations had lived there for a long time. Some initially mentioned the advantage of a closeness to certain natural features that they felt was only possible in a kampung. "It's more comfortable living in a kampung because you can plant and raise chickens," said a middle-aged taxi driver, "—unlike living in a flat where you can only stay in the house." "I like a kampung-style house because I can do some gardening and plant my own vegetables to eat, so I save a little," said a housewife in her twenties. A retired clerk living in a three-generation household said she liked "the atmosphere of a kampung. It's cool in the morning." Proximity to both the mosque and the cemetery were seen as distinct advantages. "I like that the house is situated near the mosque and you can hear the calls for prayers," said a widow living with her adult daughter. The

elderly retired muezzin who living alone liked his house "because my wife is here," he said. "Every morning I go to the cemetery, to my wife's grave, and then I eat and come back at noon." Despite admonitions by his children that he should move to a smaller place and not live alone, he said that this was the reason why "I don't want to sell this house." Others, especially middle aged housewives who may not be comfortable driving, were more inclusive about valuing proximity to other facilities: "All facilities are close by – the hospital, the fire station, the mosque. It's convenient," said one. "It's near the main road, the mosque, and a lot of facilities nearby," said another.

For others, the advantages of setting were explicitly and specifically social. A married woman in her twenties said she liked that "a lot of relatives live around this house." Another woman, also in her twenties, said "I love it here because there are many children." Other women valued the familiarity and social continuity of living in the same place where their families had lived for generations: "I've lived here since I was a child and I know all the villagers. My father and mother lived here." "This house was owned by my father; it's the place where I was born." A middle aged man, whose 70-year-old grandmother owned the house, cited both familiarity and convenience: "I've been living here for a long time," he said, "-- it's close to my workplace." Others, both old and young, liked that the area was both Malay and Muslim, for reasons both symbolic and practical. A 23-year old construction supervisor appreciated that his house was "in front of the mosque and in a Malay

kampung." An 80-year-old woman liked that "everyone here is Malay, so it is easy to talk to each other. We don't [have to] mix with other people."

Only ten respondents (25%), commenting on what they liked about their houses, initially replied with statements referring to the structure itself, and six of these were men. These responses included appreciations of both the fact of ownership and the desirability of certain physical features of the house. A factory and night market worker said what he liked was that "we own the house so we don't have to pay rent." A businessman likewise said that he liked his house "because it's my own house," as did the wife of a municipal council employee. Spaciousness was the most commonly cited desirable feature among those who spoke of structure in material terms, and some residents made it clear that this was an advantage that most apartment dwellers do not enjoy: "This house has a large area, a place to rest, and more rooms compared to flats with just two rooms," observed a male library assistant.

Residents of Kampung Dodol were thus conscious of where they stood in relation to other housing types but my sense is that they generally did not think of their houses as significant of any kind of economic status competition. Shared social values and practicality always outweighed materialism as desired features. It was the expression of these values in built form, together with the identification of certain features as "Malay," and "Muslim" that residents most valued. Only one comment even obliquely referred to the house as any kind of socio-economic status symbol, however, and this came this came from an 18-year-old student who compared his

house to a bungalow. "Bungalow" is a culturally specific term referring to a specific building type – a freestanding house usually set within expansive grounds – that is still associated with its origins among the British colonial elite in India and Southeast Asia. (King 1984). Along with "mansion" (a larger version) a bungalow remains the most expensive type of residential property in Malaysia today. This teenager liked that "the house is just like a bungalow, with cement downstairs and wood upstairs with old-style windows." But he also liked "the freedom of having no fences" and "the huge area outside" – responses that, again, do not separate an appreciation of his house's structure from its social and natural setting. For many other residents this combination of cement downstairs and wood upstairs was not something that made their houses more like elite bungalows, it was one of the features that made their houses distinctly Malay. In this view, if structure was significant it was as an ethnic, not an economic identifier. For example, a middle-aged contractor, who likely witnessed over the years the cement-block enclosure of the ground-floor stilts of many Malay houses, pragmatically stated that what he liked about his house was that "it's a double story with wood upstairs and cement downstairs and is suitable for Malays." Such responses would likely horrify architectural purists such as Lim (1987) who see complete timber construction and a more or less single story living area atop stilts as defining features of a Malay house.

Once pressed on the matter and encouraged to talk about their houses in material terms, many residents mentioned the continued presence of at least some

wood as one of the features that made their houses Malay – but they were generally unconcerned about any historic purity of materials, structure or design, even though many seemed well aware of what a "traditional" Malay house looked like in the past. In like manner, most residents indicated that they were aware of the relative socio-economic hierarchy of different kinds of houses in Malaysia but that economic status competition in housing was a game they preferred not to play. Malaysians can be very status conscious, but relative placement on an economic scale is only one of several possible means of ascertaining social status. Age and education are highly valued, to varying degrees by Malays, Chinese, and Indians alike. So too are the various titles associated with office holders in government service, corporations, and voluntary associations, as well as honorific titles bestowed by the Malaysian government, the non-royal state governors, and the Yang di Pertua Agong (the king of Malaysia), all of which are ranked. Any of these factors can over-ride estimations of status based solely on wealth.

On a strictly economic scale, however, there is a definite status hierarchy of housing types in Malaysia that is isomorphic with the relative cost or monetary value of each as real estate property.[45] Highest on the scale is the freestanding mansion or bungalow, usually set within an expanse of property. A close second is the "luxury" condominium, which lacks any private-use land but is distinguished from its lower status counterpart – the co-operative flat -- in that there are common facilities for owners such as golf courses, pools, and fitness centers. Closely following, or tying for

second place if its location is in an extremely desirable area, is a semi-detached house, in which a side wall is shared with an adjoining unit, both of which are set within a small plot of land usually consisting of front and back yards and a driveway. Decidedly lower on the scale is a terrace, or attached row or shop house, with a limited setback from a public street in front and usually a common back alley to the rear. Although kampung houses share many of the structural features of a bungalow, but on smaller scales, their association with rural provincialism and urban squatters, combined with a limited market for their exchange, place them near the bottom of the socioeconomic housing status hierarchy. Their spaciousness and low cost, however, place them just above what appears to be the least desirable form of housing – a rental unit in a walk-up four- or five-story flat.

Significantly, most residents of Kampung Dodol said they preferred a type of house near to the bottom of this scale. Given the hypothetical scenario of money not being an obstacle and being able to live in any kind of house, 25 (63%) of the 40 residents interviewed replied that they would like to live in a kampung-style house – the same kind of house in which they were currently living. Upgrading to a "better" house higher up on the economic scale was not a concern for most residents. Only two residents (both of them young men) chose the highest status type (a bungalow), but both, along with the one woman who chose a semi-detached house, cited a reason that had nothing to do with any economic status features: these were housing types, she said, that were usually built on higher ground than most kampungs and therefore

were not subject to floods. Only one young businessman cited a "luxury" reason for his choice of a condominium: he pictured it as being situated "in front of the sea."[46] Here again, with this single exception, practicality has outweighed any consciousness of housing type as expressive of economic status.

The reasons that eight residents gave for choosing a terrace house are significant in that they combine practicality and social values in ways similar to those cited for a kampung house and its setting. Condominiums may be on the high end of the economic hierarchy but they also represent a "modern" or "new" kind of lifestyle with which many are still uncomfortable. New projects featuring more modestly modern terrace houses are aggressively promoted to the high end of a middle-range market and their spatial features are not too far removed from the easy flow between interior and exterior spaces associated with both kampung houses and urban row houses. Six of the eight respondents who chose terrace houses were women. Their choices may reflect modesty in economic aspiration compared to some of the men, but the reasons they gave were, again, primarily social and practical. Some said that bungalows or high-rise condominiums were too physically and socially isolating – they preferred to be near more people, especially in emergencies or if they ever needed help. The height of high-rises was itself considered a liability; it was too difficult to go up and down and the height itself could even be dangerous, especially for children. Bungalows were too large and hard to clean; some said they did not like going up and down stairs,

even in their own house. Although contemporary kampung houses and terrace houses are both usually double story, they share a common feature in that most activity occurs in a large ground-floor space with easy access to and from a larger social world just outside the door. The familiarity and sociability of these features were what these women valued rather than newness for its own sake or as symbolic of economic status.

In short, practicality, sociability, and (as discussed in the following sections) memories of family and community history, combined with a certain visibility of cultural and religious identity -- all of these contributed to residents' positive appreciation of the houses and housing situation they already had. A 27-year old housewife summed up these concerns when she said that what she liked about her house was that is was "spacious, clean, and decorated with joy to be very lively during the [Muslim] festive season. My late father-in-law used to decorate the house with small gasoline lamps around the outside." Only one respondent declined to initially mention anything that she liked about her house, and here, too, the rationale did not concern socio-economic status. "I don't like this house," she stated frankly. "It's in a flood area."

Residents' positive evaluations of their houses, and their valorization of sociability and setting over material structure, did not mean that there was no room for improvement in all of these dimensions, or that everyone was perfectly content in all respects. Despite the overall satisfaction with their housing situation

expressed by most residents, only 12 respondents (30%) said that there was nothing their house lacked. Desired improvements included features of the house itself (a new roof, new wiring, toilets upstairs, the replacement of rotting wood), but discussions quickly moved to issues beyond the house itself, such as inadequacies of area infrastructure (low water pressure, rusted water mains, clogged drains), a lack of land ("The houses are located very near to each other;" "There is only a small front yard for children to play in"), and financial difficulties in paying monthly expenses, saving for home improvements, or purchasing needed vehicles. These responses again confirm that residents did not consider their houses primarily as discrete objects of consumable exchange or as arenas of conspicuous, competitive consumption.

Attachment to residential space – the place where people lived – extended well beyond the house as a material structure, and the social positives of their living situation far outweighed most material negatives.[47] Regular flooding was a widely shared concern, and many understood the problem to have originated when high-rise flats and factories were constructed nearby without adequate provision for drainage. The severity of these floods was reason enough for one householder to consider moving. For most residents, however, not only did they prefer the type of house they already had, they also said that, if they had to move, they would want to stay in the area. Apart from the problem of flooding (exacerbated, of course, by the trend to enclose a ground floor), the primary reasons why anyone

would consider living elsewhere was that they had kin (most often children) in other places or wanted to return to their "home village" where they were born. One woman said that she would not want to stay because she expected that "too many" high-rise flats would be built in the area. Others said that if they had to move, they would go to housing units they had already purchased elsewhere in anticipation of being evicted. Rather than live there now and in a high-rise, however, they preferred to rent them out so that they could stay in the village. The following section discusses how the housing aesthetic of Kampung Dodol, though not primarily material in the sense of consciousness of economic status, is nevertheless tied to actual structures, places and features of the built environment and how residents see their houses and the place they are located as expressions of Malay identity.

Identity, Place, and the Built Environment

Kampung Dodol is a deeply people-centered place, not primarily defined by consumption or commerce: commercial enterprises and the buildings identified with them are located only at the edges of the village. Even though the area is bisected by a busy road, this road is not visible or audible from most parts of the village: traffic and all but a few large vehicles are likewise pushed away from what *is* most prominent: the mosque and the houses and burial grounds that surround it. Despite years of constant renovation, people also remain the focus of much of the

space inside most houses. With furniture and collections of other objects kept at a minimum, the design emphasis in most houses was on a large expanse of empty floor in the center of the multipurpose main room. This was a space meant to be filled with people, not things (Figure 11). It is here that family and neighbors gather to sit shoulder to shoulder during a *kenduri* (ritual feast), but it is also here where, on ordinary days, a child will unroll a mat on which to do homework, or a husband take a nap after work or dinner. Though used by everyone, this space is the *rumah ibu* (mother house), a term that identifies this central part of the house with women. It is sometimes also colloquially referred to as the *ibu rumah* (the mother of the house), the same term used to designate a female head of household (Gibbs 1987:72). This usage reinforces the association of this space, and, by implication the entire house, with women – yet another instance of the way in which places, spaces and structures are understood primarily in human terms. The enlargement of this room was the goal of most households' more major renovations. It was here where my assistant and I were received and it was where many of the women we visited spent a good part of their day. Accessories would be brought out as needed and laid out on the floor: a baby blanket to change a diaper on, a mat or rug to sit on and fold laundry, a cradle attached to a spring on the ceiling in the center of the room to rock a child to sleep. It was a space that was never really empty. If it was not currently filled with human presence and activity it was a place where memories of them sometimes lingered.

Figure 11

Interiors of Malay Houses In Kampung Dodol

This section discusses how, given such a people-centered conception of space, personal and public identities, both ethnic and religious, are understood and expressed in and though the built residential environment of Kampung Dodol. Did materials and structures matter at all to residents or only the spaces they created? What was it that, despite certain material changes, still made houses and the village itself "Malay"? How did people who were not Malay identify these places and spaces? These questions were pursued though various lines of questions and directed conversations, during which residents indicated the significance of both that which can be publicly seen and that which may be unseen but is known to exist. Among the latter are the memories attached to certain places, the knowledge that certain traditions and ritual practices had been followed, and an awareness and appreciation of a connection to the past and of continuity through time and change. Also at work was a certain demographic consciousness in which what made something Malay was understood, at least in part, in terms of critical population mass, language use, or -- in comparison to what was not Malay -- the traditions and practices of others.

Early on in every household visit (in all three neighborhoods) respondents were asked to identify their own ethnicity. They were then asked if they considered their house and their neighborhood to be a _____ house and a ____ neighborhood, and why, with the blank filled in with the ethnicity they had previously cited. Questions were then asked about whether they thought a stranger

could make the same identification, and if so, how, as a way to ascertain what they considered to be the publicly expressive aspects, if any, of their ethnicity.

Reasons for a house being Malay were not confined to purely visual features of structure or décor, as I quickly found out, although these were significant. At times it was initially difficult to get residents to talk about their houses in strictly physical terms, but once they did, their replies indicated that they considered certain materials and design features to be Malay and publicly identifiable as such for reasons that included the following:

> "It is Malay because of the design, the wood used, and the pillar ("*tiang seri*")[48] Upstairs is made of wood and there is cement downstairs. The house is built without foundation."[49]
>
> "It looks like a Malay house – a wooden house. There are stairs outside."
>
> "Because there is a veranda, the house is wood, the design of the roof, the windows and the stairs."
>
> "Because of the way the house was built – the kitchen and the rooms – all according to Malay design."

Here, visual features are mentioned that are typical of the Malay house as a type but no one feature is singled out as a defining characteristic. Wood is an identifiably Malay material but so are other features, such as a veranda, outdoor stairs, and kitchen and roof design (whose forms are assumed to be self-evidently Malay). Note that in the first statement, the "cement downstairs," a feature only recently common to what I am calling a new Malay vernacular style, is clearly cited as something that makes the house Malay. However, the speaker then

clarifies that the house is "built without foundation" – and identification by contrast since having a foundation, and sometimes even a ground floor, are widely understood as Chinese ideas, as the following statement clarifies:

> "The shape of the upstairs is a Malay design. The shape of the downstairs is a Chinese type."

"Types" of houses, or certain features of them, are strongly and often very specifically associated with different ethnicities, but there is no opprobrium attached to their cross-ethnic use, nor, at least in village circles, is there any discourse of ethnically specific design "purity." A new form or use of materials, whatever its origin, can become "traditional," and be considered to have an equal amount of ethnic and/or regional specificity as an earlier "pure" form. One resident (the middle aged contractor), said the style of his house was specifically "Penang Malay" and he tied the incorporation of cement on the ground floor to a definite ethnic preference:

> "It is a Penang Malay house because Malays like houses with wood upstairs and cement downstairs and it is multipurpose. Malays have liked this type of house for a long time."

Certain people are definitely associated with certain types of houses but such ethnic specificity was usually framed as a matter of preference:

> "The house was built according to Malay design. Usually Chinese will build a Chinese type of house, and Indians will build an Indian type of house."
>
> "This is Malay style. The Chinese like their houses on the ground, the Malays like to have an upper floor."

This conception of preference infers that there is no hard and fast rule and that people are free to pursue what they "like" – a position that, I maintain, underscores the value people see in the expression of a sense of autonomy as a baseline, as far as housing is concerned, for the expression of both individual and group identities.

For residents of the kampung, architecture was not destiny. House form and home design features could also be ways to understand, incorporate, and express, not just identity, but difference. In the absence of other clearly identifiable structural or material architectural features, decorations and accessories can easily be added as ways to publicly customize a house to the identities of its current occupants and publicly distinguish them from others:

> "There are no signs such as the [Hindu] Indian leaves [strung over the doorway (see Figure 17, bottom)][50] and the Chinese temples [shrines]. This is really a Malay house."
>
> "The way a Malay house is decorated is different from Chinese, and Hindu houses [where there are leaves]."
>
> "[A stranger could see it is Malay] from the design of the house. A Chinese house has a small temple, and an Indian house has leaves. Both are different from a Malay house."
>
> "It's different because there are Quran verses and that is what is different from other ethnic houses."

In all of these conversations people and their expressions of faith were not very distant from residents' discussions and descriptions of materials and forms. In many cases *who* built something was equally, if not more important than exactly

what it was they had built. Both contributed to what made a house Malay, and both were often mentioned in the same breath:

> "The house is wood and has the style and features of a Malay house. It was built by my ancestor. You can tell from afar that the form, especially the roof, is Malay."

Here, that which was publicly seen was combined with personal knowledge of what only household members were likely to know: that a departed family member had originally built the house.

Knowledge of a certain continuity of connection to the past was something that contributed to the embodiment or expression of one's identity in a house. Much of this unseen content involved the expression of faith and a knowledge that certain original materials or design features that might no longer be prominent or readily evident to outsiders continued to have meaning for householders. A house could thus be a way for its inhabitants to come to terms with and understand both continuity and change through time. The following is an example:

> "The design of this house is more towards modern design but there are still features showing that this is a Malay house even though they are not prominent – the toilet is not facing the Kaabah and the basic pillar (*tiang seri*) still exists."

This statement is significant for a number of reasons. While opposing modern to Malay design it nevertheless does not postulate a strict dichotomy between the two. Rather, it admits the possibility that a house could be both. That which is specifically Malay – and Muslim – may no longer be prominent visually but is

maintained though a material symbolic connection: the *tiang seri* or main pillar of the house. This central pillar is thought to be the abode of the house spirit (*semangat rumah*), a Malay belief with pre-Islamic origins (Carsten 1995:111). Mention that this pillar still exists, despite material changes to the house, likely expresses knowledge, and possibly satisfaction, that certain rituals were conducted when the house was first built whose significance continues into the present through this material connection.[51] At the same time, awareness of respectful orientation to the Kaabah, Islam's holiest shrine, is mentioned first: an indication of the perhaps greater significance that the house was built and continues to be inhabited by good Muslims. Kampung Dodol may be something of an ethnic enclave but the imaginary of its residents is far from being provincial or static – it is well equipped for change and is expansive spatially and temporally, as these statements attest.

It is people who make places and what they do contributes to making a house Malay, and publicly so. Some residents said that their house was Malay for reasons that combined visual features with the language they spoke:

> "From conversations with the residents and from the shape and design, you can tell that this is a Malay house."
>
> "We talk in Malay, display verses from the Quran, and there is a prayer room."

Likewise, for a least one Indian-Muslim, his house was also Indian-Muslim

> "because of the languages[52] spoken in the house, especially Indian language [Tamil]."

Another resident who self-identified as Indian-Muslim, said that his house was Indian-Muslim as well "because of the language used at home and our skin color."[53] – yet another instance of the identification of a house with the people who live in it and their activities.[54] Only when pressed did either of these two Indian-Muslim men mention any visual feature of their houses. House design elements that are specifically Indian-Muslim are generally less well known than specifically Malay features,[55] and there appeared to be few, if any, examples of these in the village. Nevertheless, nothing prevented these men from going on to mention how their houses did publicly and visually express their own identities. Significantly, however, the identity they chose to mention here was religious and not ethnic: they both mentioned visual features that were Muslim – the common ground of most people in the village – and not anything that was specifically Indian-Muslim. The first said a stranger could identify the house as Muslim because of "the display of verses from the Quran and a picture of the Kaaba." The second man said that "from the outside you can tell it's a Muslim house," but he repeated what he had already told me -- that "when you listen to the language spoken you know the ethnicity." For this man, the outside appearance of his house, which others might see as Malay, was for him an expression of identity at a larger level of social categorization in which he could share: the house was

Muslim and not specifically Malay. Yet, at the same time ethnicity was also important – hence the second mention of language use as a specifically ethnic identifier.

A third Indian-Muslim respondent, a teenager, sidestepped the entire issue somewhat but said that a stranger could identify his house as Indian-Muslim because "the neighboring houses are all Indian-Muslim." – implying that the stranger would assume a social similarity based on physical proximity.[56] The need to "see" one's self in one's surroundings in one way or another, and for others to see that as well (not always through exclusively visual means), was strong in these cases. Women were by no means less than primary players in this process. One woman mentioned both the display of religious verses and the apparel of its residents' as distinguishing factors that made her house recognizably both Malay and Muslim:

> "Inside the house there are verses from the Quran, and the residents wear *baju kurung* [a type of Malay women's garment]"

Her mention of a specifically woman's garment (her own) indicates a sense of her own, specifically female participation in the visible presentation of identity.

Consciousness of demographic difference, different levels and means of identification, and a located awareness of certain critical population masses informed many other replies to my questions. For many Malay residents, not only

their house but the kampung as a whole was Malay because that's what people were here. Among the reasons a house was Malay were:

> "because everyone here is Malay and this is a Malay neighborhood"
>
> "because this is *wakaf* land and everyone is Malay. There are no other races."
>
> "because this is *wakaf* land and all are Muslims
>
> "This house is built on *wakaf* land so people of other religions can't build houses here."
>
> "because it is inside a Malay/Muslim kampung"
>
> "because it is inside a Malay village and there are no Chinese, just Indian-Muslims."

Some of these statements were not, in fact, true. Not everyone in the village was Malay, although everyone, except the Chinese household, was Muslim. There were Indian-Muslims who chose not to pass as Malay, but it is possible that they were not personally known to some respondents. For some people it did not matter whether there was some diversity, the kampung was still Malay. For others it did matter. Only five of the 40 people interviewed said it was not a Malay kampung, and three of these were themselves Malay. An Indian-Muslim said it was not a Malay village but "an Islamic village," and a young man of Yemeni and Achenese ancestry said it was not Malay "because there are other ethnicities here." The consensus among the very few Malays who said the village was not Malay

was that the presence of even some other ethnicities meant that the village itself was not Malay.

For one such resident, the kampung's ethnic diversity was also a marker of time: The area "used to be all Malays," she said, "but now there are Indian-Muslims." For all the other Malays, however, it was clearly a Malay village, perhaps because the presence of Indian-Muslims did not matter or because they themselves had Indian ancestors, or perhaps because Indians who were not Hindu could easily be considered Malay since they were fellow Muslims. One Malay woman who said it was a Malay kampung identified the land itself as Malay while at the same time explicitly excluding another group whose divergence from her own identity was even greater than that between Malays and Indian Muslims but who were particularly prominent everywhere else in Penang. The village was Malay, she said, "because this is Malay land and no Chinese live here."[57] Such strictly exclusionary sentiments were rarely expressed to me, and I do not have reason to believe that they were commonly held, but they do reflect the sentiment of at least one other woman, already quoted, who said that what she liked about the village was that "everyone here is Malay, so it is easy to talk to each other. We don't [have to] mix with other people."

Mental Maps

Kampung Dodol was relatively homogeneous ethnically, with most people considering themselves, their houses, and the village itself to be Malay. Some of the multiple meanings of this identification – meanings that are social and material, seen and unseen -- have already been discussed. Apart from being "Malay" however, what else was significant for residents about where and how they lived? The following discussion dovetails with some of the issues already presented, but it attempts to elucidate with analysis of a different kind of data some additional aspects of the spatial "mental maps" of residents – their views of what was particularly prominent or significant in their environment and the ways in which these contribute to the meaning of their everyday residential space.

In the decades since Kevin Lynch's (1964) seminal work "The Image of the City," geographers, cognitive psychologists, and theorists of space have sought ways to objectify subjective perceptions of space for the purpose of analysis. Contributing to spatial perception, a sense of orientation within space, and the creation of meaning in physical form are such factors as patterns of familiar use, visual and other sensory cues (such as sound and smell), and linguistic media (such as place names). In recent decades analysts have subsumed many of these factors within the blanket term "mental map" which refers to both states of mind among those studied and the product of a particular research technique (see, for example, Gould and White 1974; Downs and Stea 1977). As a methodological

device, respondents are asked to sketch maps of the physical features of a particular environment, which are then analyzed, together with verbal responses, as approximations or representations of their own "mental maps" or subjective spatial perceptions of that area (see Pocock and Hudson 1978:59).[58] These representations often deal, in a very schematic way, only with what is especially "prominent." Both visual and verbal responses elicited from residents of Kampung Dodol are discussed here. My analysis is not meant to be indicative of how anyone "sees the world" in any comprehensive sense, nor is it meant to be a contribution to a literature on this methodology. Instead, I am most concerned with the significance and certain implications of what it was that residents chose to mention or draw and sometimes with how these were expressed. Verbal responses discussed include the various names with which residents identified the village and responses to questions about what was prominent about their houses. The visual responses discussed consist of five maps drawn by different residents (Figures 6 through 10).[59] The significance of memory in spatial perception and meaning will be discussed in a separate section following this one.

Stated most generally at the outset, the significance and implications I see in the responses I got are as follows. Residents' spatial imaginaries were not bound by many externally defined borderlines, administrative boundaries between territories, or even by very many physical barriers or divisions at all. Instead, they were expansive and inclusive. While sometimes being acutely aware of physical

and social difference, they were not generally concerned with any boundaries between them. Spaces and places were defined more by significant centers than by borders. Houses were prominent or significant in and for their setting – natural, social, religious -- and not as discrete, exchangeable objects. Representative of a definite type of which it was but one example, each house's unique individuality was visually distinct, not because it was a site for the accumulation of any prominent items of consumer "home improvement," but because of its basic form, size or, simply its color.

Two basic "mental map" type questions, asking what were the boundaries of the kampung and what is was called, yielded interesting results, the first because it was a question that did not "work," and the second because of the variety of responses it generated. Though residents were nearly unanimous in considering the place where they lived a Malay kampung, most were not particularly cognizant of its boundaries or the actual property lines of the *wakaf* lands on which it was situated – these were not of much concern. This was not a case of the articulation of an urban space by ethnicity in which boundaries or markers between social groups can sometimes be very clearly defined, understood to be dividing lines, or at times defended. Many residents could not specify any boundaries, and the question generated little interest in the form of additional comments. Based on the course of the rest of our conversations, and on the way residents drew maps for me, the basic spatial motifs that defined the area had more to do with spaces

radiating outward from prominent features and differences between these features than with any borders or perimeter lines containing a space. The variety of responses I got when asking the name of the kampung confirmed for me that, while differences between spaces or places may be recognizable and clearly articulated, the boundaries between them were not always significant. This way of seeing space had certain implications in terms of the organizing rationale of a new residents' association, as will presently be explained.

Most people I met in Penang, including non-Muslims, knew immediately where I was going when I said that one of my study areas was Kampung Dodol, but less than half (15) of the people I spoke to who lived there initially told me that their village had that name. The remainder said that it was called either "Kampung Masjid Hashim Yahya," or, more simply, "Kampung Masjid" – responses that might indicate the greater importance of the mosque than an occupation (the production and sale of *dodol*, which took place decades ago) as an identifier. But there is more to the story than this. Piecing together several responses from residents who provided further details, it appears that "Kampung Dodol" had originally and informally referred only to the area east of Perak Road, (See map in Figure 4) which had been separately endowed and administered as part of the Kapitan Kling *wakaf*, named after a mosque some distance away in the inner city. Over time, however, the name has come to refer to a combined area incorporating different *wakaf* properties on both sides of the road. In citing the name of their

village some residents were referring to this larger total area, but others preferred to cite the name of their specific *wakaf* – the Hashim Yahya Mosque *wakaf*, were most of the interviews were conducted. The *wakaf* east of the road is smaller than that of the Hashim Yahya *wakaf*, has fewer houses, and there is no mosque on that side of the street. So why did its name -- "Kampung Dodol" – come to refer to both to both sides of the street at all? One would think that the logic would go in the other direction, with the name of the mosque – the focus of community for residents on both sides -- becoming the appellation of the larger, combined area. I can postulate several reasons that, considered together, make a good case for the inclusion of non-visual, social, and linguistic factors in the make-up of a person's "mental map." In the case of Kampung Dodol, these reasons include an alternative form of administrative jurisdiction over land organized by local residents according to their own criteria – in this case residential contiguity – and not any external, officially recognized boundaries.

Residents living east of Perak Road (the original "Kampung Dodol") worship at the Hashim Yahya mosque but they do not live on Hashim Yahya wakaf, so perhaps the rationale was that it would have been incorrect for the name of the wider territory to reference the name of only one particular *wakaf* property within it. Other factors may have been knowledge that the name "Kampung Dodol" was better known outside the village, or perhaps that "Kampung Dodol Lane" was the only officially named street in the village that was labeled as such

with a sign. But a more likely reason is consciousness that the original Kampung Dodol side of the street was the location of a very localized center of administration power and influence: this is where the headman lived. The prominence of this location and its name was clarified for me when a man who lived on the Hashim Yahya side identified the entire village as "Kampung Dodol," but added, tellingly, that "Kampung Masjid is not quite noticeable. The area of Kampung Masjid is under the area of Kampung Dodol."

Officially, in terms of the administration of *wakaf* properties by the state religious council, this statement was not true; but it was true in terms of a new organizational structure that residents on both sides of the road (consisting of two different *wakaf* trusts) had recently joined together to set up on their own. The "Kampung Dodol" side was more noticeable because this was where the residence of the headman, one of the founders of the new association and its current chairman, was located. As previously mentioned, this man was at least the second generation of his family to hold the informal title of headman and he lived here in what was perhaps the largest house in the area, built by his father. This man spoke from his home on a weekly radio talk show, allowed his house and grounds to be used for a number of community activities, and wielded a considerable amount of very local influence. He was also instrumental in forming the kampung's first formal residents' association and was its chairman. Called the "Kampung Dodol Residents' Association," the new organization he had been instrumental in

founding covered a territory that cut across and brought together the two *wakaf* territories on either side of the road. From the official standpoint of the state religious council, these two trusts had been administered separately and differently. It is likely this locally formed association was what the speaker referred to by the statement that Kampung Masjid was "under" Kampung Dodol. This new association was not usurping or superseding the administration of *wakaf* by the state religious council, it was acting independently on its own and for other purposes (the goals of which will be explained in a later section). The name "Kampung Dodol" was likely chosen for the new association not just because that was the headman's side of the road and it was a popular name, recognized even by outsiders, but also because it was not the name of *either* of the wakaf properties, which were known by the names of the mosques to which they were attached. (The *wakaf* on the headman's side was part of the Kapitan Kling wakaf – the name was that of a mosque some distance away). The name "Kampung Dodol" was thus inclusive of a wider territory than either wakaf, better known to outsiders, and reflected the values villagers placed on residential contiguity and a sense of local autonomy. An example, perhaps, of a mental map at work, the choice of this name for the new association can be considered an effort to assure that space is locally people-centered and not externally boundary-defined.

A mental map commonly concerns prominent features of the built or natural environment used for purposes of spatial orientation. One resident of

Kampung Dodol remarked that "all Malay houses are alike." How, then, within a winding network of un-named paths, could people tell where they were? The answer is that there was great individual variety within the type. The practice of self-building meant that each house was visually different. This individuality, however, did not involve the competitive display of consumption. Asked what was prominent about their houses, I had expected to hear responses detailing an aesthetic appreciation of certain specific material features or individual distinction achieved though items of home improvement. Instead, many responses dovetailed with what I have already discussed regarding perceptions of house and village. For some, age, size, and the fact that the house was a traditional Malay type were prominent features:

> "It's a traditional house and the smallest house in this village."
>
> "It's a Malay house and has an old design."

For most, however, details of setting, either natural or religious, were what individualized their houses:

> "There's a river behind the house, a drain in front, and it's the third house from the front."
>
> "It's situated behind the cemetery."
>
> "There is a mango tree in front of the house. It's a wooden house."

For one resident, setting embraced a larger territory, in which he considered his type of house to be somewhat unusual -- a consciousness of difference on a larger scale than the village itself:

> "It's a kampung house in the town area."

In addition to setting, color was often cited as a prominent material feature:

> "There's a green fence and it's the second house from the front."

> "It's near the cemetery and there is a red zinc fence in front of the house."

> "The sign with the number of the house and the color of the awning -- yellow and blue. It's near the mosque."

> "There are red stairs and a mango tree."

In the following response, a prominent feature was explained as the result of an accident:

> "It's spacious and the only house with fences. Trees fell after the flood so that is why the fences were built."

This last comment was indeed apologetic about the presence of fences, which the speaker imagined to be unique to her house. (They were not.) Fences are sometimes taken as the sign of a lack of hospitability, and popular discourse has it that the open sociability and communal security of a kampung renders fences unnecessary as well as undesirable. The presence of a fence would then be a memorable aberration that would distinguish a particular house.[60]

What all of these responses have in common is that, on the whole, residents did not think of their houses as discrete, consumable objects to which they had

incrementally added value in any kind of visual status competition. Home improvement was not what made a house prominent or memorable and structures were inseparable from their natural, social, and religious setting. Individuality could still be achieved but though very modest means, such as planting a tree or through color. It was features such as these, combined with a house's relationship to what was beyond it – a river, the mosque or the cemetery – that were residents' primary spatial guideposts in the village.

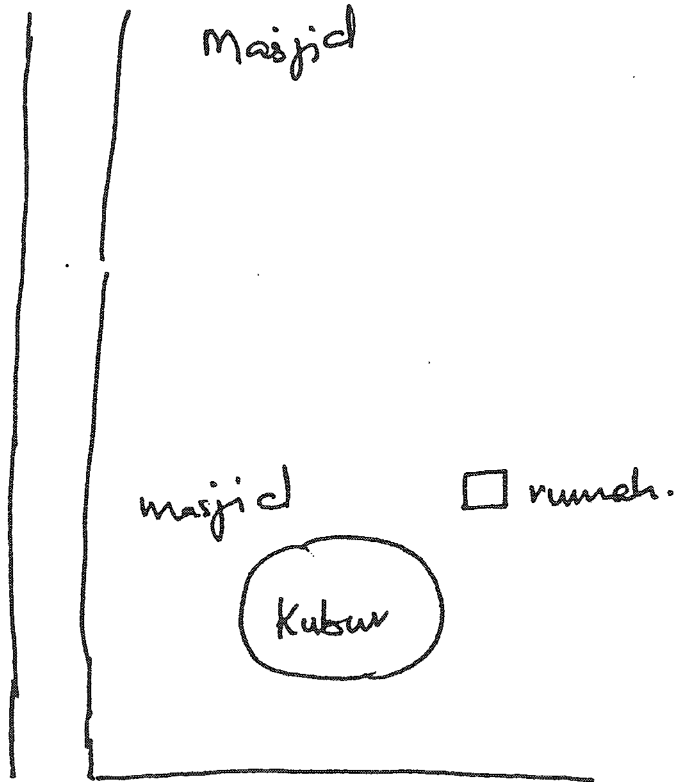
When asked to draw the location of their house in relationship to any prominent features nearby, the results confirmed that the two mosques and the cemetery were especially significant, followed by roads and rivers which were drawn much less frequently and often given less prominence when they were. Not every resident interviewed drew a map, and some claimed they were unable to, but five of the more interesting results are chosen for brief discussion here. Each of them confirms Pocock and Hudson's observation that city dwellers often orient themselves by conspicuous features rather than by cardinal points of the compass and that the features cited are often experiential rather than objective -- they include such things as significant centers and the primary path leading away from the home (Pocock and Hudson 1978:62). None of the maps discussed here are oriented with north at the top of the page (the cartographic convention in contemporary Malaysia); greater significance is generally indicated by greater

size; and the results confirm though visual media what was also expressed verbally -- that boundaries are not much of a concern.

Map 1 (Figure 12), depicts the primary features of the kampung at their most basic. The author's house is depicted relative to two mosques and the cemetery is circled to emphasize it as a center and not as an indication of its boundaries. Perak Road is indicated to the left of these four elements but is not named, which perhaps indicates its lesser importance. It is not a boundary so much as a linear element that frames more important elements – what Lynch calls an "edge." The top of the page is oriented toward South, which is the direction one would be facing when traveling on the one-way Perak Road which is the way most people approach the kampung. Map 2 (Figure 13) gives additional prominence to the two mosques by naming each but gives even less prominence to the road they are on. Parallel to the road is a river and the only other element in the space between them is the indication of a housing project looming on the horizon off its banks and drawn even larger than either mosque. This is the type of housing that many residents felt would eventually overcome the area. The author of Map 3 (Figure 14) includes one mosque (the one at which most people worship) but places her house in the exact center of an area marked by Perak Road (now named) and the river on one axis, and the cemetery and another housing project (labeled "flat") on the other. Lines along the first three axes are again, more for emphasis than an indication of any solid boundaries – they do not meet to contain

Figure 12

Map 1
Drawn by a Resident of Kampung Dodol

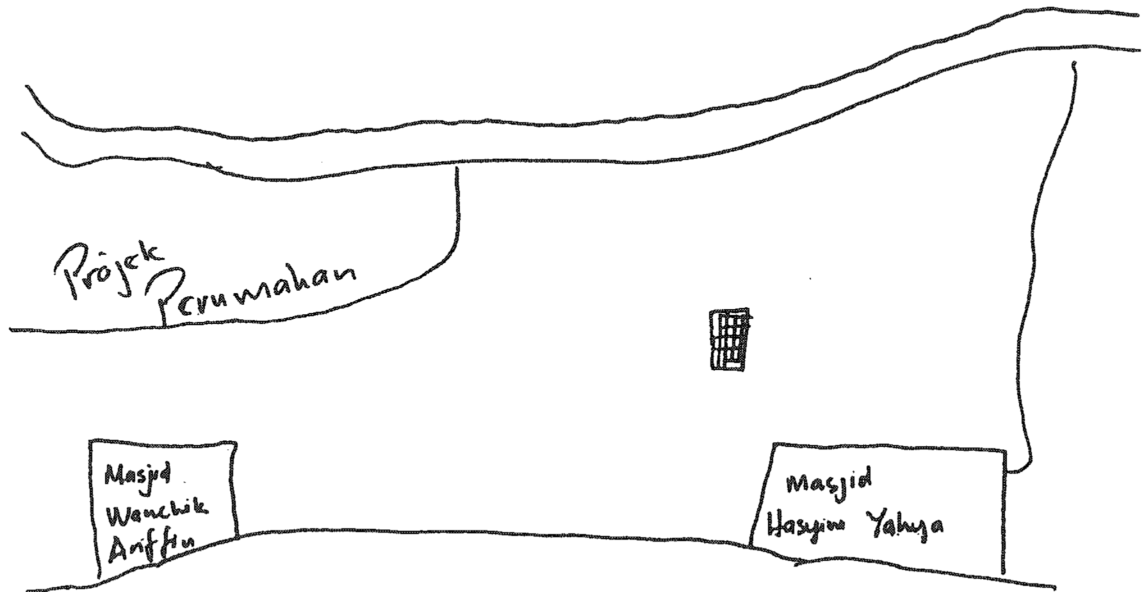


Key:

masjid **– mosque**
kubur **– cemetery**
rumah **-- house**

Figure 13

Map 2
Drawn by a Resident of Kampung Dodol

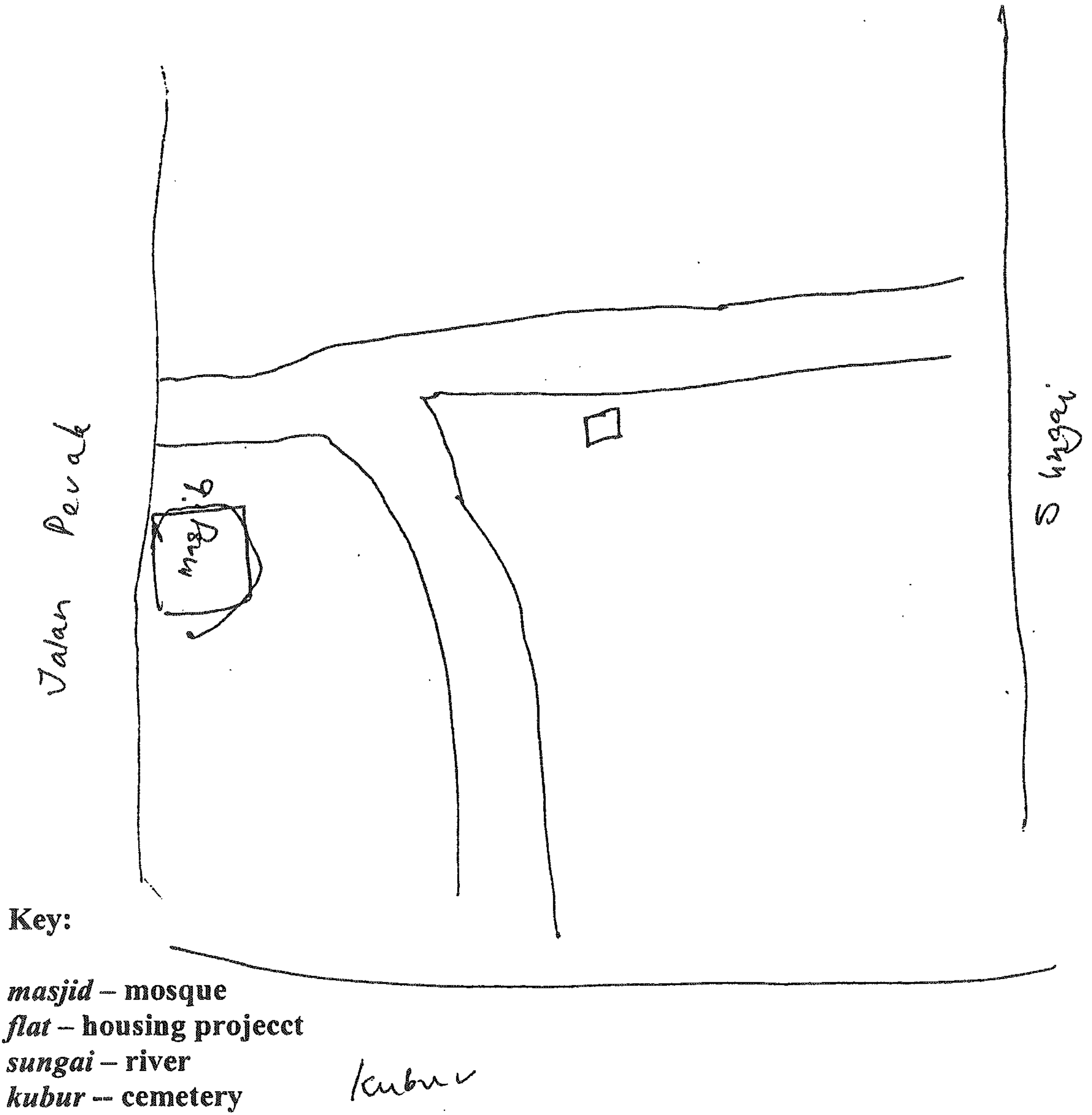


Key:

masjid **– mosque**
projek perumahan **– housing project**

Figure 14

Map 3
Drawn by a Resident of Kampung Dodol



Key:

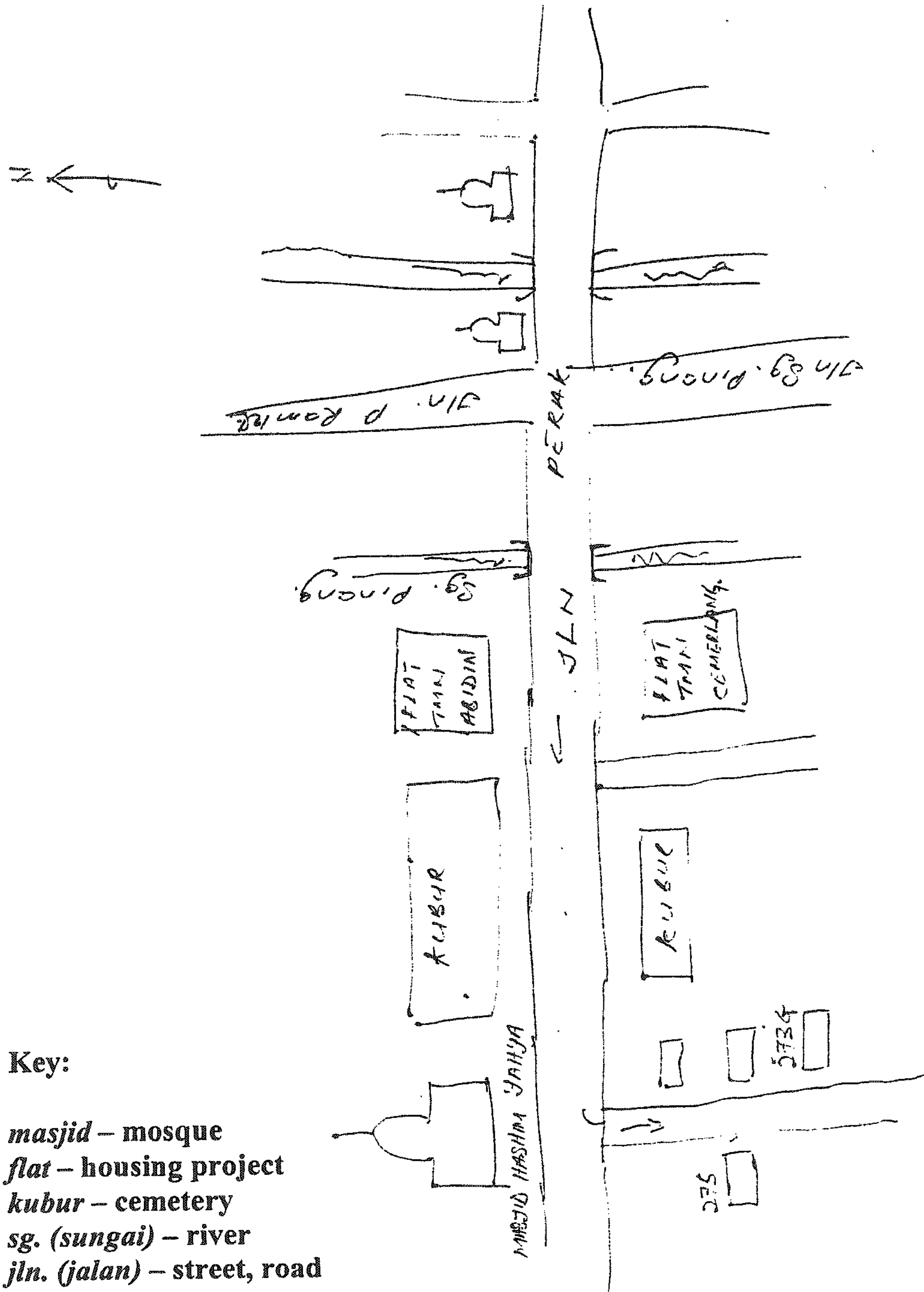
masjid **– mosque**
flat **– housing projecct**
sungai **– river**
kubur **-- cemetery**

the space inside. The largest element indicated is a winding forked path leading from her house to the mosque, the cemetery and the river but not to the housing project (labeled "flat" here, in English) – a likely indication that this housing project is not a major part of her social world.

After the two mosques and the cemetery, the river (and/or its tributary) was the next most commonly mentioned feature. Rivers were primary sources of water for kampungs before the advent of piped water supply and many Malay kampungs throughout the country were situated alongside them. The tributary of the Penang River that was nearest to Kampung Dodol had recently taken on a new significance, however, due to the increased frequency of its flooding since the building of the nearby housing projects. Map 4 (Figure 15) is the most detailed sketch that was produced. It details the location of the tributary that is the main source of the area's flooding as well as the main branch of the river, where two additional mosques line its banks. These mosques (un-named on the map) and the village's own Hashim Yahya mosque are the end points along the centralized axis of Perak Road which, though prominent, is given a moderate size, as are the two new housing projects (flats) named on either side of it. The cemetery areas are larger than either the road or the housing projects, however, and the mosques are drawn with decorative cupolas – indications of the greater importance of burial grounds and mosques than roads or housing projects. This and the following map add an additional element not seen in the maps previously discussed: the location

Figure 15

Map 4
Drawn by a Resident of Kampung Dodol



Key:

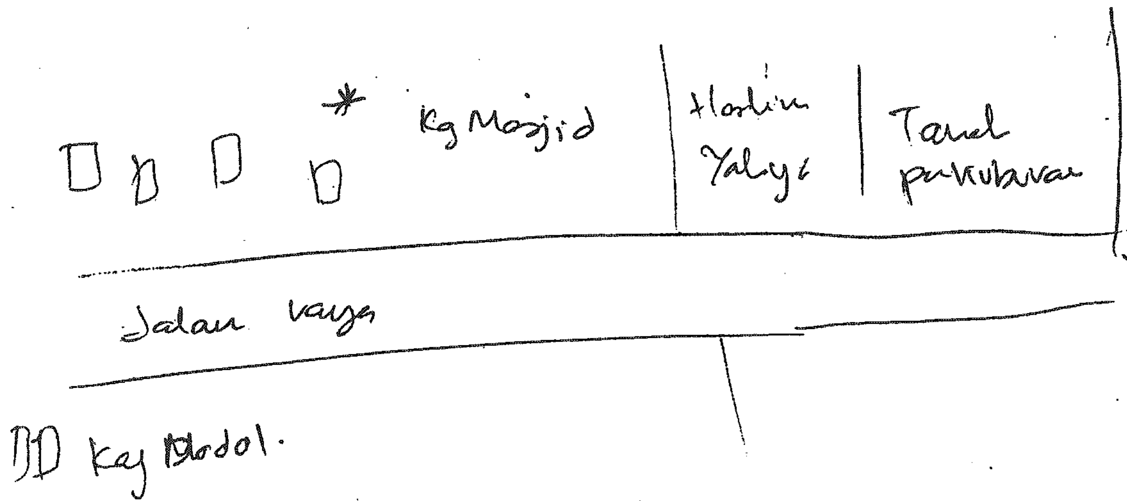
masjid – mosque
flat – housing project
kubur – cemetery
sg. (sungai) – river
jln. (jalan) – street, road

of the headman's house. The respondent's house is located in relation to both the headman's house, set within a large yard across the path, and two other similarly drawn houses. This is also the only map to indicate a reference to North at the top of the page, but this direction is incorrect and is actually West. My interpretation here is that the author knew the cartographic convention of having north at the top of the page but a more significant, experiential orientation overrode accuracy according to any external standard of representation: the map is oriented from his and the headman's side of the road looking toward the front of the Hashim Yahya mosque.

Map 5 (Figure 16) has a similar orientation but was drawn by someone living across the street from the headman very near to the mosque. Houses in this map are indicated as similar rectangles somewhat indistinguishable from each other, but the author's house is indicated with a star. The headman's house is indicated with two such rectangles -- as if to indicate it is the same type but larger. This map is significant in that it clearly labels one side of the road as "Kampung Masjid" and the other as "Kampung Dodol" but seems to imagine village space from the vantage point of the latter as a foregrounded baseline. It also minimizes the importance of the road as a dividing line between these two areas by calling it simply "*Jalan raya*" ("Large Road"), and not by its official municipal name. Apart from citing Perak Road and a few other named streets, only a very few respondents ever mentioned or sketched public civic features (examples were

Figure 16

Map 5
Drawn by a Resident of Kampung Dodol



Key:

kg. (kampung) **– village**
tanah perkuburan **– burial ground**
jalan raya **– large road**

traffic lights, the *takraw* [61] court in the middle of the kampung, fire hydrants, the fire station). Even fewer included any commercial properties (examples were a mini-market; a shop selling paint). Consciousness of ethnic difference was not completely absent but only one person mentioned any feature that was recognizably Chinese – a Chinese primary school located just off the next biggest intersection on Perak Road and past the territory of the kampung and the two mosques. In seeing things from their own perspectives, residents often minimized, or at least attempted to put aside from centrality, certain features of their environment that impinged on what they considered most important.

Memory, Place, and Heritage

Contributing to the distinction of houses, places and features of the built environment in the village were the memories they embody. These memories were additional, non-material ways in which houses and places could be personalized and distinction achieved in the midst of similitude. As in other aspects of villagers' understandings of the kampung as a place to live, the content of these memories was often deeply social and not confined to a single individual's knowledge about other individuals. The difference between social and individual actions that are memorable seems to be the rationale for many villagers' affirmation that Kampung Dodol had heritage but not historical significance as a Malay village. The distinction between the two will be explained a bit later.

Residents valued long-term continuity with the past, and their perceptions of their houses were filled with memories of people and events. As has often been noted and theorized, places and structures within the built environment can provide tangible connections to the past that can enable social memory (Casey 1987, 1993, 1996; Connerton 1989). This is the sense in which many residents felt their houses were significant. Most residents (27 out of the 40 interviewed) were aware of how old their houses were -- and the ages they gave were between six and over a hundred years old -- but age in itself was not what was significant to them, or what they meant by heritage. Specific houses were often important because of the memories they evoked of people who had lived there. The elderly muezzin who lived alone and visited his wife's grave daily said his house was important "because of the memories of my late wife – that's why it's so important to me. It's heritage." As has already been mentioned, the continued presence of his wife (or her memory) was why he did not want to sell his house or move. In many other cases this memorial value (a form of use value) referred not just to individuals but specifically to their social activities. At the same time, however, houses were also valued as sites of on-going social or religious activities or as places of current community service.

The social memories attached to houses often referred, not just to people who had passed, but also to their activities that specifically pertained to the expression of faith and religious education. One resident said that "when my father was alive this is the place where the village children recited and learned the Quran." Another resident

remembered that "before the mosque was re-built this house was used as a *surau*" [prayer room]. Sometimes it was very specific events, important to the community, that were remembered along with the principal people involved. A young housewife said that her house was important because "my late father-in-law was the person who urged the state government to tar, for the first time, the paths inside this village." She also mentioned that "during the worst flood and heavy rain in 1991, reporters gathered at this house to record all the facts because this house was the one that was affected the worst by the flood" – a very localized form of social memory, specific tying an event to a particular place.

Others cited a more generalized sense of the past that their houses represented, and explicitly stated the value of temporal continuity. A taxi driver declared:

> "This is an heirloom house (*rumah pusaka*) and many generations have lived here. This house has heritage value. We don't want to sell the house because it has been handed down by the older generations to us."

The value of continuity did not just extend to the past -- it had everything to do with the future and was seen as relevant to succeeding generations. Another man, a factory worker with three young daughters, cited the importance of his house as a type that was fast disappearing. His statement is an example of what I have called "demographic consciousness" applied to architecture. He said his house was important

> "because the number of Malay houses has been decreasing -- [they] have been torn down to build flats. So it is very important for this house to exist for the next generation. If there are no more Malay houses, how will the

> next Malay generation, especially after 2020,[62] know about Malay houses?"

For this man, the heritage education of youth, and not just material development, was an important concern. The value of temporal continuity embodied in the Malay house as a type was something important for future generations to know.

The sense of the past and the memories that a house evoked did not depend on how a house looked today, nor was the significance of memory confined to the elderly. With site often more important than structure, memories tied to places and not necessarily things were what was passed on to succeeding generations. One man clearly distinguished between his house itself and its importance as a site in this regard:

> "This house doesn't have any historical value, but this site has historical value. Years ago an imam used to live here. He was a religious guru to the villagers. He lived upstairs [when] there were no rooms downstairs. I heard this story from my father. He is eighty years old."

In this case, the legacy of having had an important person live in the house still clung to its location through time, despite structural changes to the building. Above all it was the memory of people and their activities that was valued as extending through time -- and not so much the materiality or any detail of the medium through which they were evoked.

Residents valued the past but they were not nostalgic. The past was still present in their lives; it was not distant and lost. Houses were deemed important not just for the memories they evoked but also as centers for on-going social

activities -- the stuff, perhaps, of future generations' memories. Again, much of the concern here was with social action, education, and the expression of faith and it is these that were often highlighted over and above individuals and their activities. One resident said that his house was important

> "because many activities are done around the front yard – such as meetings of the residents' society. . . . I'm [also] an UMNO[63] member and a lot of activities are held at this house, such as meetings. . . . When there is a flood villagers will gather here or at the mosque because this is higher ground. When there is a family problem, the villagers will come here. I have done a lot for the benefit of the community, such as [making available] the computer inside my house."

Another resident's current activities served a wider area than that of the immediate kampung. She said her house was important because

> "This is a place for learning and reciting the Quran. A few of the villagers and also people from the Jelutong flats come by in the evening and the morning to recite the Quran, learn Arabic, and practice writing Jawi."[64]

The current muezzin perhaps summed it up by saying his house was important "as part of the community. We help each other just like a big family."

Although most residents knew that their houses were old, age in itself did not mean that they considered them to have any historical significance. Most, however, said that both their houses -- and the kampung as a whole -- had heritage importance. As one resident put it, "This house has no historical value, just heritage value." The difference seemed to lie in what they meant by "history." Although most residents were well informed about their own families' histories and various aspects of a very localized social history -- which the built

environment helped them remember -- for some it seemed that history itself was reserved for truly famous people doing important things in a larger arena. This perception was confirmed by responses to the question whether there were any historical monuments, buildings or sites in the area.

Residents were equally divided on this question, with half saying "no" and the other half "yes." Among the latter, some mentioned the cemetery and the two mosques in a general sense but, significantly, most mentioned something associated with a person who was widely famous as a historical figure, even outside the immediate area: the graves of Dato Keramat and Tok Guru (important Muslim religious figures in the history of early Penang) within the village burial grounds or -- at a further distance away -- the house of P. Ramlee, Malaysia's famous film star. "Heritage," on the other hand, was something that was closer to home -- and it seemed to mean social, cultural, or religious importance or significance in a more familiar, everyday sense. It was often attached to people and places with which there was some kind of personal connection but whose significance extended beyond any individual. Houses were thought to have heritage value for the reasons already discussed. Reasons cited for the kampung as a whole having heritage value included the special status of the land as *wakaf*, an assertion that the first branch of UMNO was established there, and the fame of the village's production of *dodol* (which only the oldest residents could directly

remember). All of these were either group activities involving a social identity or things that continued to have social implications into the present.

In general, heritage meant a sense of community whose social past – linked to a sense of place -- continued to be relevant to both the present and the future. History, on the other hand, usually involved notable individuals and specific events well known beyond any single community. As such, history was somewhat less personally felt in the form of a social memory specifically tied to a particular locality than was heritage. Though specifically linked to very definite localities, Kampung Dodol was thus one example, among other possible examples elsewhere, of "heritage;" but it was not uniquely "historic."

Conclusion: A New Organization

As the previous sections have shown, residents of Kampung Dodol valued the spaces constituted by both their houses and the village itself largely because they had a certain moral content. This moral content was not confined to significant focal points explicitly defined as sacred such as the mosque and burial grounds but was embedded in the residential space of everyday life. Houses were not generally or primarily thought of as investments or objects of material exchange, as end products of the incremental accumulation of material "home improvements," or as sites for the consumption of consumer goods. Despite the de-emphasis of any strictly material aesthetic, the meaning and appreciation of

houses and living situations among residents was nevertheless intimately tied to both the built environment, specific structures within it, and a specific locality. Residents valued that both their own houses and the village itself were Malay and that this identification also entailed the expression of certain values. Structure was inseparable from setting, and the material and social fabrics of the kampung were understood as deeply intertwined. By way of summary, this section discusses how such a spatialized conception of value and the perception that space has moral content provided much of the rationale for the goals and activities of the Kampung Dodol Residents Association.

The immediate impetus for the formation of this association was to organize locally to address the rise of certain problems in the kampung. These problems were seen as material, social and sometimes a combination of both. The discussion here shows how the spatial imagination at work in this association and in its proposed solutions to these problems was inclusive, expansive, and able to incorporate change and difference. In attempting to protect and secure what was valued about the kampung and assure its continuity into the future the interests at work in forming this association were not about opposition to what was outside but about asserting the value of local autonomy. Conscious that material and social differences were increasing all around them, organizers sought a new focal point for village cohesion that had previously been latent but now required self-conscious reinforcement: residential space itself. This space – the place of the

village -- was seen as fundamental to what remained, or could yet remain, truly shared.

The sense of village autonomy at work here meant autonomy in a very particular sense: the goals were not separatism, self-governance, or even complete self-sufficiency. Everyone appreciated the fact that they were part of a larger urban space from which they derived both opportunity and income. Rather, the point was to assure that, in the midst of change, a space remained for a fair amount of self-determination as far as housing and everyday life were concerned. Seeking to assure that what was good about this space remained continuous with the past and not be lost to future generations, the values and way of life ideally embodied by what a kampung was or what it should be were perceived to be broadly relevant in both time and space. They were considered significant, not just to the moral upbringing of the kampung's own youth, or specifically to Malays or even Muslims, but to anyone and everyone living in the city, including different people and especially those living in very different material circumstances. Key to this conception was a certain idea about social cohesion, long associated with kampungs, that everyone should look out for everyone else. If space was inherently social and had a certain moral content the current task was to reinforce a continuity with what had been good about the kampung in the past and project it forward in both time and space.

Seeing space in moral terms meant that the spaces and places of everyday life could be arenas for both good and bad. Despite the value that residents placed on good relationships with neighbors and mutual help, Kampung Dodol had a fair share of both social conflict and material problems pertaining to infrastructure and the built environment. Though these two domains were sometimes perceived as linked, most of the strictly material problems concerned water: the recurrent and sometimes severe floods, inadequate water pressure, and a lack of fire hydrants (which were located only on the main road). Most residents understood that all the problems with water had to do with the recent construction of large buildings surrounding their village (Figure 17, top). Their density and size had both strained the water supply and reduced the capacity of the land to provide natural drainage. The river, where some older residents remembered swimming as children, was now silted and clogged. A much more difficult problem than the adverse material affects of the presence of large buildings, however, was their perceived negative moral influence on the kampung because of who now lived there and how they lived.

Social problems cited as arising with the construction of the high-rise projects included drug addiction and the sale of *dadah* (heroin) and *ganja* (cannabis) -- activities that some residents identified as taking place in the cemetery at night. Other residents mentioned additional "social ills" such as theft (burglary from houses) and *khalwat* (the impropriety of unmarried couples

Figure 17

Top: A High-rise Flat in the Vicinity of Kampung Dodol
Bottom: Mango Leaves Strung over the Doorway of a Hindu Household

meeting without supervision), with this latter activity also taking place in the darkness of the burial grounds. Though respondents did not always exempt people from the village as participants in these activities, some specifically blamed them on the influence of strangers not from the kampung who were living in high-rise projects nearby. Some even dated the first appearance of these problems to the approximate time period of the opening of these first high-rises in the area.

The negative, materially environmental affects of the big buildings were things that were out of the hands of villagers, who thought they should be easy to control, but the social and moral problems were more difficult. (One woman said "it is easier to solve floods by providing a bigger drain; it is much harder to solve the drugs problem.") Water woes were a municipal problem and clearly the responsibility of the state government, about whom many residents complained and said should be doing a better job.[65] ("The villagers aren't capable of replacing and enlarging the drains," said a resident contractor, inferring that they would accomplish these tasks if they could.) Regarding the moral problems, residents cited a range of solutions, more local than the state level, with problem-solvers mentioned that included the police, the local branch of UMNO, and the villagers themselves working together with these offices.

A number of residents felt, however, that the time had come for a more formalized village organization that could respond to both material and social problems in a coherent way and this resulted in the creation of the Kampung

Dodol Residents' Association. This was one of the first organizations of its kind to be formed in George Town in which membership was based solely on contiguity of single-unit residence for the purpose of addressing any long-term concerns arising in a particular place. (Associations of residents did exist in new high-rises.) Apart from a number of prominent NGOs with broad-based ethnically diverse memberships organized to address specific issues such as consumer affairs, breast-feeding or domestic violence, most voluntary associations in Penang had not been based on territory but on ethnicity, clan, guild, dialect, or district of origin in a distant homeland. What distinguishes the Kampung Dodol Residents Association is that, unlike others in the city, it was not formed either under the impetus of the state (who provides a suggested charter for associations of residents in high-rises), nor was it formed for the temporary and sole purpose of opposing evictions or negotiating displacement compensation for re-development projects (a type of organization that was beoming quite common). Residents of Kampung Dodol had a much longer time sense in mind in organizing, one which projected its current activities onto the long-term future of the village and the city.

As already mentioned, a driving force behind the creation of the association was the village head man who, like his father who held the informal office before him, had worked for a department of the British colonial administration. After Independence he continued on in government service but was now retired. This man was a descendant of one of the original donors of the

land as *wakaf* and was not directly involved in its administration; but he did wield considerable influence in the village and was chosen as the new association's chairman. A conversation with this man clarified for me many of the issues that other residents had voiced. He also pinpointed an issue that I heard echoed in many other venues throughout Penang, and not just among Malays: Anxieties about social and material change were projected onto concerns about the upbringing of youth. Among other things, it was thought that a new generation of Malaysians was becoming too materialistic, and the environment in which they now lived was at least in part to blame.

One of the headman's greatest concerns was that recent changes in the physical and social environment of the village were having a negative impact on everyone but especially upon village youth. He was optimistic, however, that with a little help from the association, the values that the kampung had embodied in the past could continue to be maintained into the future and would positively mitigate these recently harmful effects. What he saw as an inherent social cohesion in village social organization in years past (which he dated prior to the current economic boom) was now something that he felt required conscious management by a formal association of residents.

At stake were the proper guidance of a younger generation, an ideal of communal responsibility for their upbringing, and a sense of personal and social security to be achieved by everyone watching out for everyone else -- especially in

guarding against undesirable intrusions from the outside. All of these had everything to do with the idea of a kampung itself, or what it should be, taken as the nexus of a combination of social and spatial attributes. A sense of what was the headman felt was in danger of being lost is perhaps best summed up by Chua Beng Huat in a paper entitled "That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for the Kampung in Singapore." Chua was writing about specifically Chinese kampungs, and in Singapore (where, he says, the nostalgia was a result of a connection to the past: every kampung in Singapore had been replaced by more "modern" forms of housing by 1989 (Chua 1994:31, n.1)). His description, however, is also apt for a Malay context. He suggests that, at least in the imagination

> kampung households never closed their doors[66] because [there was] little that was valuable to be stolen; however, even the wealthier families maintained the practice. The practice itself was the result of a very high level of unintended public surveillance in the kampung. Visual familiarity enabled the dwellers to spot a stranger quickly; he/she would be followed by sets of eyes until his/her intentions were known. The constant presence of young men. . . added not only eyes to this surveillance but also muscles if necessary. The interlocking levels of familiarity thus generated a sense of being among friends and acquaintances and of public and personal security. This sense of security, itself a fondly remembered feature of kampung life, is signified and registered by the . . . open door practice (Chua 1994:15).

Many doors in Kampung Dodol were already open when my assistant and I approached them, but more than one woman at home mentioned with some concern that the village was perhaps too quiet during the day – almost everyone nowadays was away at work in a salaried position. Pre-renovation Malay

kampung architecture was even more visually open than its Chinese-style counterpart. For women working in or near the house, this feature facilitated a communalization of child-care responsibilities, since a child could wander freely and still be watched. For men, such openness translated into opportunities to extend male authority well beyond their individual households, and for families it meant that many domestic interactions were carried out within the sight, and hearing, of others, providing at least some measure of social constraint. Based on my observations, many of the social dynamics facilitated by permeable divisions between interior and exterior continued in Kampung Dodol, even with the enclosure of the ground floor and windows installed higher up on its walls. The implication of specific design features such as these, however, was not what mattered to the headman, who was more concerned with what he perceived as a recent trend to individualize moral authority over a child and locate it exclusively in the child's own parents

The headman was incensed that children and youths, especially those "born since 1980," did not respect either his authority or that of other adults in the village, and he was worried about the long-term effect on the entire community of a lack of communal supervision. "They don't know the history and they don't respect the community," he said. "They don't care." When he was a child any adult, or at least any adult male, had the authority to reprimand, and even beat him in his father's absence if he did something wrong. But this delegation of authority

and its dispersal throughout the community was no longer something that could be assumed. "The father is different now," he said. His perception was that, in some cases, both parents would even come to him to complain if he ever reprimanded their children or reported them to the police. The secretary of the residents' association, who was also present during this conversation, clarified what had changed: The mentality "is not like the old time," he said. Previously, even serious matters such as drug use would be managed by the community which together would decide what to do, but now no longer. Some now felt that no one should say anything about or scold a child not his or her own. He added that "the mentality is that my son is my son, your son is your son, you see." For the headman, drug activity in particular was a legal as well as a moral issue; he refused to protect anyone or be silent about it.

The secretary attributed this shift in mentality, by both parents and children, to "the environment of our country [which] is drastically changed because of a lot of development. – all the tall buildings, all the shopping complexes. Material things influence our youngsters." He cited loitering of youth in shopping malls as an example of a newly emergent social problem.[67] While admitting that village youth could be involved in drug activities, the headman attributed other offences, such as theft and *khalwat*, to foreigners, and he dated their first appearance in the village and the cemetery to the construction of the first high-rise flat in the area, occupied by outsiders. In his version of urban theory the

increase in crime associated with an increase in urban density was the product of greater prosperity and materialism -- and not poverty. "Our economy was very very good so many of our neighbors were no longer Malays," he said, "They are also Bangladeshis. They are also Indonesians." A labor shortage had attracted a work force of people from less prosperous Asian countries. These people, he said, worked in the factories during the daytime and at night sought "additional income" by burglarizing village houses. The factories had put them up in the new apartments and these were small – eight or nine workers in a three room flat – so at night even the women went out. These Bangladeshi and Indonesian women were doing "not good things" with the local people. Significant here is that "good" is located in the village and with its people, both of which were identifiably Malay; "not good" is seen as originating in another location, a different kind of housing situation, and is identified with people of other nationalities, even though these were fellow Muslims. Space and place were considered concrete moral domains; their influence on social behavior for good or ill could at times be more acutely felt than the abstraction of a community of faith.

Through the efforts of kampung residents, however, a good part of the problem with the foreigners and the high-rises was "secured," as the headman put it, and some of the solutions, like the problems themselves, had much to do with the built environment. The headman led a delegation that complained to the factories and asked them "at 11 o'clock at night, every night, please shut your

[housing project] gate and close it." Fewer foreign workers now came to the village or cemetery at night. Although high-rise flats were still considered sources of social ills (due to a lack of community self-surveillance) and couples with "no respect" still occasionally came to sit in the cemetery at night, the latter problem was mitigated somewhat by a solution that was also material-environmental. The headman wrote about the problem in a letter to the chief minister of Penang, who granted his request that a light be installed inside the cemetery – a provision that did not facilitate actual surveillance so much as consciousness that one might perhaps be watched.

Youth was not the sole focus of the headman's and the association's concern. What especially distressed the headman was what he perceived as a current divergence from a unity of purpose he had always known in the village. "There are [now] so many differences," he said, "ideological differences, psychological differences -- so the association was started to unite all the residents in this kampung together, at least the majority of them." The rise of ideological differences in a kampung as a mark of social change was precisely what concerned Geertz when he wrote about the anxieties he had witnessed about a funeral in Java (Geertz 1973:142-169). Geertz attributed the "failure" of the ritual on this occasion to "a discontinuity" between social structural ("causal-functional") and cultural ("logico-meaningful") forms of integration (Geertz 1973: 164). Society and culture were not the same; a disjuncture between them had led to conflict. For

Geertz, social change in Java at the time had an important consequence: territorial ties between people were diminishing in favor of ideological ties:

> . . . much of recent Javanese social change is perhaps most aptly characterized as a shift from a situation in which the primary integrative ties between individuals (or between families) are phrased in terms of geographical proximity to one in which they are phrased in terms of ideological like-mindedness (Geertz 1973: 148).

The headman and the association he had founded were not settling for either one of these ties: they wanted both.

To use Geertz's terms, what the Residents' Association of Kampung Dodol was doing was attempting to bring the social reality of the village more in line with an imagined cultural idea or ideal of what a kampung is or should be as a place to live. Despite some conflicts, there was still a generally shared cultural consensus about what a kampung should be all about: a place to which people were deeply attached and to which they would want to return, characterized by such values as an easy and open sociability, communal cohesion, self-reliance, and an emphasis on what the social and spiritual over the material or commercial.

Geertz was writing about a society in transition, at mid-century, from rural to urban, but such a transition was not an issue in turn-of-the-millennium Kampung Dodol. People there had shared an appreciation of their urban village location for generations and had worked for as long as anyone could remember at the newly disparate and urban trades that Geertz mentions: "chauffeur, trader, clerk, or laborer" (Geertz 1973:149). To hear the headman tell it, village cohesion

had long been a reality despite each resident having always earned a living, as Geertz puts it, "more or less independently of how his [sic] neighbors make theirs" – a factor which "naturally diminishes" that person's "sense of the importance of the neighborhood community" (Geertz 1973:149). Concerned residents of Kampung Dodol were attempting to keep at bay for as long as they could any possible de-territorializing effects of "a more differentiated class system, more bureaucratic and impersonal forms of government, [and] greater heterogeneity of social background" -- all of which, according to Geertz, "tend to lead to the same result: the de-emphasis of strictly geographical ties in favor of diffusely ideological ones" (Geertz 1973:149-150). What Geertz does not address here is how territory itself can be understood as ideological. For the residents who were joining the new association the territory of the village itself was just such a "diffusely ideological" tie that was newly and somewhat self-consciously significant as a focus for organizational action toward the explicit goal of greater social cohesion. The challenge of the residents' association was to find ways to work together, not to produce crops or even to help build or renovate each other's houses (Chinese contractors were often hired to do that), but to reinvent ways to keep their community together and their children out of trouble.

One of the ways to reactivate the cultural ideology of the kampung and actualize it in social reality was to initiate organized activities, some of which were self consciously planned to embody a specifically Malay "heritage." For boys, the

association sponsored formal training in *silat,* a Malay martial art that combines elements of dance and self-defense. A troupe was formed and practice sessions were held several times per week in the large yard adjoining the headman's house. For girls and young women a group was created to perform *nasyid*, a type of devotional choral singing. But many other activities were civic and not ethnic, and explicitly expressed a shared concern over shared space. Adults were recruited by the association for training to take turns staffing, not only a corps of volunteer paramedics but also the village's own 991 (emergency telephone) center – a high tech re-invention of earlier, less formal, forms of community self help and surveillance. Mutual self help and self sufficiency were reinforced through donation drives launched to benefit of a woman in the village with a lung disease who required a costly respirator and eight households that had been particularly hard hit in a recent flood.[68] A plan was put in effect to organize the cooking and delivery of hot food, by boat if necessary, to households stranded by rising floodwaters. The success of this plan when a flood did occur, along with the humble beginnings of a village computer training center in one of the village's larger houses, were documented in a videotape that was proudly shown to me as an example of what the kampung and its new association could do.

The association was far from being xenophobic, separatist, or self-contained. Inclusive and expansive would be better characterizations. It looked both inward and outward to identify problems, seek solutions, and discover

management styles that could be incorporated into the existing cultural capital and resourcefulness of the villagers. The association did not seek to oppose existing municipal, state, and religious authorities and the trappings of officialdom but rather to create their own versions. The association quickly put together a bureaucratic structure with an officialdom akin to the government of a small state, with numerous committees and titled offices for various functions – as if to show that it should be regarded, not only seriously, but on somewhat of an equal footing with at least the structures of outside powers. An abiding motif was the position that just as certain problems had origins outside the village, any possible solutions the association might come up with could be relevant to and should be recognized in a wider political and territorial domain. Like a very different residents' association discussed in Chapter 4, members of the association felt that it should rightfully have the power to call meetings to at least be heard by the powers that be. These official external powers often took shape in the form of "councils" (*majlis*), so the association created one of its own with a distinctive new name that cut across specifically religious and municipal identifiers. One of its first initiatives was to hold a "Dialog Council" (*Majlis Dialog*) that included residents from communities adjoining or near the kampung, officials from the state legislature representing this wider area's political constituency, the head of the Religious Council (*Majlis Agama*) that administered part of the village' s *wakaf*, the president of the Penang Island Municipal Council (*Majlis Perbandaran Pulau*

Pinang) who was, in effect, the "mayor" of George Town, and the chief inspector of the local branch of the police department. Faith in the ability of the association both to get things done in the village and to establish a presence beyond it was marked by steady increases in membership. In the seven months between the first and second general meeting, membership increased from 50 to 213 (Kampung Dodol Residents Association 1998: n.p.)

As already mentioned briefly, the geographic and social imagination of the association was expansive and inclusive. The premise of membership in the association was geographical proximity of residence and the experience of a familiar shared space. These factors cut across other dimensions that could have been utilized as an organizational motifs, such as the facts that, though somewhat ethnically diverse, the kampung was identifiably "Malay," was even more universally "Muslim," and that it consisted of two separately endowed *wakaf* properties with different histories of administration. The name "Kampung Dodol" as the preferred appellation for both this territory and the association is significant in that it is a secular name, the name by which people living outside the village know the area, and it is not the name of either of the two mosques by which the *wakaf* properties attached to them are known. Membership was open to anyone who lived, or had ever lived in the kampung, regardless of ethnicity or religion, and the choice of a widely known name reflects the association's ambition to be recognized in a sphere wider than the village. The single Chinese household

resident in Kampung Dodol was welcome to join the association and its head was a committee member, and there was a special category of membership (with reduced dues) for former residents who now lived elsewhere. While some activities were explicitly Malay and Muslim, and others were civic and secular, kampung residents were not the only beneficiaries of the association's activities. Even though, as the secretary of the association told me, "no one is poor" now in the village, another initiative was the organization of a large feast (*kenduri*) at the headman's house, held at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, at which food, drink and clothing were distributed to any hardcore poor (*fakir miskin*) from the entire area (larger than the village itself) that was served by the burial grounds of the mosque.[69] As the largest Muslim burial ground on the island, this meant, in effect, a vision of social service that encompassed the entire island and its Muslim population -- an example of how the "demographic consciousness" discussed earlier contributes to local understandings of space and place in Penang.

Consciousness and ideology were what the territorial focus of the residents association was all about. The scope of its activities was wide but its ambitions were specifically directed at a very intimate level of villagers' experience. According to the association secretary, the overall goal of the organization was to "change the mentality of the kampung people so that everybody will live in peace." The headman further specified that one of the reasons to start the association was "to solve the problems which involve the residents, such as

husband and wife quarrels, divorce . . . and problems between families." The idea here was that the problem-solving social cohesion for which kampung life had always been known – its ideology -- could still be maintained or yet be actualized even though the means toward this goal were more formal (an association) than in the "old time" and involved activities now self-consciously organized to promote solidarity. With some effort, the kampung could become more like what it should be, or what it once was, with the kernel of its moral and ideological content still intact. With residential space itself now a primary organizing principle and the focus for an additional conception of identity – that of resident -- broader than ethnicity or even religion, the relevance of the moral content of this space was no longer confined to what was specifically identified as Malay or even Muslim. The headman felt that the association's reformulation of a kampung-type approach to community surveillance and mutual self-help could, and should, be extended to high-rise flats everywhere. This effort would be a way to mitigate a variety of "social ills" but especially those associated with the youth who lived in these large new complexes. A high-rise flat "can be – must be" made more like a kampung, he said.

Using his available cultural capital, this approach was, in effect, an attempt by the headman to extrapolate a social organization associated with one kind of built residential environment (the kampung) onto another (a high-rise flat) that was thought to encourage, or at least make possible, socially undesirable forms of

behavior. He suggested that the residents of the high-rise flats, the "leaders of the flats houses," the residents' associations[70] and parents should all "sit down and make suggestions." The significance of these statements is in their suggestion that social cohesion, though it may be facilitated or constrained by certain material spatial configurations, is nevertheless something to be consciously discussed, debated, and achieved. It is not an automatic by-product of architecture nor is it the monopoly of any one group's specific tradition of land use. The thinking here is that if residential space itself is taken as a focus of shared concern, this could be an organizational principle that should be able to accommodate, incorporate, or at least attend to multiple locations of authority and multiple inputs deriving from differences in ethnicity, religion, social background, or living situation.

In 1962, Herbert Gans (1982 [1962]:4) coined the term "urban village" to refer to an area in which residents attempted to adapt non-urban institutions and cultures to an urban milieu. But there are several significant differences between Boston's West End in the late 1950s (the location and time of his study) and Kampung Dodol in the late 1990s. In the former case, residents made this attempt in response to poverty. In Kampung Dodol, at least according to the headman's perspective, the efforts of the residents' association were formulated as a response to prosperity and some of the negative social and physical changes it had wrought. For reasons already discussed, Kampung Dodol should not be considered representative of a society or culture "in transition" from rural to urban values and

structures. The housing situation here was not "a helter-skelter profusion of little bamboo houses" (Geertz 1973:150), not a squatters' settlement of new arrivals, a "poor" neighborhood, or a slum. It was an ordered, well established and recognizable part of a greater urban social and material fabric that, at least until recently, appears to have conformed to an equally well established and recognizable cultural idea or ideal of housing that had long been part of the city's history. In organizing efforts to bring current reality closer to this ideal, residents were not reacting to what was newly urban about any aspect of this fabric. Rather, they were concerned about the rise of what could be called a new kind of urbanism that they perceived to embody values more material than moral.

For Geertz, the conflict he had witnessed in what he considered, at mid-century, to be a transitional, newly urbanizing kampung, was "not simply indicative of a loss of cultural consensus" but was indicative of "a search, not yet entirely successful, for new, more generalized, and flexible patterns of belief and value" (Geertz 1973:50). Half a century later in Kampung Dodol, with a cultural consensus still popularly prevalent about what even an urban kampung is or should be, residents may have already found just such a generalized and flexible pattern of belief and value: the territory of the kampung itself, and along with it, urban residential space more generally. As a "diffusely ideological" tie capable of bringing diverse multiple significations under its umbrella, this space was the foundation of what was still truly shared despite growing social and material

differences. It was, for residents, a newly significant organizational focus for the ongoing reformulation of a tradition of local autonomy in housing, for the expression of identities that were not exclusively ethnic or religious but also civic and regional, and for the creation of new ways in which long-standing ideals of social cohesion and mutual self-help might continue to be realized in practice.

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[1] The decades following World War II saw the appearance of an additional single-unit type: semi-detached bungalows consisting of two large units sharing one common wall. Prior to the war, only a very few structures were built that housed multiple units of flats or apartments, but these did not exceed four or five stories.

[2]. This does not imply, however, that these single houses were always, or even intended to be occupied only by single families, or that their function was always strictly residential. Single structures intentionally built to accommodate multiple and separate housing units (similar to apartments) first appeared as a rural, and not an urban phenomenon in Southeast Asia, in the designs of some of the longhouses built by native agricultural and forest peoples.

[3] *Wakaf* is the Malay language spelling of the Arabic term usually transliterated as *waqf.* The latter spelling is also sometimes used in Malaysia but I am retaining the Malay spelling here for the sake of consistency.

[4] A numbers of questions asked in the survey were taken from a household questionnaire prepared for the Housing in Historical Cities of Southeast Asia project organized by the Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany. I am grateful to Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz and Alex Koenig, members of this project, for sharing their questionnaire with me and for giving me permission to use portions of it. This project concentrated solely on one portion of the old inner city of George Town and selected results were presented by Tjoa-Bonatz (1998) and Karim (1998) in papers delivered at the International Symposium on Heritage and Habitat, held in Penang on April 6-8, 1998, which I attended. See also Chan and Tjoa-Bonatz 1998 and Chan and Karim n.d. With the possible exception of two houses, there was no overlap between the households I and they visited.

My thinking at the time was that perhaps some of our results could be combined in the form of a presentation in a local venue about the possible impact on the city's long-term tenants of the impending end of rent control (as of January 1, 2000). This presentation was never realized in the form I imagined. I did, however, have an opportunity to present some of my own preliminary findings during my participation in a committee convened by the Penang State Government to evaluate

possible negative social effects of the end of rent control on the inner city and to propose some mitigating solutions. This committee met in 1998-1999.

Not every question in the questionnaire was asked in each interview, and not every respondent answered all questions asked. The list of questions was adjusted slightly during the course of the study since a primary goal in preparing the questionnaire was to elicit a qualitative conversation with residents about the range of topics it covered. I do not discuss responses to every question here.

[5] This project was the Community Participation in *Waqf* [*wakaf* in Malay] Revitalization, Historic Inner City George Town.

[6] Concerned that a woman or women home alone might be reluctant to talk with male strangers, my local research sponsor, Dr. Halim Salleh, a professor of development studies at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, suggested that I hire only female assistants, and I followed his advice. My assistants were Asyirah, a Malay graduate student in the School of Housing, Building and Planning; Punitha, her Tamil friend and graduate school classmate; and Paik Siang, a senior undergraduate majoring in project management. These three talented women were my primary assistants for the questionnaire survey and I was fortunate to have found in them three colleagues who not only completely understood the goals of my project but also found the experience of talking to residents relevant to their own studies.

[7] The purpose of our visit was usually quickly accepted with a minimum of explanation and we would be promptly asked to enter the house. I attribute this ease to several factors: the confidence and professionalism of my assistants; a general interest in discussing housing issues; curiosity about a foreigner (myself); and widespread familiarity with the process of door-to-door surveys and field research, which is a part of many social science curricula in Malaysia, even at the secondary school level.

[8] *Perak* is the Malay word for silver and the name of a state of Malaysia near Penang.

[9] This is the Khan Mohamed Mosque, named after a wealthy Indian Muslim who built it in 1860 (Abdul Kahar bin Yusoff et. al. 1974: #8).

[10] Chinese-style kampung houses, for which wood is also a basic material, are generally built on the ground without stilts. Additional features characteristic of Malay houses are discussed in later sections of this chapter.

[11] Kampung Baru, in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, is a famous example.

[12] For Malays and Indian Muslims this holiday is Hari Raya Adilifitri, the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan; for Chinese it is the first day of Chinese New Year; for Indian Hindus it is Deepavali, the Festival of Lights.

[13] This Malay term is commonly used by all groups for this activity, regardless of their ethnicity or the language spoken at home.

[14] Some of my acquaintances, however, also confided in me that they felt great pressure to complete all the arrangements and to spend time with certain family members whose company they might not seek out on other occasions.
[15] This situation is comically depicted in several of the films of P. Ramlee, Malaysia's most famous film director, singer, and actor, whose films from the 1950s and 60s are regularly broadcast on Malaysian television. As previously mentioned, Ramlee grew up in a kampung very near to Kampung Dodol.
[16] This name is a pseudonym.
[17] These free events include night-club style folkloric productions produced by the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) and performed by its troupe of Malay, Chinese, and Indian dancers. These productions are presented on holidays for locals and tourists at the Fort Cornwallis band shell. Other free events include state-sponsored performances on Merdeka day and concerts sponsored throughout the year by political parties at the *padang* (municipal parade grounds); events put on by various voluntary associations at Dewan Sri Pinang (George Town's municipal auditorium); and special promotional events held in the atria of shopping malls. Most religious festivals held in the city also involve free public performances, often on temporary stages erected on city streets.
[18] This structure still stands and is now used as a *surau* (Muslim prayer room). Another Malay house was constructed as a show piece inside the walls of Fort Cornwallis, the 18th century British colonial fort in the heart of old George Town, as if to reclaim this British colonial space as independent and Malay.
[19] Lim acknowledges with regret that, with the timber industry in Malaysia now emphasizing centralized mass production for export, locally produced wood products are harder to find and, where they still exist, are priced beyond the means of most villagers.
[20] An extra room is traditionally added to the main house prior to the marriage of a son and guests are invited to inspect its new furnishings on the day of the wedding. In Sharil's kampung, Sharil's brother and his sister-in-law followed this tradition even though their son and his new wife never intended to live there.
[21] This is not to say that *wakaf* lands have never been alienated, that their trusteeships are never contested, or that deals transferring land have never been struck. In the early years of the 19th century the East India Company endowed almost 18 acres of inner city land as *wakaf* supporting the Kapitan Kling Mosque and its surrounding community. By 1900 almost half of it had been appropriated by the colonial government as sites for municipal infrastructure and public amenities, such as roads and police stations.
[22] Most families were paying monthly rental charges of RM1 to RM6 (US$0.25 to $1.50) for their house lots, and many of these had been sub-divided, resulting in extremely low individual rates.

[23] The Hashim Yahya wakaf consists of two lots spanning 348,480 square feet (approximately eight acres) and 174,240 square feet (slightly less than four acres), which provided enough land to accommodate, as of 1985, sites for 70 and 30 houses respectively, as well as the burial ground and the site of the mosque (Salleh and Tahir 1985:69). Thirty seven houses in this area are included in the current survey. The area of Kampung Dodol that is part of the Kapitan Kling wakaf is on the other side of Perak Road, where two lots, of 97,595 and 88,531 square feet, provided 27 and 25 house lots respectively, again as of 1985 (Salleh and Tahir 1985:286). Three houses in this area were visited in the current survey.

[24] In 1899 the site for the Canarvon Street Market, a popular wet market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, and produce still in use in the inner city (and now called the Campbell Street Market), was purchased from the Kapitan Kling wakaf for $20,982. and out of the proceeds $2,500. was spent to purchase approximately five acres in Perak Road to be added to the existing burial ground there. Nasution (2000) notes that "in so doing, the Municipal authorities had forced the Muslim community to move the cemetery out to the edge of town partly for sanitary purposes and partly because an inner city cemetery was by that time deemed an inappropriate use of prime land in the city centre" (Nasution 2000: 7). This is the portion of Kampung Dodol that is now administered by the Religious Council as part of the Kapitan Kling waqf and which, as of 1985, was also the site of 52 houses (Salleh and Tahir 1985:286).

[25] The Hand Book incorporates the 1904 report of a Commission of Enquiry that resulted in the creation of the board. See Nasution 2002, where this quote is cited on pages 303-304.

[26] The report of the Commission of Enquiry had expressed the concern that "the existing state of affairs is a grave obstacle to the progress of the Settlement generally and especially (from a Municipal point of view) to the improvement of the town" (Hand Book 1932: 5; also quoted in Nasution 2002: 304).

[27] Details of how this occurred are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

[28] A major criticism of the Council is that few, if any of the proceeds from recent developments on *wakaf* lands have been returned to the local community. The size of proposed development projects is also a point of contention. Large projects require investments from outside the community and these investment opportunities are perceived to be offered to political favorites or institutions with little or no connection to the community surrounding the project site.

[29] Kampung Dodol appears in the central part of this map as the irregularly scattered houses on either side of Perak Road. The "blank" areas in their immediate vicinity represent Muslim burial grounds.

[30] This figure is slightly lower than the 7.9 national average in 1991 for extended families living in detached houses, but somewhat higher than the average of 5.1 residents per house when all detached houses nationwide are considered. (Department

of Statistics Malaysia 1995: 780-781; 788-789). These numbers reflect a growing national trend away from extended family living arrangements.

[31] "Extended family" is defined here by the presence of at least one affinal relationship other than husband-wife. "Single family" here includes three-generation households in which daughters-in-law or sons-in-law are absent.

[32] Considering only the heads of households, however, the picture changes somewhat in the direction of greater maturity: heads of households ranged in age from 35 to 80, with 55.6 years of age being the average.

[33] I was often asked my age when first meeting people anywhere in Penang.

[34] Thirty-two residents identified their households as having male heads (including one 75 year old man living alone) and 8 as having female heads of household. Of these 8, 2 were all female households, in 3 others the head was a widow living with one or more married sons; and in the remaining 3 the female head of household was living with a brother-in-law, a sister's son-in-law, and two sons-in-law, respectively. In a total of 9 households the oldest person in residence was not identified as the head. In these cases, the relationship of the oldest family member(s) to the person considered the head of household was: grandmother (1 household); father (1); mother (5); father-in-law (1); and older sisters (1).

[35] As discussed in Chapter 1, second and third generation Muslims from India can "*masuk Melayu*" or "become" Malay when they are registered with the Malaysian government, a move which then allows them to enjoy the favorable quotas allotted to bumiputra (native Malays) under the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) and New Development Policy (from 1991). Several households visited distinguished between older generation family members, who were identified as "Indian Muslim" and their children or grandchildren, who were "Malay."

There was one Chinese household resident in the kampung. This household ran a sundry shop and was not interviewed.

[37] Though ostensibly the same language in terms of structure and grammar, Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*) and Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) differ considerably in terms of lexical choice and ways of speaking and their speakers distinguish between them.

[38] One Malaysian ringgit (RM) was the equivalent of approximately US$0.40 prior to the Asian economic crisis of 1997, and US$0.25 afterward.

[39] Of a total of six pension amounts quoted, three were under RM200 per month, one was RM500, one was RM600-800 and one was RM1000-1500.

[40] Two owner households did not answer whether they had purchased or inherited their house.

[41] The highest price mentioned was RM20,000, paid in 1988.

[42] Constructing a kampung house in decades past would have required little initial investment and was likely accomplished without incurring any substantial loans (cf. Lim 1987).

[43] Previous window treatments, which still remained on the upper stories of most houses, consisted of loosely closing wooden shutters.

[44] Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga neatly summarize the commodification of housing in twentieth-century Europe and their comments are worth citing at length here as an example of what residents of Kampung Dodol were resisting:

> Publicly financed housing projects stimulated the development of a housing industry centered on mass production of standardized building components and specialized labor, resulting in displacement of rural builders working in the local vernacular. International style-setting design trends and the mass production of consumer items such as furni9ture and appliances to fill new houses have further weakened local control over ideas about the proper way to live. Market forces increasingly enter into the construction and economics of housing and remove the immediate control of design, the organization of space and expression of domestic values from traditional key actors. The home ceases to be a center of production and becomes instead a locus of consumption; the domestic environment is commodified (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zuniga 1999:20).

[45] I determined this implicit economic status hierarchy of housing type through numerous conversations with homeowners and tenants and observation and study of the Malaysian real estate market.

[46] Much of Penang's prime beachfront property is now taken up with either hotels or luxury condominiums.

[47] Appendix B presents the results of residents' evaluations of 12 aspects of their neighborhood, which they were asked to rate positively, negatively, or neither (neutral or medium). Every "social" aspect asked about (except cost of living, which was rated by most as medium) was rated positively by a majority of respondents: convenience, nearness to work place, liveliness, good relationships with neighbors, favorability for children, and favorability for old people. Two "material" aspects were evaluated as neutral by a majority (air quality and noise level), one was rated positively (amount of green vegetation), and one was rated negatively (adequacy of cultural facilities). Though awkward methodologically, and with a hardness of edge that belies the qualitative intent of my interviews, these questions were among those that residents most enjoyed answering.

[48] The *tiang seri* is the central pillar of the house, which, according to Carsten (1995: 111) is thought to be the abode of the house spirit (*semangat rumah*), which is believed to be female. If the customary building ritual was followed, the mother of the house would have held this pillar when it was being erected.

[49] Several respondents cited a foundation for a building as being a Chinese idea.

[50] Many Hindu household string mango leaves above the front door as an auspicious prophylactic against the entrance of malevolent spirits.

The *semangat rumah* (house spirit) and, along with it, the people residing in a house were believed to be vulnerable to attack from other spirits unless iron had been placed in the ground at the base of the *tiang seri* (main pillar).

[52] More Indian-Muslims that Malays are proficient in English. English, Malay, and Tamil were all spoken in this household.

[53] Differences in skin color between Indians and Malays are not always distinguishable and seem to be one of the factors involved in the ability of some later-generation Indian immigrants to be accepted as Malay. Some people from India, however, have darker skin than most Malays. The speaker here is replicating colonial-era categories in which ethnicity is conflated with race and certain physical features, still a common practice in Malaysia.

[54] The Malay word "*rumah*," which was used in the line of questioning for which these responses were given clearly denotes "house" or "building" but some respondents may have understood it to mean "*rumah tangga*" ("household"), a conflation which is itself interesting and illustrative of the point I am making. The intended meaning of the word, however, should have been clear in the context of its use in several previous questions about the physical condition of the house and its prominent features.

[55] Khoo Salma Nasution (personal communication) has identified the design features of a distinctly "Indian-Muslim" vernacular architectural style in Penang that combines elements of the Anglo-Indian bungalow with the Malay kampung house (personal communication), but this style is not generally recognized as such by those who are not architectural historians

[56] This assumption may have some historical basis. The postal addresses of several clusters of houses in Kampung Dodol share a common number (on Jalan Perak) and are distinguished from each other by the addition of a letter after the number – a feature which perhaps indicates that the housing plots originally granted by the *wakaf* trustees were later subdivided for re-distribution among the recipients' family members or cohorts. All three "Indian-Muslim" houses mentioned here shared the same street number. Unfortunately, I did not pursue details of kinship relations between houses.

[57] As previously mentioned, Kampung Dodol did, in fact, have one Chinese household.

[58] The "accuracy" of this sketch as a representation of its producer's subjectivity, of course, may be limited by such factors as graphic ability, degree of comfort with the medium, and familiarity with other cartographic representations, which is why I call it an "approximation." For a discussion of the epistemological and methodological issues involved see Downs and Stea 1977: 99-107; Sack 1980: 97-100; and Liben and Downs 1991: 146-151).

[59] Depending on the circumstances not every resident visited was asked to draw a map.

The maps discussed here were chosen because of their clarity and the ways in which they illustrate what their authors and many other residents also expressed in the course of conversation.

[60] In *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates (1966) discusses how a visual aberration in an architectural framework can function as an orientational mnemonic.

[61] *Takraw* is a Malay game in which participants keep a rattan ball in the air by hitting it with their knees. There was a takraw court in a small clearing immediately adjoining several houses in the approximate center of the residential area.

[62] "2020" refers here to "Vision 2020," the national goal of achieving a completely industrialized nation by the year 2020.

[63] UMNO is the acronym of the United Malays National Organization, the ethnic-Malay based political party.

[64] Jawi is the writing of Malay using Arabic script.

[65] As discussed elsewhere, municipal services for the entire island were provided by the Penang Island Municipal Council under the direct authority of the Penang State Government. A similar body administered the territory of Penang state located on the mainland

[66] The significance of doors remaining open pertains to kampungs in general and is not associated with any particular ethnic group. A resident of an ethnically mixed kampung just outside George Town told me with pride that the door to his house had not been locked in 30 years.

[67] *Lepak* (idleness), was a commonly mentioned "social ill" among youth and was often thought to take place in and be encouraged by shopping complexes.

[68] The financial targets of these drives were substantial. The fundraising goal for the respirator was RM6,800. As of February 15, 1998, RM2,200 had been given to the eight households who had suffered losses in the flood that occurred on November 18, 1997 (Kampung Dodol Residents' Association 1998: n.p.).

[69] This event appears to be a reformulation of an earlier practice (pre-dating the official discouragement by Muslim authorities of *keramat* worship) of holding a feast for the poor at the end of Ramadan that was financed by donations placed in a collection box at the Dato Keramat tomb, a well-known keramat within Kampung Dodol's burial grounds. See Abdul Kahar et. al. 1974).

[70] As previously mentioned, the state government encourages residents of all high-rise buildings to form residents' associations and provides them with sample charters.

Chapter 3

The Importance of Houses: Two Inner City Neighborhoods

Introduction

Wherever one goes in Penang, to talk about houses and housing is often a way to talk about identity. The identities in question in such conversations, however, are not always or exclusively ethnic, nor do they refer only to cultural identities. They are also about religious and social identities that can be expressed in some very personal ways and they often reference, in one way or another, a sense of individual or household autonomy, at least as far as living arrangements and lifestyles are concerned. This chapter continues a discussion of many of the issues raised in the previous chapter regarding discourses and other forms of practice regarding housing, but it locates them in two additional areas of George Town that, in terms of the built residential environment, are very different from Kampung Dodol. In these two inner-city areas, the urban fabric consisted largely of attached single-unit terrace and shop houses within a grid of city streets. The residential population of these areas was also different, from each other and from the predominantly Malay residents of the kampung: in one of these most of the residents were "Chinese," and the other was ethnically "mixed."

Although the discussion of houses and housing presented here indicates that there are some significant differences in the ways residents of different ethnicities

perceive and use residential space – and cross-ethnic comparisons will occasionally be highlighted – there was also some equally significant common ground in how residents of George Town in all three of the study areas understood and appreciated where and how they lived. Whether residents self-identified with any of the three largest ethnic categories in Malaysia – Malay, Chinese, or Indian -- or whether they identified themselves as members of sub-sets within these categories – their responses underscored a primary contention of this dissertation: that houses are to be understood as social phenomena and not just as materially aesthetic or practical objects; that the production of space is an on-going process; and that an analysis of particular residential spaces should not be detached from the broader social and spatial contexts of which they are a part. Nevertheless, specific forms, materials, structures and visual appearances of houses do convey multiple meanings to both residents living in a particular place and to others. Attempts will be made in the following discussion to abstract some of the ways in which these meanings -- tied as they are to social processes, ethnic and other identities, cultural and religious values, and a valorization of autonomy in housing situations -- vary for different people living in different parts of the city. I show how the social and cultural production of meaning in the urban residential space in Penang involves a continuous process of awareness of, accommodation to, or translation across multiple dimensions of difference marked by such things as language, education, religion, age (of both people and buildings), as well as ethnicity – and how the expression of the latter in the built environment was

something that was not equally important to all people, or significant to them in the same ways.

For example, as an ethnic minority in the city, Malays were perhaps the most concerned of the three main groups with their own urban presence and the expression of their own ethnicity in housing; as the ethnic majority in town, Chinese were perhaps the least concerned. Later in this chapter, I interpret this difference as due, at least in part, to a sense of confidence among Chinese that the presence of things Chinese throughout the city is an assumed standard that will continue to be expressed in many venues even in changed material and social contexts, such as in new high-rise housing projects. As a group whose urban prominence falls somewhere between that of the Malays and Chinese, Indian Hindus were perhaps the most concerned over the demarcation of their own turf in the old inner city. I show how they were the most conscious of all three groups of any boundaries of their residential neighborhood and seem to have willingly accepted the state's designation, largely for the purposes of tourism promotion, of their well-known residential concentration as "Little India."

Like the Malays of Kampung Dodol, the Chinese, Indian Hindu and Indian-Muslim residents of the two neighborhoods discussed here considered residential space to have a certain moral content but many of them saw at least part of this content as somewhat differently configured. As has already been shown, there are strongly held popular ideas about kampungs and a widely known discourse about the ideology of "the Malay house" – both of which refer to long-standing values largely associated

with an esteemed past. No such coherent discourse pertains to either the communal life or the architecture of the inner city (with the exception of a newly emerging discourse, to be discussed later, of "heritage" recently advocated by preservation activists). As in the kampung, ideals of social cohesion and mutual self-help for a common good were often achieved on inner city streets, but they were not reinforced by any clear popular conception of what the inner city was or should be, like the popular discourse regarding life in a kampung. If there was any popular ideology that residents in the city's historic core had to come to terms with it was that urban space itself was now supposed to locate and mark much of what was held out to be new and progressive about the economy of Penang as a state and Malaysia as a nation. In this signification, the age of the "old" inner city appeared to some in power as a liability, not an asset. As in Kampung Dodol, however, residents' own perceptions that residential space should be regarded primarily in social and moral terms often took the form of resisting seeing the houses and places where people lived solely in the terms of a newly intense and speculative property market. These social and moral understandings of residential space spanned both what was old and new in the built environment and, in their spatial imaginations, residents attempted to incorporate a range of differences between people that were not just ethnic.

A good part of this conception and understanding of space had to do, not just with consciousness of diversity, but specifically with religious practice and an impulse to see a certain common ground within difference. "All religions are the same," was a

sentiment I heard expressed by many non-Muslims throughout Penang – "they teach you to be good." People were aware that different groups of people and different individuals (sometimes even within the same family) observed a range of different practices toward this goal. It was the material expression of these practices, sometimes in the form of religious equipment and accessories, in, around, and outside the home, that was more significant to many residents of the two areas discussed here than any publicly visible expression of ethnicity per se. Chinese residents in particular saw their homes as but one instance of a moral center with a certain presence or influence that had multiple possible locations such as the human body and the temple or shrine. As explained later, each of these locations had a certain power, and sometimes very material connections were established between them that contributed to the moral content of residential space.

Though they expressed a somewhat different spatial imagination that that at work in Muslim religious practice, one in which, for some, spirits were active players in the production of space, Chinese and Indian Hindu residents in the inner city shared some of the ideas that were expressed by the Malays of Kampung Dodol. In both the kampung and the inner city, houses and residential spaces were often identified with and defined not just by what they looked like but by who had built them and what people did there and by their placement in a larger arena of social action. The practices at work in the creation of the moral content of residential space were thus not just religiously or ethnically specific but also broadly social in ways that often

encompassed both domains. They referenced some common values and conceptions widely shared across groups. For example, though most houses in all three areas were identifiably "old," age was not valued for its own sake but for what it represented, such as a positive appreciation of household stability, a connection to kin both living and dead, and the convenience, continuity and familiarity of long-term residence in the same location. As far as temporality was concerned, however, the future was the focus of much more concern than the past. A significant component of this concern was an understanding that recent increases in the standard of living, marked by such things as higher incomes and an increased ability to purchase consumer goods, did not necessarily mean a higher quality of life as far as housing was concerned.

The plan of this chapter is as follows. An outline of the ways in which multiple identities are expressed in the built residential environment of the inner city is followed by a brief introduction to each of the two study areas and a section on the ways in which differences in ethnicity, language use, education, and religious identification (sometimes even within the same household) contribute to residents' experience and understanding of urban residential space. The discussion then turns to the ways in which certain traits variously associated with Chinese culture and with what was once a distinctly immigrant form of ambition have, with the passage of time, contributed to the valorization of a sense of autonomy and self-determination in housing preference and to a strong sense of attachment to the places of long-term residence that most of the people I spoke with shared. Next comes discussion of an

example of place-based autonomy and self-reliance in action and how this particular activity – the household production and public consumption of hawker food – contributes to the understanding, use, and experience of urban space in Penang, to residents' consciousness of diversity and difference, and to a pan-ethnic "Penang" identity tied to a greater regional metropolitan area to which many people are also deeply attached in addition to the locations of their own homes. This section is followed by a presentation of residents' ambivalent relationships to a newly emerging speculative housing market and their perceptions of how their lives would change should they be forced to move to different forms of housing, such as high-rises. Following this are discussions of the shape, perception, and uses of residential space and how Chinese religious practices and beliefs contribute to the meanings of this space, both within the home and beyond it, for residents of one neighborhood where two Taoist temples were particularly active. The chapter ends with a discussion of residents' "mental maps" and the ways in which these express consciousness of identity, diversity and difference in the everyday space of urban life.

Houses, Urban Space, and Identity

Although the same could be said for any building anywhere, every structure in Penang is symbolically "marked." Unlike some other places, however, the built environment of George Town is distinctive in that an urban fabric consisting largely of individual houses provides the terms for a popular local discourse about a range of

identities that include but are not confined to ethnicity. The distinctive feature of Penang's architecture that initially attracted me to George Town as a field site – its often highly articulated ethnic vernacular specificity – turned out to be merely one of the meanings residents saw in the places and buildings they inhabit. The meaning of built form in Penang is also about age (both of people and of buildings), religious practice, lifestyles and types of occupations and economies. A recent building boom, largely concentrated just outside the city but also sporadically penetrating its historic core, has been radically transforming the city's greater metropolitan area for over a decade. The many physical and social changes this boom has wrought ensure that architecture, planning, and the use of urban space are not just the concerns of design specialists, but also popular topics of everyday discussion. Within this discourse, the continued saliency of expressions of ethnicity in the city and its built environment, in one way or another, is something that is largely assumed, at least among the demographically dominant Chinese. For Chinese, Malay and Indian residents alike, who it was who built something and when it was built were in many instances more significant than any ethnically specific particulars of what was built, and different house types have increasingly come to be identified with what one does, in addition to, and sometimes apart from, who one is. In popular parlance the old single-unit houses of the inner city represent such things as individual or household autonomy, modesty of lifestyle, enterprise and thrift. Each of these is in turn further associated with a particular economic configuration that had been in place for most of the city's history.

New types of housing represent other things associated with more recent economic trends. These include such things as corporate or state sponsorship of large-scale, often high-rise residential development projects, increased specificity in the material expression of economic status, as well as a newly intense speculative property market and the indebtedness and steady, regular (often salaried) incomes required of most households if they want to participate in it.

Urban development is nothing new in Penang but the form it has taken in recent years marks a transformation from an economy based largely on small-scale entrepreneurship (with some notable, extra-urban and large-scale economic success stories in banking, mining, plantation production and international trade) to one increasingly dominated by large-scale corporate, state and national-level, and sometimes transnational, big business no longer associated with single families. With rent control and scattered patterns of land ownership effectively preserving much of the oldest part of the city, this is where earlier traditions of self-building, small-scale development, and the establishment of family-run enterprises are still very much in evidence. Constrained by few colonial-era building or planning restrictions, people built what and often how they wanted, and this often meant clearly indicating, in one way or another, one's own specific ethnic identity. A roof line, a window molding, or a decorative element would immediately indicate whether a structure's original builder or owner wished to be identified as Malay, Chinese, Indian, or British, with the latter sometimes expressed in combination with any of the previous. Rows of originally

identical, or very similar, attached shop or terrace houses, built not for a particular family but to be rented out, further indicated that multiple units were commissioned at the same time by a single owner operating on a very small scale of property development. The result was what much of the city, including the two areas that are the subject of this chapter, continue to look like today: two story single-unit attached shop or terrace houses whose basic structure and design is identifiably "Chinese," or more specifically colonial-era "Straits Chinese" in that they incorporate certain western European Renaissance, Palladian, or neo-classical motifs such as Corinthian pilasters or classical columns and cornices (cf. Khoo 1996; Kohl 1984; Yeang 1992).

The residents I spoke to generally understood that older house forms were ethnically specific and that the basic form of attached shop or terrace house – still dominant in the city -- was itself "Chinese."[1] When I asked one resident if he would say that his house was also Chinese (after he identified himself as Chinese), he replied that there is "no need to say anything – you can see that the building is Chinese." His terrace house had no specifically Chinese decorative elements such as carved gilt doors or screens – what he was referring to was the structure of the terrace house itself as a type. In this typology, structural or design features that might further specify a house as Hokkien or Cantonese (particularly roof and roofing tile profiles) often fell away in favor of broader distinctions of difference that mirrored the large, nationally-defined categories "Malay, Chinese, and Indian."[2] Likewise, his Indian neighbor who lived a few doors away in a similarly unadorned terrace house replied "no" when

asked if hers was an "Indian house." "This is a Chinese house," she said, "the building type is Chinese." Analogously, a Chinese resident whose family and business were housed in a large renovated kampung-style house on the same side of the street clearly identified his house as Malay or Indian-Muslim because of its structure and the fact that it was made of wood. Though types of houses were closely identified with kinds of people and especially the kind of people who originally built them, the ethnicity of house type and of its current residents could be separately identified.

Similar to some of the responses I heard in Kampung Dodol, one resident said that his house was Chinese "because I'm Chinese," and several others said that their houses were Chinese because "everyone living on this road is Chinese" or the area was mostly Chinese. As in Kampung Dodol these statements indicate a certain territorialized demographic consciousness and a sense of rootedness in which identifications of people and buildings or places mutually implicate each other. These connections were expressed, however, without asserting any naturalized or absolute connections between people, places and things. Like the Malays of Kampung Dodol, some Chinese residents had extensively renovated their houses as they could afford to, although in decidedly more modest ways and in fewer instances because most inner city residents were renters and not owners. In making these changes, houses were still considered "Chinese" and, as in the kampung, residents here were likewise little concerned with the age of a structure in itself or any historical purity of ethnic design

detail. Age was important for what it represented, and this was not just about materially aesthetic structural or decorative elements. Architecture was not destiny locked in time. It was regarded as an on-going process in which people recognized themselves to be players.

Unlike the Malay residents of Kampung Dodol, for whom living in a house that was also Malay was quite important, for residents of these two inner city areas, there was no particular opprobrium or discomfort attached to living in a type of house associated with someone else's ethnicity. A house could easily be customized in ways that were publicly expressive of the identities of its current occupants. Even more commonly cited than basic structure as something that identified a house as Chinese or Indian were certain decorative features and accessories that many residents had added to their houses. Sometimes the meanings of these were more or less exclusively ethnic and secular – such as a red light bulb or lantern (indicating "Chinese") hung over the front door, or a plaque or signboard inscribed with a family or business name whose language or script clearly indicated a particular ethnicity (Figure 18). But many more accessories specifically referenced a household's religious belief or on-going religious practice, and these indicated ethnicity only by assumption or inference as to who likely practiced what religion.

Outfitting a house with religious equipment was often considered an important act in making it truly habitable. The primary functions of these items were either for on-going worship or to ensure the safety and well being of a house's occupants; the

Figure 18

Signage in the Inner City
Top: A Chinese Terrace House; Bottom: An Indian Hindu Shop

fact that they could also be publicly visible indicators of identity appeared to be a secondary concern. For example, a Gujarati businessman living in a large terrace house elaborately ornamented with Chinese motifs inside and out had left all the original ornamentation intact but had installed a full-scale, temple-size altar for Hindu deities along the back wall and a Siva *linga*[3] in the center of the main room. His house was on a busy road and he usually kept the front door shut. With the altar not visible, only a modest string of mango leaves hung over the intricately carved and gilt Chinese double door (to prevent the entry of bad spirits) indicated to strangers that the house's occupants were Hindu, and therefore probably Indian.[4] Of the 16 Indian respondents living in ostensibly "Chinese" structures in one of the study areas, 9 said that their houses were "Indian-Muslim" or "Indian" and that what made them so were primarily religious identifiers that they themselves (or their families) had added to the structure.[5] Muslims sometimes cited a verse from the Quran, written in either Jawi[6] or Arabic, that was hung over their door or somewhere in their shop; Hindus mentioned either the string of mango leaves over the door and/or an interior altar. Paraphernalia and equipment associated with "Chinese" religious practices was often quite elaborate (leading several Chinese residents to remark that their beliefs were more costly to practice than those of other groups). Interior household altars in Chinese households most often faced the front door and were often publicly visible when the door was open, but there was also often an outdoor altar[7] to T'ien-Kong (the sky god), and a protective talisman pasted over the door that had been written by a deity through a

medium in trance. These presence of these features as traces of religious practice were what many residents cited as what made their houses "Chinese." (The roles they play in the shape and perception of residential space among Chinese residents will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.) Not to be outdone in the public expression of religious belief, many Christians hung a framed picture of Christ or the Holy Family outside above their front doors.[8]

As in Kampung Dodol, the age of a house or building was not something was usually valued by residents in itself but for what it represented, with "old" and "new" in the built environment meaning some very particular things, most often having to do with what people do than with who they are. Age was a category with which every building in Penang was more or less clearly marked, at least within the city limits. This is not to say that most residents of Penang are architectural historians, or that they are concerned to specify a precise date for the design or construction every building, but the dividing line between "old" and "new" structures was generally clear. "Old" generally meant pre-World War II (the structures then protected by rent control); "new" meant postwar or post-colonial (the era of independence).[9] In this scheme of things, every house visited in all three neighborhoods would be identified as "old." Buildings constructed after World War II, even utilitarian, architecturally undistinguished structures, were not an "unmarked" standard in George Town as they might be in other cities, since they were still (at least as of 1999) somewhat aberrant from a norm. Postwar buildings were marked as "new," precisely because pre-war

structures still dominated the city, both visually and numerically. Just about everywhere outside it, however, "newness" was quickly becoming the assumed standard. As already mentioned, scattered patterns of land ownership, even amongst the largest property owners (see Goh 1997) and rent controls in effect since 1966 have both worked to limit new construction projects within the city limits, despite the state's ability to seize any property in the name of "development."[10] As a result, the "new" buildings in the city, generally larger and higher than their predecessors, were sparsely scattered and they sat, some would say rather uncomfortably, in the midst of a sea of two and three story prewar shop and terrace houses that, for the most part, were still identifiably "Chinese."[11]

Not yet the norm, the newness of such buildings itself convey many things. For the most part ethnically unmarked in their basic structure, these new buildings represent such things as Malaysian (and not specifically Chinese, Indian or Malay) economic achievements since independence; new forms of investment and credit; and new kinds of business enterprises that, for those who remember even the recent past, have likely displaced the modest business enterprises located in shop houses with an extended families of small-scale entrepreneurs living upstairs. As discussed in Chapter 1, every major city in the Malay peninsula was, until recently, largely identifiable as "Chinese," both demographically and architecturally. Each of these features were somewhat problematic for the establishment of an inclusive, pan-ethnic Malaysian national identity since the images of cities themselves had such important

roles to play as symbols of the nation's development and its "modernity." Critiques of architecture articulated from the perspective of "postmodernism" (Harvey 1989; Venturi 1977) have decried the valorization of "newness" in modern architecture as a decontexualizing and dehumanizing trend that detaches structures from long-standing historical, ethnic or vernacular precedents, but these are precisely the features that can make modern architecture such an important tool of nation building in ethnically diverse countries such as Malaysia. Although attempts were made in other Malaysian cities (especially the nation's capital) to tip the visual balance by superficially incorporating forms thought to be specifically "Malay" or "Islamic" (and not "Chinese") into the designs of certain large new buildings, most new architecture in Penang is ethnically unmarked and bears little connection to the past.[12] By nationalist accounts, both of these features are dimensions that contribute to the appeal of "modern" styles. During the 1974 groundbreaking ceremony for the modern – and massive -- KOMAR[13] re-development project in the inner city of George Town (for which he was the namesake and which resulted in a 66-story tower) Tunku Abdul Razaq, the second Prime Minister of Malaysia declared that the project "would change the face of the city, discarding the colonial heritage image in favour of one which reflects the identity of Malaysia and its multi-ethnic culture" (quoted in Penang Development Corporation n.d. [1990]). Depending on how one looks at it, or more properly where, the extent to which this change has occurred is debatable. Penang as a whole has been transformed into a modern industrializing state, but the city itself has not been the

location of most of its large-scale development projects, whether these are industrial, commercial, or residential. Looking up within the inner city, a smattering of medium size high-rises, most of them hotels, pierce the sky at varying distances from Komtar. Looking out and at eye level, however, the cityscape still consists of low-rise, pre-war terrace and shop houses that, in many senses, continue to be simultaneously "old," "largely Chinese," and/or "ethnically mixed."

For most of the people I knew in Penang, the fact that most new residential architecture was ethnically unmarked was not much of a concern, since a tradition of customizing any structure to the ethnicity, or more specifically to the religious practices of its inhabitants continues in new contexts. For example, looking up at blocks of certain high-rise flats at night, one can often see that many of the balconies are illuminated with small red light bulbs, which indicate the presence of an outdoor altar to T'ien-Kong, the sky god. Such a practice indicates that ethnic and religious expression in a household's built environment continues and that "new" and "unmarked" structures have been adapted by residents to suit their own purposes. People continue to make whatever spaces they inhabit their own and creatively adapt long-standing practices in new situations. What residents of old houses in the inner city were much more concerned with, however, was that strictly economic considerations in housing were now becoming overemphasized in new housing situations and that the terms of these significations were increasingly out of the hands of autonomous household control.

One of the implications of the difference between the old and the new in housing is that different house types were becoming increasingly identified, not with ethnicity or religious activities but with what you do in an economic sense. Previously, although a certain segment of Penang's elites had expressed their economic status by constructing large extravagant mansions for themselves, for many others, the look or the structure of the terrace or shop house in which a household lived was no sure indicator of its financial position or level of income. Today, however, the location and type of house in which you live, whether old or new, says somewhat more, in a general sense, about household economy and what one does for a living. Given the paucity of rental apartment complexes in George Town, living in a high-rise flat almost anywhere usually indicates that you own your own unit, or were placed there by the factory you work for – and that you are therefore a participant, in some way, in either state sponsored development projects or a "new economy" that sees housing primarily as an exchangeable investment or commodity. Ownership, even of a "low cost" flat offered by the state to those displaced by development projects, means that you must have both savings and a regular income in order to put up a down payment, meet the loan requirements, and sustain the monthly payments. As discussed below, some residents of the old city (and especially the elderly) who do not have salaried positions have difficulty meeting these requirements. Above all there is a sense that new forms of housing also mean "new" types of occupations. Young factory workers are often housed in multi-story dormitories. Foreign laborers

working on large construction projects live in either ship containers or self-constructed shanties on job sites. Local and foreign professional elites no longer build townhouses or mansions that proclaim specifically Straits Chinese or British colonial identities but now purchase luxury condominiums. In short, "new" housing is often more about economics than ethnicity, about exchange and investment value rather than use value and the continuity of a tradition of self-building or vernacular self-expression. Conversely, "old" houses are often associated with older forms of income generation such as individual and often small-scale entrepreneurship, "traditional" trades, and even sometimes elderly people themselves. For some, recent trends in housing specifically mean that a sense of autonomy and self-determination in terms of where and how one lives is being increasingly diminished and that increases in incomes and standards of living do not necessarily translate into increased quality of life.

Many Chinese and Indian residents in the two inner city areas discussed in this chapter shared a perception expressed by the Malays of Kampung Dodol: that communal sociability was more difficult to maintain in a new high rise than in an old neighborhood of single-unit houses. Many also shared a concern that such new environments might not be the easiest ones in which to raise children because they were thought to reinforce an emphasis on material over moral values among a new generation thought to be particularly vulnerable to the attractions of what was widely discussed in negative terms as the recent rise of "consumer culture." Chinese

residents in particular also frequently expressed that such new housing arrangements might not be very good for old people either.

There were many ways in which the residential spaces of the old inner city represented not only old forms of material culture but also the activities and presence of old people themselves. As already discussed, most large new development and housing projects in Penang are located outside the city center. Walking along an inner city street, even in the late 1990s, it would not be uncommon to come across many landmarks representative of by-gone eras: a barbershop whose Indian proprietor had worked in the same shop and had not altered its interior since the '50s, a Chinese art-deco era coffee shop with original marble tables and bent-wood café chairs, or a street vendor still cooking with an antique charcoal stove. Although a number of old shop houses or colonial mansions had been turned into cyber cafes or discos, it seemed that few youth or young professionals just starting out aspired to live in the inner city. Asking a retired teacher why it seemed that there were so few young people on the streets of the old city, he responded that teenagers go out primarily to "see and be seen" and that they prefer to do that in the new shopping malls and entertainment complexes just outside town – an example of the rise of consumer culture, especially among youth. In many ways, the old city thus meant older patterns of both production and consumption that were still very much appreciated by, and identified with older generations.

For example, an antiques dealer said he knew of many elderly people who felt uprooted and unhappy when younger family members moved them out of the city to live with them in suburban high-rises. He knew of several who would regularly commute back to town just to walk around, visit old haunts, and linger for hours in favorite coffee shops where they knew most of the patrons – an older person's version, perhaps, of going out to "see and be seen." Some articulated an observation that old people have been known to sicken and even die more quickly when they move to a high-rise.[14] One woman said old people "wither and die" in such contexts: separated from friends and familiar activities, they tend not to go out very much, even though there are shops nearby. Many observed that, in a high-rise, doors are always closed so you do not know your neighbors. In the inner city however, old people can easily just walk out the door and participate in the life of the street, go to the sundry shop, or meet friends nearby to play mah-jongg or just chat.

The gist of many of these comments is that housing should properly be people centered and that this conception, along with certain long-standing social values that had always been expressed in urban residential space, are now in danger of being overlooked by a new or a newly prosperous generation participating in an increasingly commercialized, speculative, and impersonal housing property market. Some felt that this market was perhaps dangerously out of control and was leaving behind, not just a significant segment of the population but much of what had made the city an attractive place in which to live. A man who was active in efforts to preserve Penang's historic

architecture told me that "the nouveau riche do not care about old George Town because it wasn't their families who built it." He also said, "I think that the people who are concerned about preserving old buildings are the ones who were raised to take care of their parents." The conceptual interface between old and new housing situations was not just about filial piety, respect for elders, or an appreciation of temporal continuity with the past, it was expressive of a broader conception that held residential space to have a certain positive social and moral content that was now in danger of being constrained or diminished. This man was not suggesting that the old city should be preserved because old people liked it, or because age in itself was a value, but for a range of things that the old inner city represented. He felt that with the current building boom, people were now losing a good amount of self-determination and autonomy, at least as far as housing and everyday life were concerned – and these were things that the city had long embodied. In his view, there was now pressure to relinquish perhaps too much to the interests of the state and big business in the name of "development," and that opportunities to see oneself and values other than financial or commercial reflected in the built environment of the city were becoming harder to come by as time went on.

Active in community projects and protests organized by Penang Heritage Trust[15] to promote architectural preservation, this man had a keen aesthetic appreciation of old building forms, even while also admiring what he considered some of the better examples of modern architecture. Understanding the need to progress

and change and that a discourse of "heritage" protection could also be a source of potentially undesirable constraints, he was perhaps even more keenly appreciative of the expression of autonomy and self-determination in the built environment than of any particular ethnic vernacular. "To me, freedom is more important than heritage," he said. He also said, "If you tell me I can't tear down a building it makes me want to tear it down even more." People should be allowed to do what they wanted, he felt, and perhaps the challenge was education to foster a sense of civic responsibility. He had expressed such remarks in support of a man who had stood up at a meeting with a UNESCO regional representative regarding the possible designation of the inner city of George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In the course of the meeting it was mentioned that the prime minister of Malaysia had once remarked on a trip to Penang that he thought the tin sheeting that had replaced the original terra cotta tiles on many of the roofs of the old city was ugly and that heritage protection would prevent such eyesores. "Who is he, or anyone else to tell people that they cannot have tin roofs if they want them?" this other man insisted. "Maybe they like tin roofs." These comments underscore the significance that self-determination in housing, localized to the level of the individual household, had for residents and how this was a fundamental value that the old city was thought to embody and represent over and above, or as the underlying basis of the expression of any particular ethnic identity through built form. Though beyond the scope of the present discussion, they also convey a sense of the obstacles faced in Penang in legislating and enforcing any clear

architectural preservation codes, which were still not in place at the time of my field research. As discussed later, a discourse of "heritage" protection for the old inner city was just beginning to be taken up by residents who were not activists, and they embraced it primarily as a frame for appeals that they should be allowed to continue to live where and largely how they had for generations.

Lorong Seratus Tahun (One Hundred Years Lane):
A Chinese Neighborhood

The residents of the first of the two areas of George Town I discuss in this chapter were unanimous in their observations that this particular location had no particular name, but that it was predominantly "Chinese," both demographically and architecturally. Lorong Seratus Tahun (One Hundred Years Lane, abbreviated here as LST) – the street on which I lived -- extends several hundred feet between Selangor and Naning Streets, parallel to Irving Street, in a relatively quiet residential wedge (abbreviated here as LST) between two main commercial thoroughfares, Dato Keramat Road and MacAlister Road, which feed, respectively, into and out of the Komtar complex, the city's new high-rise municipal center which is about a half mile distant. (See map, Figure 19). In addition to participating in the activities of many of the residents here – attending weddings, funerals, family dinners, New Year's and other holiday celebrations and, very often, trance medium sessions and other ritual activities in the area's two temples -- I interviewed members of 32 of the area's

Figure 19

Map of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) and Vicinity

households, home to just over 200 people.[16] Though most of the people and many of the things and activities here were Chinese, there was no sense among residents that this was an isolated or ethnically exclusive enclave. As the following sections show, residents' spatial imaginations were expansive, often inclusive, and they were conscious of both identity and difference at a range of levels analogous to but different from both the Malays of Kampung Dodol and the Chinese and Indian residents of the final study area who identified that area as ethnically "mixed." The following is a brief introduction to the area of LST, which is located within what is considered the inner city but outside its original 18th century core that is now the focus of preservationist concern. No house here was on anyone's proposed list as a heritage property worthy of protection, but almost every structure in the area was pre-war and its tenants were thus protected by rent control.

I could not obtain any historical information about the immediate area, apart from that apparently embedded in the name "Lorong Seratus Tahun" – "One Hundred Years Lane." This name is expressive of the value placed on personal longevity, if not necessarily age in itself. Several people, including some who did not live in the area, told me that the name referred to a resident of the street – a lady – who had lived to be a hundred years old. No one I spoke to, however, knew who she was or precisely where she had lived. Discussion of the name, as for many of the names of places in Penang, often led to conversations about either points of local history or things having to do with the passage of time, since a number of street names in Penang had been

changed from English language colonial names to Malay names in the years since Malaysian independence. In this case, conversations turned to a further explanation that achieving the age of 100 is a significant milestone in Chinese culture. Several people told me that at the funeral of a centenarian, participants were supposed to wear red and not be sad, in celebration of the achievement of such longevity. Apart from the two small temples in the area, which were attended by many, but not all of the people who lived nearby, there seemed to be few other publicly notable features of the immediate environs of this street. One was a coffee shop famous for a particularly good *curry mee* (noodles in hot sauce) that would attract many cars attempting to park in the area on the few afternoons per week that it was open. The other was something that I was occasionally warned about when I told people from outside the area where I lived: one of the small hotels around the corner had apparently been operating for many years as a late night brothel catering largely to transvestite prostitutes. Several people recalled, with some amusement, that this corner had once created its own traffic jams – of bicycle-powered trishaws – in the days before cars were very common in Penang. They said that current activity there, however, was modest in comparison and this location was not the focus of very much concern or caution by residents.

On the whole, LST was a very quiet place in which to live, and many residents said that was what they liked about it. Anything you might need, such as household supplies, fresh meat or vegetables from either of two morning wet markets, or hot

hawker food at virtually any time of day, was only a short walk around a few corners. With the exception of a two new office buildings still under construction and a few offices and workshops operating out of a few of the houses, this was primarily a residential area. Though not particularly pretty, it was peaceful and most of the houses were well kept. Many were extensively renovated. A single mango tree provided a bit of green and its fruit attracted a few large yellow birds – if the swarms of even larger black crows, ubiquitous in the city, hadn't gotten them first. Some residents had their own miniature gardens and cultivated swaths of bright purple or white bougainvillea in boxes or ceramic planters outside their houses, or tried their hands at potted orchids, chili peppers, cactus flowers, or small mandarin orange trees. Dogs were the pets of choice, and they were generally admired for their ability to sound an alarm if a stranger approached the house.[17] But there was not very much to bark at most of the time: most people here knew each other or at least knew people to be neighbors. Wedged between two of the city's major thoroughfares, few vehicles passed through during the day – there were too many turns to negotiate to make the area any kind of useful short cut. Even fewer cars came through at night, which made it pleasant to sit outside in front of one's house to enjoy the somewhat cooler evenings. (Several households had metal two-seat swings or benches outside). Parking was easy for those who had their own vehicles, either in a small paved area just in front of some houses, or on the street. With vehicular noise at a minimum, perhaps the loudest sounds filling the air were the Muslim calls to prayer broadcast

throughout the day from the loudspeakers of two different mosques several streets away, or a clashing of drums and cymbals accompanied by chants that indicated that a medium had been possessed by a deity (*shen* or spirit) and was dispensing advice, good luck, or healing in one of the two small temples. At quieter times I sometimes heard the tinkling of someone practicing the piano, or an announcement in Hokkien from a slow moving truck asking people to bring out old newspapers in exchange for a small payment.

Though the fabric of the immediate area had seen some changes in recent years, most residents said that things had stayed pretty much the same for a long time. Most of the houses here were attached terrace houses, meaning that they had been designed for primarily residential purposes and had unglazed windows on either side of a central double panel front door – rather than having the entire ground floor openable to the street as in a shop house (Figures 20 and 21). Judging by their architectural style and relatively large size (many older terrace houses were quite small), most appeared to have been built during the first three decades of the 20th century. A few even older buildings still remaining in the area gave some indication of what the built environment here might have been like before the row houses were built: there were a few modest, wooden, kampung-style houses set back from the street behind yards, and one or two large late 19th- early 20th century Straits-Chinese style bungalows, also with space around them. An equally few modern buildings indicated what the area might increasingly look like in the first decades of the 21st century: there

Figure 20

Terrace Houses in Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area
Top: Plants, Parking, and Outdoor Seating; Bottom: Temple Feast for Deities

Figure 21

Terrace Houses in Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area Showing Decorative Chinese Details

was a five-story, reinforced concrete, walk-up apartment block (with three office units at street level and twelve flats above them) that had replaced a maternity clinic housed in a wooden bungalow; and a six-story concrete-and-mirrored glass corporate office building that residents told me had replaced another wooden kampung house.

As discussed in the following section, based on levels of material culture and consumption if not necessarily income levels (which I could not always determine), residents here were the most prosperous of the three areas studied. As in Kampung Dodol they could, perhaps, be considered middle-class but, in most cases, this was only because housing costs were so low. Most households here were renters protected by rent control. One resident said that, unlike some other areas of the inner city that were considered somewhat rough, he thought people here were "more refined." Definitions of refinement aside, however, it is doubtful that any person not resident here would readily identify this, or any other area of the inner city as a middle class residential neighborhood. Though most households here no longer had a need to operate a sundry shop in their front rooms or to take in boarders as some said they had in the past, a continuing tradition of mixed residential-commercial use was still in evidence as it was throughout the old city. This mixture could be less than tolerable to some of the more firmly established higher-income households who had moved out of the city in recent decades into more strictly residential suburbs. For example, there was a motor vehicle repair shop in LST whose operations occasionally spilled out onto a paved area in front of the shop, and a number of households prepared foodstuffs at

home for sale elsewhere. Similar workshops and enterprises were still scattered throughout the inner city where one could readily see how some residents made their living. Although no resident of LST ever complained to me about the presence of such businesses in their neighborhood, I often heard residents of suburbs criticize the fact that workshops of a technical nature (but not food preparation) were located in the same places in the city where people lived. While it would be difficult to make the case that spatial separation by use is simply an expression of middle-class taste, the "modernization" of Penang is often marked by a trend toward designing structures for a single use. Recent development projects, both commercial and residential, often mean that people no longer live near or where they work -- and that the locations of residential, business and social activities are increasingly segregated. LST seemed to be in the midst of this trend.

The one "new" housing structure in the area – the five-story block of flats over three office/shop units, interestingly represented, at a somewhat expanded scale, the same kind of small-scale speculative development that had shaped much of the city throughout its history. Rents here (for three-bedroom apartments) were approximately ten times higher than those for entire rent-controlled terrace houses in the area, but these prices did not mean that the area was becoming gentrified. The location of these flats in an urban area marked by mixed use meant that it did not attract middle-class families. This "new" form of housing, however, provided homes for people implicated in one way or another in economic structures and occupations that most of

the surrounding residents did not share. These activities represented regional and transnational aspects of Penang's new economy that were bringing people to the inner city only temporarily and this, in turn, resulted in somewhat different types of households than that of an extended family that was common in the terrace houses. For example, one unit was occupied by ten single young men from Bangladesh, all of whom worked in a nearby shop house factory sewing lace trim on ladies undergarments. Another housed both male and female workers (including a married couple) from the Philippines who had been recruited to work in a large Japanese restaurant, also nearby. These residents were provided living quarters by their employers as part of their contract. In another unit, the rent was shared by a group of single acquaintances who had come to Penang from another state to study computers at the same technical college. All of these people walked to work or school. A fourth apartment was occupied by a single junior executive of the multinational pharmaceuticals company Bristol Myers, who had opened a small regional office in one of the commercial units on the ground floor. Although this individual did not commute, he spent little time at home and drove elsewhere for most of his social activities. In short, despite the relatively high rents for these new apartments, and a fair amount of material prosperity among the area's more established residents, LST was not clearly identifiable as a middle class neighborhood, and the changes that had already occurred did not necessarily mean gentrification. According to most long-term residents, the overall character of the neighborhood had remained largely

unchanged for decades, although most assumed that it would become increasingly and more or less exclusively commercial. At the time I lived there, however, it was still mostly residential, and still largely "Chinese." It represented a continued, citywide tradition of mixed use in which most residents were not commuters. They were either retired, worked near their homes, or, in quite a few cases, used (and sometimes physically adapted) their houses to accommodate both household and business activities. As discussed later, many of these activities served to maintain a sense of place that was appreciated by residents in ways that were in addition to, or apart from, an identification by residents that the area was specifically Chinese.

Tanjung (Promontory): The Culturally Multiple Old Inner City

The second area to be discussed in this chapter is the oldest part of the city of George Town, which still retains much of its original 18th and 19th century urban fabric. Residents throughout Penang (and of all ethnicities) refer this area as "Tanjung" – a Malay word that means "cape" or "promontory." It was in this low lying area, surrounded by water on two sides, where the British adventurer and entrepreneur Francis Light is thought to have fired gold coins into the jungle in order to facilitate its rapid clearing by Malays from the mainland and others he brought with him (Hoyt 1991:15). This was also where the British built a fort, a church, and a town hall, all of which still remain. The original grid of sometimes very narrow streets that

Light laid out beyond the fort was where most of the households surveyed were located.

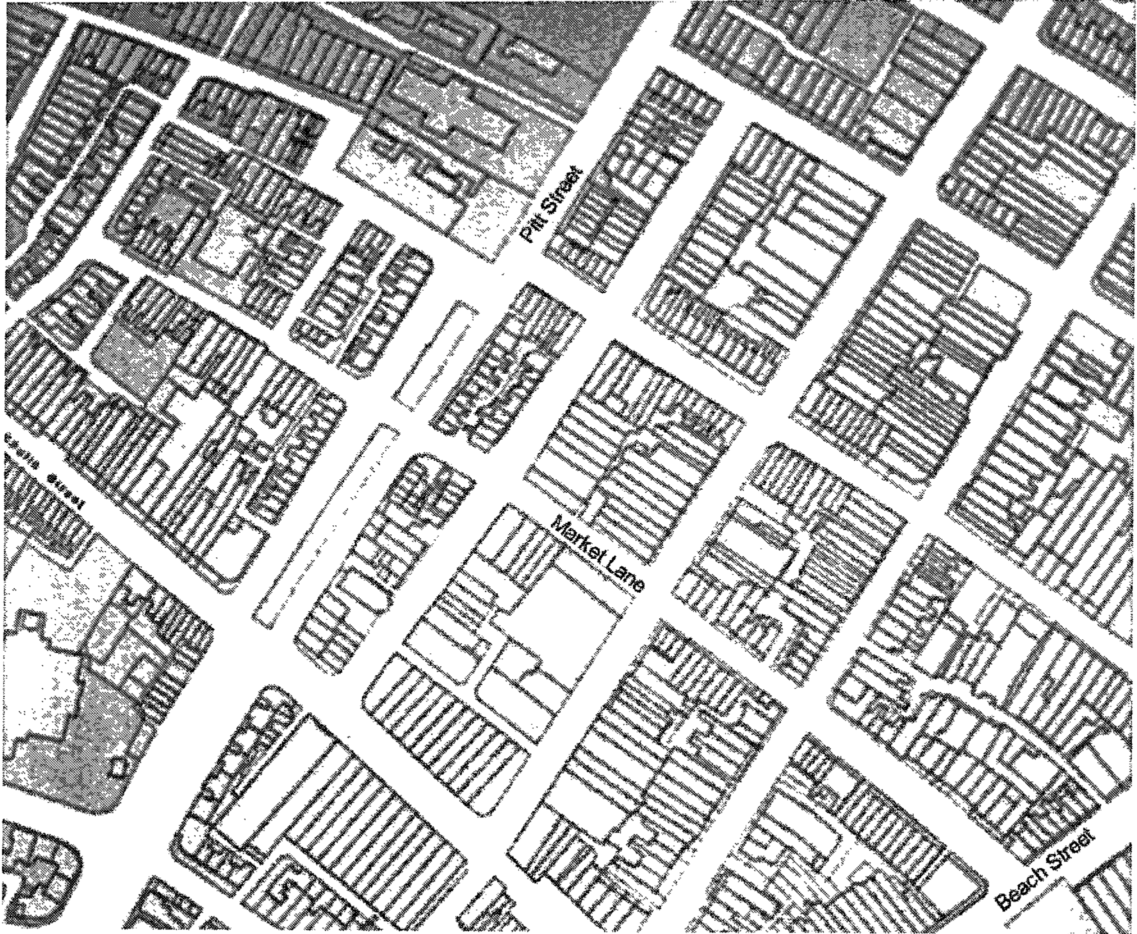
As the city grew, many of its original, predominately timber-constructed houses and shops were replaced by more permanent, and more elaborate structures. Despite the value that the city's first generations of new inhabitants – and many of its current residents -- placed on such traits as ambition, enterprise and thrift, new found prosperity was often funneled into an elaboration of architectural form and detail that expressed specific ethnic, religious, or clan identities. These expressions are most clearly evident in the historic public and semi-public structures that are scattered throughout the old inner city – mosques, Hindu temples, Chinese temples, clan houses, and association headquarters, British colonial court and administrative structures, a clock tower dedicated to Queen Victoria, and a colonial Anglican church. But the structures in which most people live and work in the inner city – terrace and shop houses sharing a common party wall – are also marked by both age and cultural specificity. As the population of the city grew to be predominantly Chinese, Chinese building types, or more specifically "Straits Chinese" types incorporating certain neo-classical European elements, became established as a near-ubiquitous urban vernacular standard associated with the numerically dominant group. The city itself then became widely identified, in some quarters, as "largely Chinese," and not just by Chinese themselves. Today, despite increasing numbers of new, ethnically "unmarked" structures, including the Komtar tower, a half dozen or so high-rise

hotels, and increasing numbers of small office buildings, "old" still predominates numerically and very often visually over "new" in and near the old inner city, where most house types are single unit and identifiably "Chinese" in their basic structure. A 1990 survey of the inner city area of Tanjung found that 85.1% of the structures in this area were shop or terrace houses (predominantly pre-war) and that 90.4% of the residents in this area were ethnically Chinese (Tan 1990:13; 47). Apart from referencing Chinese ethnicities, with certain details sometimes specifically Hokkien or Cantonese, these single-unit houses also continued to represent and embody a baseline of the city's social economy throughout most of its history: the multiple small businesses and extended-family type households upon which so much of the character and early growth of the city was premised.

Whether because multiple ethnic and religious referents abound in such close proximity and daily encounters with difference are inescapable, or because discursive attention by the state has focused on this part of the city as representative of Malaysia's diversity -- or a combination of multiple factors -- most residents I spoke to in this area considered it ethnically "mixed," despite Chinese dominance architecturally and demographically. Thirty-one houses, home to 156 people, were visited in Tanjung. (See map, Figure 22). These were located on fourteen different streets, all of which were located within, or very near to, Light's original 18th century grid.[18] Residents' perceptions of the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of both this area and LST is presented in greater detail in the sections below. In Tanjung, 15

Figure 22

Map of Tanjung Study Area



of the households interviewed self identified as "Chinese" and 16 were "Indian." Among the latter, 8 were "Indian-Muslim" and 8 were "Indian Hindu."[19] This range at least approximates a representative sampling of the predominant cultural groups historically, and still resident in the old city.

Somewhat different sets of issues presented themselves here than in either Kampung Dodol or LST. As what was once the economic center of the city, there was much greater emphasis among residents here on commercial and business activities, which made crowded and even congested streets positive attributes. There was also a much looser sense of residential community and a somewhat keener sense of diversity and difference. Fewer people seemed to have such close relationships with neighbors as those I witnessed in the other two areas. Many more doors here were locked and windows were closed for purposes of both security and to keep out noise and dust. Despite its symbolic importance as Penang's historic core, many people had already left the area to live elsewhere and its residential population was declining. As discussed in Chapter 1, a specifically Malay – and Muslim – residential presence within Tanjung is now somewhat less prominent than it once was. The largest mosque in the area, Kapitan Kling, is specifically identified as Indian-Muslim (and named after its founder who was appointed "kapitan" of the Indian-Muslim community by the British). The nearby Acheen Street mosque, smaller and less visible behind a row of shop houses, is Malay. Neither now has a very large membership of permanent nearby residents and the location of Friday prayers alternates between them because so

few regulars remain. (Some however, now commute from elsewhere in order to continue to attend at these locations.) Many of the more prosperous Indian-Muslim businessmen have moved their households to more up-scale residential neighborhoods in the suburbs and retain their old shop houses only as business outlets – and to house staff. Some Chinese and Indian Hindus do likewise. Many of these houses in the old city are quite small. Limited space, urban congestion and increased prosperity seem to be motivating factors to move elsewhere to live. As will be seen, among both the Chinese and Indians who remained as residents, income levels were often very low, and patterns of consumption were decidedly less "middle-class" than the residents of the generally larger houses of LST.

The importance of specifying one's specific sub-group ethnic identification appears to be on the wane in Penang, a phenomenon that can perhaps be tied to the structure of national-level politics in Malaysia since independence, in which three of the major political parties constituting the national coalition are identified in broad terms as Malay (United Malays National Organization -- UMNO), Chinese (Malaysian Chinese Association -- MCA), and Indian (Malaysian Indian Congress -- MIC). A social domain in which greater ethnic specificity remains important, however, are in rituals associated with life cycle transitions, such as marriages and funerals, which, for many Chinese, should be specifically Hokkien, Cantonese, or Teochew. As already mentioned and discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, services needed by immigrants during the colonial era were often provided by voluntary associations tied

to specific clan, guild, region, ethnic or linguistic identities of their members whose goals were to help their own with jobs, social networks, and economic support (Lee 1985; Yen 1986:1-140). Though the activities of these associations continue in transformed dimensions, and their often imposing headquarters buildings dominate the urban landscape, much broader strokes of identity now characterize much of contemporary George Town's social landscape. Social categories even larger than the main ethnic groups formulated under colonialism have formed since independence, such as the decisive, nationally defined division between *bumiputera* (a category that includes native Malays and *orang asli* (aboriginal) groups), and non-bumiputera. Non-bumiputeras, who constitute most of the inner city's inhabitants, continue to thrive on their own self-sufficient networks at a range of scales without enjoying much support from either state or national economic development plans, which reserve favorable quotas for bumiputera groups and especially Malays. Ethnic sub-group specificity now matters little in this regard – with members of different Chinese ethnicities being mutually supportive -- and residential ethnic segregation[20] in general is not much of an issue in Tanjung, but it was in the past, when secret societies aligned with different ethnic sub-groups battled for turf and the control of certain city streets. A 19th century map, for example, of a single street specified the households on one side as Hokkien and the other as Teochew or Cantonese. Though certain sides, ends, or groups of streets could at one time be identified with specific Chinese ethnicities, today this is no longer the case. On most streets, individual houses in the same row

may be alternately inhabited by members of any Chinese ethnicity, by Indian-Muslims or by Hindus, with very fewer numbers of Malays (Figure 23).

An even more broadly encompassing identifier for the old inner city is its more recent designation as "multicultural." There is a strong sense in which Tanjung is now popularly and widely considered to be multicultural, both spatially and socially. This is the area that has been the focus of much non-governmental effort to preserve, protect, enhance or develop aspects of the area as exemplars of the city's "heritage," and of government efforts that more often specifically target the promotion of tourism. In both endeavors, multiculturalism is an important trope in that it mirrors a national discourse that seeks to promote unity and harmony among Malaysia's diverse cultural groups. This discourse is socially inclusive in its spatial imagination and contributes to residents' understanding of the space in which they live as ethnically "mixed" and diverse. For example, one of the old city's original streets and still a major artery is "Pitt Street" (named in the 18th century after the current British prime minister). After national independence this street was renamed "Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling" (Kapitan Kling Mosque Street), but it is also now promoted by the state of Penang as "Harmony Street" because along its short length there is a mosque, Hindu and Chinese temples, and a colonial Christian church. Many of the residents I spoke to in the area neatly replicated this same progression of monuments in conversations about what was prominent or distinctive in the area near their houses. As will be seen, however, when asked to represent their neighborhood graphically, many preferred to concentrate on or

Figure 23

Shop and Terrace Houses in Tanjung Area
Top: An Outdoor Indian-Muslim Tea Stall; Bottom: A Chinese Terrace House

emphasize only those features of the built with which they themselves could identify, in addition to a few ethnically "unmarked" modern structures. Likewise, most residents here were aware of a discourse of heritage regarding their area, but they usually cited it specifically as a reason why their houses should not be re-developed and they should be allowed to remain as tenants. They were much less concerned with history or heritage in and for themselves.

Jumping forward to anticipate the concluding section of this chapter, which compares and contrasts all three neighborhoods surveyed, what residents seemed to value and identify with most in each area was not so much any publicly visible aesthetic features of their houses or neighborhoods as their use value and the ways in which both structures and locations facilitated ways of life that were familiar and supported opportunities for self-determination. Residents also valued living in convenient locations in the heart of the city and that there was enough space for multiple generations of kin to live together, with some also valorizing temporal continuity and a family history of long-term residence in the same house or location. As in Kampung Dodol, the Chinese and Indian residents of both LST and Tanjung cared little whether their houses expressed status on any economic scale or hierarchy of housing type. Though "prosperity" was itself a trope in many of the articulations of Chinese culture, Chinese and Indian residents alike were often less conscious of the exchange value of their houses (which were in locations extremely desirable for commercial development) than the Malays, perhaps because so few owned their own

houses. Estimates of current "fair market" rents for inner city shop and terrace houses, as discussed in the press, were dismissed by many tenants of the inner city as preposterous and unattainable. Protected by rent control and with some recognizing that their way of life would possibly be at stake when it was due to end (as of January 1, 2000), most spoke of their housing situation in terms of convenience and personal comfort rather than history, heritage, or real estate value, with certain expressions of ethnicity assumed but not always emphasized. Many expressed these values in a language of emotion and not of rights. This was a somewhat different conception of their place in a larger scheme of things than among residents of Kampung Dodol, where the facts that house types and the kampung itself were both identifiable as specifically Malay were quite important to many residents.

Ethnicity, Language, and Education

Inner city George Town is multicultural in that it is not a "melting pot" in which there is pressure to assimilate to a single dominant culture; but it is also not a "caldron of ethnicity" waiting to erupt, as in Nash's (1989) use of the term. In the decades since Nash first studied ethnicity in Malaysia various processes of accommodation between groups have run their course and shifts in the focal points of identity have become well established. New generations of urban residents have become even further detached from their families' specific origins in China or India and have embraced, in varying degrees, a pan-ethnic "Malaysian" identity (in addition

to ethnic identity) and a shared sense that both urban and national space is shared among different diverse groups. Though some people I spoke with identified themselves at the outset as specifically Hokkien -- the dominant Chinese ethnicity in Penang -- most initially identified themselves according to the large ethnic categories – Malay, Chinese, or Indian – that figure so prominently in national politics. Although criticisms of these categories (Mandel 2001; Shamsul 1998, 2001) and of the quotas reserved for Malays under the New Economic Plan and New Development Plan (Boo 1998) continue to be expressed by Malaysian commentators, many non-Malay residents I spoke with agreed that these national-level policies had achieved some success in improving economic conditions for Malays and that they had thereby defused potential Malay-Chinese tensions. Within the category "Chinese" especially, there is much more ethnic diversity than most people initially think important to express. Figure 24 details with more specificity the ethnicities of the Chinese residents interviewed in LST and Tanjung that were ascertained in the course of further questions and conversation. Though Indians here often specified additional details about their language use and region of origin in India, most continued to self identify as "Indian" and not with any more specific group identity.

In terms of dimensions of identity other than ethnicity, such as language use, education and literacy, diversity and consciousness of difference were things that often began at home and extended beyond the household into public interactions and the understanding of shared urban space at a larger territorial scale. Each of these

Figure 24

Ethnicity of Residents Interviewed
Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) and Tanjung Areas

LST = 32 respondents
Tanjung = 31 respondents

	Numbers of Residents:	
	LST	**Tanjung**
Hokkien	21	6
Cantonese	2	7
Teochew	3	1
Hockchew	1	1
Fuchow	1	--
Khek	1	--
Sin Leng	1	--
Indian	2	16
Total	32	31

components of identity were variables more or less independent of each other and in many cases they were articulated differently and in different combinations for each individual, even within the same household. For all three areas of the city, younger members of households were, on the whole, educated at higher levels than their elders – people across the board were investing in the education of their children. But young and old often had varying degrees of competence in different combinations of languages; there appeared to be little or no connection between multilingualism and higher levels of education; and many people in the inner city were literate only in a

language they did not speak most often. Language use was not always a sure indicator of ethnic specificity and, for the Chinese, the religion of the parent was additionally not always the religion of the child as was usually the case for Malays and for Indians, both Muslim and Hindu. Chinese children seemed to have been allowed to determine their own configuration of religious practice in many of the households I knew and, in some, only the parents had converted to Christianity, sometimes at a late age.

To flesh this out a bit more without going into too much detail, among the Chinese I spoke with in both inner city areas the four most commonly known languages were Hokkien, Mandarin, English, and Cantonese,[21] in descending order of frequency (see Figure 25). For Indians in Tanjung the most common languages were Tamil, Malay and English – a difference in the combinations of languages known that marks one of the main cultural cleavages between Chinese and Indians in Malaysia. In this regard English appears to be the most common language bridging this social divide.[22] It has, as one Malaysian academic puts it, not only "become prominent in public spaces but, more important, it has become preeminent as the language of all Malaysians as its ownership cannot be claimed by any one ethnic group" (Mandal 1998:80; 2001:160).

City residents generally know many languages (see Figure 15) and use them in different ways. Hokkien is not written; conversely, no household with members who knew Mandarin ever spoke it at home as a primary language. In each case, if Mandarin was known it was always reserved for either reading or more formal

Figure 25

Languages Known in Households Surveyed
Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) and Tanjung Areas

	Number of Households			
	LST Chinese (30)	**LST Indian (2)**	**Tanjung Chinese (15)**	**Tanjung Indian (16)**
Language:				
Hokkien	29	1	13	--
Mandarin	14	--	11	1
Cantonese	7	--	10	1
Teochew	1	--	1	--
Hockchew	--	--	1	--
English	11	2	10	9
Malay	4	--	5	13
Tamil	--	2	--	15
Gujarati	--	--	--	3
Telugu	--	--	--	1
Hindi	--	--	--	1
Thai	1	--	--	--

public occasions.[23] But many who spoke Hokkien or Tamil could read only English and/or Malay. Among Chinese households, Malay and English were sometimes the exclusive preserve of younger generations, who were currently learning them in school or using them at work, where knowledge of both English and Hokkien was sometimes considered an advantage. Knowledge of Malay, however, was important

for most government jobs. Hokkien exerted a certain amount of pressure as perhaps the most widely spoken lingua franca throughout the city – and there were Cantonese and Teochew residents who said they or their families no longer knew or spoke very much Cantonese or Teochew and now used mostly Hokkien in public and, increasingly among younger generations, even at home. In short, language use was not much of a social barrier in the city, since few urban residents were monolingual, nor was use of a specific language isomorphic with one's ethnicity. These linguistic factors contributed to perceptions that the inner city was a space of diversity.

Out of a total of 63 respondents in both areas, only eight said that members of their household knew only one language. Five of the monolingual households (5 Hokkien and 1 Cantonese) were in the "largely Chinese" area of LST; the remaining two (1 Hokkien and 1 Tamil) were in Tanjung. Though the sample is small, this difference perhaps indicates that the ability to maintain a monolingual household is greater when one's house is in a more ethnically homogeneous location. As indicated in Figure 15 more residents of Tanjung, both Chinese and Indian, knew more languages than their counterparts in LST. There was more linguistic diversity in Tanjung despite, or apart from the facts that levels of both education and income were, on the whole, lower here than in LST. Many said people said they were self taught in other languages or just picked them up in the course of living in the city; and the greater linguistic diversity that residents experienced in the old inner city area of

Tanjung likely contributed to their perception that this part of town was ethnically "mixed."

In many ways, ethnicity was merely the subtext of other identities and differences in which the baseline was the autonomous expression of one's own particular combination of cultural elements. Given that so much in Penang was culturally specific and many different peoples from China had settled in the city, before I spent much time there I had expected that people would readily identify themselves at a very specific level by fore-fronting whether they were Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, etc. Chinese residents rarely spoke of their specific ethnicity unless I asked. Instead, I found that the most common form of unsolicited self-identification among residents of all ethnicities, but especially among Chinese, was whether one's self or someone else was "English educated," "Chinese educated," or "Malay educated."

Being English or Chinese educated often did not directly correlate with what language was most often spoken at home. Rather, the distinction referred to literacy and different domains of standard knowledge that were associated with being literate in one language or another. Speakers of Hokkien, which is not written, could be literate in either English or Mandarin (or both), and sometimes Malay, depending on what schools they had attended, what level of education they had attained, and which written languages were mandated (this was usually Malay) or discouraged by national education policy at the time they had attended. The terms "Chinese educated"

Figure 26

Number of Languages Known in Households Surveyed
Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) and Tanjung Areas

LST = 32 households
Tanjung = 31 households

	Number of Households			
	LST Chinese	**LST Indian**	**Tanjung Chinese**	**Tanjung Indian**
	(30)	**(2)**	**(15)**	**(16)**
Number of languages known:				
1	6	--	1	1
2	15	1	1	8
3	5	1	6	4
4 or more	4	--	7	3
	Total = 32		Total = 31	

or "English educated" referred not to just the language studied in school but also the primary language of instruction. In general, people who were "Chinese educated" were thought by their "English educated" counterparts to be better versed in the intricacies of Chinese culture, such as the details of ritual and devotion, because they were both socialized differently and had greater familiarity, from an early age, with certain standard works of Mandarin language literature.[24]

Most Indian residents interviewed were educated in Tamil (either in school or "under the tree" as several referred to their informal education in villages in India),

with English or English and Malay being the second and third most common languages of their education. Among the Chinese respondents, more in LST had been educated in English (14) than in Mandarin (8), but in Tanjung the numbers were roughly equal (5 in English and 6 in Mandarin). The rest of the Chinese respondents were educated in various combinations of English, Mandarin, and Malay (sometimes all three).[25] In any case, and to reiterate, among all non-Malay residents, there was no necessary correlation between one's own specific ethnicity and either spoken language or the language of literacy. For example, being ethnic Indian did not necessarily mean that one spoke or read an Indian language, or had ever studied one in school. Parents and children in the same household often knew different combinations of languages, at different levels of competency, and they were often literate only in a language they did not speak most often. There were many ways of both speaking and reading in George Town and many verbal interactions appeared to proceed from an assumption of linguistic heterogeneity and accommodation to a great deal of individual variation.

Citing the ability of household members to speak different languages was a matter of some pride for many respondents, with most citing additional languages as being used or learned primarily in contexts outside the home – such as at school, at work, or, as some said, in order to get better deals from business associates. An unusual combination of person and language could be something that was appreciated quite positively. For example, an Indian Hindu performer who spoke and sang in

Hokkien on stage was quite famous and in great demand for street performances commissioned by Chinese Taoist and Buddhist temples during festivals.[26]

The point in discussing this linguistic complexity is that people in Penang expect people to be different – and there is a range of ways in which to be different that are not confined to ethnicity in terms of descent. Difference was also something that was actively created and you could do something about, and people were generally respected for their own, sometimes very individual combinations of cultural attributes. As discussed in Chapter 1, consciousness of difference between individuals and demographic consciousness at a larger scale figures into the epistemological space of residents and also into the real spaces that social interactions help to create. This following is an example of how this works. Most Chinese people in Penang are recognizable as such by their physiognomy. I found that many verbal interactions between Chinese strangers were initiated in Hokkien, with the assumption being that this is a language that most Chinese in Penang know. But this language may only be imperfectly known by either party. Such conversations may be sprinkled with English and/or Malay and eventually veer off more or less completely into either of these by their end. I witnessed quite a few instances in which an acquaintance who seemed to have actively participated in a conversation later confided in me that he or she had had some trouble understanding everything that was being said -- a difficulty that was not immediately apparent because no participant appeared to indicate any difficulty. In commenting on "the particular sense of pluralism and hybridity" that he says is being

broached in many linguistic exchanges in Malaysia, the Malaysian historian and political theorist Sumit Mandal perhaps best sums up what I witnessed many times in Penang:

> Social life is negotiated through conversations in a variety of languages and accents, resting on the participants' linguistic breadth. As the same time, much goes on where one party watches and listens silently to a language spoken that is unintelligible or partially intelligible, typically comprehending a lot or enough merely as a result of this practiced behavior (Mandal 2001:163).

Mandal goes on to observe that:

> Two key things mark this interaction. First, there is no overarching dominant language or rule, as is the case say in the United States with English. Second, much operates on the basis of empathy rather than tolerance. This does not mean that concern is overtly expressed for "the other" but that there is an ability and desire to accept and perhaps even to comprehend a strange language in the gaze of the listener (Mandal 2001:163)

Mandal concludes that "at least as expressed in linguistic terms, differences between cultures are [thus] not regarded as alienating" (Mandal 2001:163). I suggest that such empathy and absence of alienation are expressions of the valorization of a certain sense of autonomy and self-determination (already discussed) in which people understand the expressions of themselves and others as subsets of difference operating within a shared arena of social action inherently marked by diversity. This arena, I maintain, is deeply spatial – it extends from the space of the household, to residential neighborhoods, the city itself and its metropolitan area (seen as foci of a shared regional identity), and to the space of the nation as a whole.

Immigrant Ambition, Household Autonomy, and Urban Autochthony

Although many things and practices in Penang continue to reference people's origins elsewhere, the specifics of when and from where someone or someone's predecessors came to the city have given way to other concerns, such as where and how one lives, and how long someone has lived in a particular location. Though just about everyone's forebears were originally newcomers to the island (even Malays were from the mainland), succeeding generations have settled in and made Penang their own – and there were many long-term residents who were deeply attached to particular residential locations in the city. Much of the early growth of George Town as an urban center was founded on the enterprising ambition of an immigrant population, who literally built a city to suit their own purposes. Though the historical origins of the city and even one's own family may not now be uppermost in everyone's minds, many of the values and lifestyles thought to be associated with the city's early immigrants are still widely shared, and they figure into people's creation, perceptions and uses of the places in which they live.

The city's different groups have different degrees of connection to their ancestral homelands. Few ethnic Chinese have ever visited China, for example, but many Indians, especially Hindus, have visited India, either for pilgrimage, business, or to keep in touch with family. Different regional political histories account for these differences.[27] Chinese migration to Malaya generally ceased with the Japanese invasion of Penang in 1941, but migration from India continued. Among the Chinese

respondents in both LST and Tanjung most were the second or third generation of their family to live in Malaysia, having had parents or grandparents who had come to Penang prior to World War II. Many of these individuals were elderly, which meant in some cases that their families had come to Penang in the 19th century. A small minority of household members were themselves the original immigrants. Members of later generations could sometimes pinpoint with great precision their family's village of origin in China as well as who in their family had first come to Penang and in what year. Others (and these were not just young people) specified only a larger Chinese region, a more general time frame, or did not know many details. Among the Indian residents visited in Tanjung roughly one third each were first, second, and third generation immigrants. A number were still citizens of India, and all were generally more conversant than most Chinese residents about the specifics of their families' travel histories and their places of origin in India. A number had lived and worked in George Town for decades to support wives and children who remained in India and had not been back to see them for years.

Chinese, Indians and Malays have always contributed to Penang's economy, but George Town is perhaps best known for the enterprise, ambition, and long-standing cultural traditions of its Chinese inhabitants in particular. For many observers, including Malaysians of other ethnicities, Malaysian-Chinese culture is intimately associated with such characteristics as thrift, the prevalence of extended networks of family and other associates advantageous for business activities, and a

general talent, and drive, for making money. Nonini (1998) notes that in overseas contexts, Chinese immigrants assimilated to local cultures only if doing so offered the possibility of upward socioeconomic mobility. Many of Penang's earliest immigrants from China followed this pattern, and created a distinctive "Baba-Nonya" or Straits Chinese culture that incorporated elements of Chinese, British, and local Malay culture that were expressed in hybrid forms of language (Baba-Malay), dress, custom, cuisine, decorative arts, and architecture (cf. Khoo 1996). This cultural group firmly established themselves as the local elite and their descendents continue to hold prominent positions in such domains as government, education, social service organizations, and land ownership, but not necessarily business. At the same time, there was a baseline of later Chinese immigrants and their descendants who did not, or could not assimilate, perhaps because many of the more lucrative opportunities were the exclusive preserve of an already entrenched Straits Chinese elite. These *sinkek* (recent arrivals from China), might not have been well educated or known much English, but they were the group that was often specifically characterized as being economically energetic, enterprising and good at making money. Stories are legion in memoirs and historical novels about succeeding generations of Baba dynasties (usually third generation) dissipating family fortunes amassed by hard-working first-generation immigrants who had transformed themselves in a single generation from penniless paupers to scions of business empires based on banking, wholesale trade, rubber, pepper or tin.[28] A common practice among Baba patriarchs would be to seek

sinkek husbands for their daughters (who would often adopt the patriarch's family name and be incorporated into the household) in the hopes that their first-generation energies would revitalize family businesses.

The second world war, a post-independence shift away from production of primary commodities, and, more recently, new, transnational flows of investment capital, effectively ended Baba dominance as a coherent community and Baba culture became relegated to the domain of "heritage." The social distinction between Babas and non-assimilated Chinese is now very much less salient,[29] and a specifically Baba presence is now much diminished in the city. Many of their mansions (located within the city but not always in the center) were sold off, converted to commercial uses, or demolished to make way for high-rise condominiums and shopping complexes, with the proceeds often divided among new generations of multiple heirs who no longer wished to live together in the same house. A more broadly conceived "Chinese" presence remains, however, that embraces both succeeding generations of *sinkek* who did not assimilate or incorporate many British and Malay elements into their culture during the colonial era, and succeeding generations of Babas who did.

The continued characterization, in the postcolonial era, of "the Chinese" as enterprising and ambitious, is, like most stereotypes, overstated. Not every Chinese resident of George Town was truly prosperous, an entrepreneur, or even well off. But there is an important sense in which the Chinese who have remained in the inner city, together with their Indian counterparts, have remained resilient, independent, and in

many ways culturally autonomous. Both groups continue to go their own ways without very much help from state and national economic development programs, five-year plans, or increased employment opportunities created by government support of large transnational corporations in a new industrial, free trade zone located just outside the city. Many of these programs specifically target Malays, some of whom struggle with a cultural dissonance occasioned by shifting from agricultural work in a close-knit rural kampung, to the less familiar environments of assembly work in a factory and life in a semi-urban dormitory or high-rise apartment block (Ong 1987, 1988). As will be discussed below, most of the residents of LST and Tanjung greatly valued the continuity, stability, and familiarity of their living arrangements. Their lifestyles were truly urban and, like the houses they lived in, largely unchanged since before the war. For the most part, the ways in which they earned their livings both derived from, and contributed to, a specifically urban experience. Much of this experience was self-generated and the product of ethnically specific, very localized enterprises and support networks. Unlike the Malays of Kampung Dodol, many of whom held jobs in factories, public schools and hospitals, or with the government, few households surveyed in either area of the inner city were exclusively dependent on salaried positions or were engaged in occupations directly linked to state sponsorship or big business. Many householders were themselves entrepreneurs, even if on a modest scale, and most households had a least one member who was engaged in some sort of self-managed or non-salaried business activity. This pattern meant that income

levels might fluctuate or remain low, but it contributed to a sense of personal and household autonomy and the perception that prosperity could be achieved though individual effort. These efforts were not always completely independent in that they often relied on local networks, but they did they not primarily depend upon state support.

The incomes of independent entrepreneurs in the inner city were among the highest, and also among the lowest among all the income levels I was able to ascertain. On the whole, and comparing all three areas studied, total household incomes were highest in the Chinese area of LST, and lowest in Tanjung, with income levels in Kampung Dodol, where more residents had salaried positions, falling somewhere in between. Having one's own business in the inner city meant that one could do quite well but it could also mean that one had only an extremely modest income. For example, Indian proprietors of shops in Tanjung selling textiles, clothing, Hindu religious articles or gold jewelry, working either alone or with one or two assistants, said they could earn more than RM 4000 (US$1,000) in a good month. Conversely, several Indians operating small tea or sundry shops said they made only RM 200 to RM 400 (US$50-100) per month. These modest incomes, however, could nevertheless go quite far if one's expenditures and lifestyle were also modest. A 78-year-old Indian Muslim who had sold mutton in the same small shop for twenty years said that the RM400-600 (US$100-150) he earned per month was enough to support a wife and children who had remained in India. Incomes among Chinese residents of

Tanjung could also be modest or low. Although the sample is small and data on income levels was not complete for all households, no Chinese household in Tanjung, including the business owners, quoted a monthly income for any individual as being above RM1500, and some were in the RM400 to RM800 range.[30] Many of the more prosperous business owners in Tanjung, both Chinese and Indian, had moved their families to the suburbs, and the tradition of living above, or behind one's shop was waning and had left behind some with only very modest incomes: 11 of the 16 Indian households surveyed continued to live above their shops; but only 2 of the 15 Chinese households visited had this arrangement.

On the whole, and taking into account even the quite prosperous Indian business owners, the survey confirmed popular perception that those who remained as residents in the oldest part of the city were among those who were the least well-off, and that lifestyles here were sometimes extremely modest. In addition to the visually self-evident identification of much of the built fabric of the inner city as "old" and "Chinese," there was also a widespread perception (in the press and among state planners) that the central core of the old city was largely the domain of an aging residential population that had been living there for a very long time. Based on data collected, this observation was somewhat, but not entirely correct. Rent controls on pre-war structures did contribute to long-term residential stability, but the survey revealed that it was not just the elderly who lived here. Although the average age of residents surveyed in Tanjung was somewhat older than those of LST and Kampung

Dodol, fully half, or more, of the people living in all three areas were under forty years of age, and a large percentage was under 30.[31] (See Figure 16).

Figure 27

Age of Residents in Households Surveyed

Age	Kampung Dodol (302 residents)	LST (204 residents)	Tanjung (156 residents)
under 30	50.9%	43.1%	40.3%
under 40	68.5%	53.4%	50.0%

As in Kampung Dodol, most residents of both LST and Tanjung had lived in the same house for a long time, with most saying that they had been there for over thirty years and that previous generations of their family had also lived there. One of the longest-term residents in the LST area was Mr. Koh,[32] who said that his family had moved to the house in the mid 1930s -- a year or two after he was born and a year or two after the house had been built. Mr. Koh's house was one of the oldest terrace houses in this area, and his recollection provides a general date for the construction of most of the terrace houses in LST, which were similar in style.[33] Several of the tenancies in Tanjung, however, were much longer. A 73-year-old Indian shopkeeper in Tanjung said that his family had been living in the same house for over 100 years, and three other Chinese residents of Tanjung, who were also in their 70s, said that

either their mother or their father had lived there. Apart from a single household that had just moved to a small terrace house in Tanjung, even the newest residents of Tanjung (a total of 5 households) had lived in the same house between 10 and 20 years. Every other household in the Tanjung sample had been there longer.

In a moment of pessimism about the future of old George Town, which I often heard expressed in many quarters, a heritage preservation activist with whom I was having tea in an open-air coffee shop, made the following observation as we looked out at the old inner city. "I would say that 95% of the people of Penang wouldn't care whether this was all torn down and destroyed – just as long as they get a space for themselves, they don't care whether it is old or new." In the course of my conversations with many inner city residents, I found this observation to be untrue. As in Kampung Dodol, people did not generally value the age of a house in itself but for what old houses in particular often represented – use values over exchange values – along with a certain social content of a house's setting. Both of these were valued more than any purely aesthetic or historic details of its material structural form. The difference between the Malays of Kampung Dodol and the Chinese and Indians in this regard, however, was that, for the latter two groups, a good part of the social content in question more explicitly embraced the commercial and entrepreneurial opportunities represented by the location of a house in the inner city. These opportunities and the social content of urban residential space were prominent among what many residents feared would be diminished, constrained, or less accessible if one

lived in a new type of house in another location. Many said that they or their families had originally chosen a central urban location because it was busy and good for business. But many of these same people were also deeply attached to where, what kind of house, and the particular house they already lived in, not just because they were convenient, practical, and inexpensive, but also because they valued the continuity, stability, and familiarity of long-term residence in the same location, a house that was big enough for extended families, and relationships with neighbors that were often close. New types of housing arrangements, where units were often small, distant from the city's center, and where it was perceived that doors often remained closed, did not have these advantages. "In a modern house, even a terrace house, you don't know the neighbors," said one man. "In a flat, you don't know what is happening around you," said another.

There were many other indications that residents of the inner city were very attached to the places where they had lived for so long. As in Kampung Dodol, a number who had already bought low-cost high-rise units outside the city were currently renting them out so they could stay in town (and not incidentally have their own tenants cover the monthly loan payments for the new unit). When asked where they would want to go if they had to leave their current house most cited Penang's North East district – the same location where they already lived but where no medium- or low-cost units were currently being built. Several residents who had already been displaced by earlier inner-city development projects were now living in different but

similar houses and they had chosen these in locations very close to where they had lived originally. The few residents of Tanjung who referenced a discourse of heritage protection regarding the old inner city did so not because they appreciated the antique or heritage value of their houses in and of themselves but because they thought the creation of a protected zone meant that they should be allowed to stay and continue their continue their tenancy. A house was more than a large, inexpensive or convenient place to stay – it also meant sociability and economic opportunities that, in some cases, were both rooted in the closeness of family living and sometimes also working together or at least nearby. An example of an extended family working together is presented in the next section, but for some residents ambition was expressed not just in economic enterprise but as the ability to keep the family together (although the two could be related). For this man, being able to continue to live close to his children once they grew up and had families of their own overrode his attachment to any particular location within the city, but he retained a preference for a central urban location and the particular type of house his family already had. He said he would like someday to own three adjoining terrace houses, anywhere else in the city if it were not possible nearby, so that both of his two children could have their own houses next to he and his wife and the family could stay together.[34]

Owning a house was not necessarily a consideration in feeling attached to the particular house or location in which one lived, but housing costs were key factors in most residents' household economies and lifestyles. In LST, the area with the highest

incomes, less than one third of the households visited owned their own houses, and in Tanjung only 4 out of 31 houses were owner occupied.[35] As in Kampung Dodol, it was the low cost of housing combined with many long-term residents that had allowed both inner city neighborhoods to retain much of the same residential ambiance that they had had for many years. Renters were protected by rent control, which had largely frozen rents since 1966, and most owners had bought early, when prices were low. Most rent controlled monthly rents in both areas were in the RM100 to RM200 range, but there were many more below that in LST, and many more that were higher in Tanjung – which made the average rent in LST lower than in Tanjung where people were poorer.[36]

The potentially higher cost of housing after the end of rent control was of great concern to renters in both areas. Many said that they would just not be able to afford increases of 400-500% -- percentages frequently mentioned in the press that, in many cases, would still not bring their rents up to "market value." Several retirees said that they could not afford the down payment even on a government sponsored "low cost" house – usually a high-rise flat of approximately only 700 square feet – even if they were offered one, because they said the banks refuse loans to older people. The lowest price of such a "low cost" flat was RM25,000[37]-- for a space that was approximately half as big (or less) than most terrace and shop houses. The government allowed purchasers of any age to withdraw funds from their Employee Provident Funds (EPF) that had accrued through mandated salary deductions over the years, but for those who

had been self-employed in their own small businesses, no such funds were available. Waiting lists for low cost units were long and there were currently no plans to build such units in the Northeast District, which is where most residents said they would like to remain but where land values were among the highest in Penang and even the country as a whole.[38]

As in Kampung Dodol, the fact that housing costs were so low appeared to be a primary factor in allowing residents in both areas to apply more of their incomes to other expenditures, such as the acquisition of a range of consumer goods that could be considered associated with a middle class. LST was the area with the highest income levels of all the areas studied, and it was also where households had the most consumer goods. (See Figure 28 for a comparison of all three areas.) In addition to more frequent investments in education in this area, residents of LST has considerably more air conditioners, CD players, VCRs, computers, and cars than either of the other neighborhoods. The residents of Tanjung, on the other hand, had the lowest percentages of ownership in 11 of the 22 categories of consumer goods listed in Figure 17. In the previous decade – a period of unprecedented growth in the Malaysian economy – the residents of Tanjung appear to have only modestly increased their acquisition of consumer appliances.[39] On the whole, most households in both LST and Tanjung were decidedly less than extravagantly equipped. Even the possession of a motor vehicle was not always a strict necessity, since markets, schools, places of worship and, in many cases, work, were all often within walking distance.[40] Much of

what was acquired or used, desired or needed, including essential services, could be located within the immediate areas themselves.

Most inner-city residents had somewhat ambivalent attitudes about the acquisition of material goods and the housing market, and whether or not either should rightfully be considered indicative of a household's status in an economic hierarchy. Owner occupants, both Chinese and Indian, were aware that the monetary value of their houses had increased since they had bought them, but few spoke of them as investments or of any intent to sell at a profit or move out any time soon. Financial investments of various kinds were spoken about much more frankly here than in Kampung Dodol, but as far as housing was concerned there seemed to be a greater tension between consciousness of exchange values and of other values such as the use values of convenience and continuity, and the stability of having had a family's residence and often its business in the same location for so long. Some renters who feared that they would not be able to stay in the inner city after the end of rent control felt that a price was being put on their heads without their having much say in the matter; others who were owners came up with innovative combinations of different kinds of values that expressed a desire to participate in an investment property market but under their own terms. For example, there was one Chinese household in LST who lived in a large Straits-Chinese bungalow that they had only recently purchased and they had plans for it that would creatively combine investment and use values with a reformulation of the ideal that family should stay together. They planned to

Figure 28

Household Consumer Goods: Kampung Dodol, LST, Tanjung

Number of Households:	**Kampung Dodol 40**		**LST 31***		**Tanjung 29****	
Item	**% (number) of Households**		**% (number) of Households**		**% (number) of Households**	
Refrigerator	100%	(40)	94%	(29)	97%	(28)
Washing machine	75%	(30)	65%	(20)	69%	(20)
Oven	38%	(15)	42%	(13)	31%	(9)
Air conditioning	5%	(2)	42%	(13)	21%	(6)
1 cell phone	28%	(11)	35%	(11)	28%	(8)
2 or more cell phones	10%	(4)	26%	(8)	--	
Television	100%	(40)	97%	(30)	93%	(27)
Stereo/radio	88%	(35)	81%	(25)	69%	(20)
VCR	70%	(28)	84%	(26)	66%	(19)
CD player	18%	(7)	48%	(15)	38%	(11)
Computer	8%	(3)	39%	(12)	17%	(5)
1 car	43%	(17)	29%	(9)	31%	(9)
2 cars	8%	(3)	29%	(9)	3%	(1)
3 or more cars	3%	(1)	13%	(4)	--	
1 motorbike	43%	(17)	42%	(13)	66%	(11)
2 motorbikes	23%	(9)	29%	(9)	21%	(6)
3 motorbikes	13%	(5)	13%	(4)	7%	(2)
4 or more motorbikes	5%	(2)	3%	(1)	3%	(1)
1 bicycle	38%	(15)	48%	(15)	38%	(11)
2 bicycles	10%	(4)	13%	(4)	10%	(3)
3 bicycles	8%	(3)	3%	(1)	3%	(1)
4 or more bicycles	5%	(2}	--		3%	(1)

* 1 household out of the 32 surveyed in LST was not asked or did not answer this part of the survey.
** 2 households out of the total of 31 surveyed in Tanjung were not asked or did not answer this part of the survey. (Note: Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.)

demolish their single-family bungalow and build in its place a four-story condominium in which floor-though units would be individually owned by each of four siblings who would all share in the revenue generated by the rental of shops on the ground level. This plan was an updated expansion on the idea of the shop house as a place where an extended family lived and worked together, but the innovations here were to provide for increased privacy and separate ownership for each nuclear family unit and a recognition that household income need not be tied solely to working at the family business. (The family had a successful wholesale fish company.) Instead of the decorative ironwork encircling a large yard, a cavernous front parlor, and many other elaborate turn-of-the century details that were features of the existing house, they envisioned their own private and small-scale version of a high rise, complete with elevators and a parking garage. The original house had been designed to house an elite extended family with elegance and style; its imagined replacement was a more working-class combination of no-frills practicality, entrepreneurial spirit, and a heightened sense of nuclear family autonomy. The woman who described the plan to me said it was her father-in-law's way of keeping the family together and in the same place – something that the large size of the original bungalow had also meant to accomplish, but in a different way in a different era.

This valorization of what was basic and practical extended to the purchase of household consumer goods, which, in many cases, residents felt was *not* a good investment in the long run, especially if it meant going into debt.[41] A Chinese hawker

of street food said he "preferred his freedom to spending money on a nice car." What he meant was that he valued, even more than the potential status symbol of a car, the facts that he was in debt to nothing and no one and could work when, how, and as much as he pleased. In one way or another, this sentiment was widely shared, even though, for many others like himself, working for oneself and operating one's own small business often meant working an average of six to seven days per week. In these cases, what was often attractive and important to people was not the potential to earn substantial amounts of money but that there was no boss or bank telling one what to do or compelling monthly payments.[42] People seemed appreciative of the fact that houses and things could indeed express a person's socioeconomic status but that their own priorities were elsewhere and their own expressions were modest in this regard. As the elderly Indian-Muslim mutton seller already mentioned put it:

> "I prefer to have money than to live in a luxurious house. I'm used to living in the same kind of house that I live in now. I am always happy with what I am, and live an average life."

In this, and in other cases, valorization of modesty in living arrangements was tied to the familiarity and low cost of long-term residential continuity in which one could independently decide many things for one's self.[43]

In living day to day, and in some cases hand to mouth, people had distanced themselves from a new emphasis on the long-term investment potential of residential real estate in the private corporate sector and from state encouragement of a new sense of security to be found in owning rather than renting a housing unit which usually

entailed long-term debt. The man whose family had rented the same terrace house in LST since the 30s chided himself that he had perhaps made a wrong decision when, upon leaving a certain job, he had used a lump-sum termination benefit to buy a car and not a house. The car had ended up as a "piece of junk" he said, and had long since been discarded but houses were now exponentially more expensive. Facing a higher rent and possible eviction upon the end of rent control, the family might have no choice but to move to a low-cost high rise outside the city, a prospect he considered as "miserable," both in terms of the family's finances and its quality of life.

Remaining debt-free was something appreciated by residents of all three study areas of George Town, and it was a sentiment widely shared by both non-Muslims and those Muslims who regarded it as a positive religious value. One inner-city Muslim resident said that, when the current building boom was over, Malaysians would be even poorer than they were before because many more people would be in debt. Participation in a debt economy and a valorization of the acquisition of material goods as indicative of economic status were often things that were perceived to be both literally and figuratively distant from people's lives and homes in the inner city. A devotee of one of the Taoist temples in LST said that what he liked about Penang – and what made it different from bigger cities like Kuala Lumpur or New York – was that people in Penang do not always want more and more or "strive higher than their class." "They know their limits," he said.[44] A Chinese resident of an ethnically mixed

urban kampung in Penang further distinguished between his own modest living situation and more flashy alternatives:

> "The Chinese say that if you have a big house and a car it doesn't necessarily mean that you are rich. They could have been bought with loans. But kampung people are rich. They don't owe any money and they don't know how to borrow money."

This man understood that people are shaped by where and how they live. In opposing his own "kampung people" to "town people," however, he admitted that the latter have their own advantages in terms of different personal traits:

> "Town people are more smart. They know how to borrow and to invest. In later years they are richer than us because the value of what they have has gone up."

These comments indicate that people in Penang often see residential space in very personal terms of identity and that some are still struggling to come to terms with the implications of a new kind of urbanism. This urbanism, while not always focused on the inner city, nevertheless represents a different economy, somewhat different social expectations, different ways of doing things, and certain differences in the temporal and spatial meanings of urban space than what generations of self-reliant, largely self-employed, inner-city residents had created for themselves and with which they were long familiar.

As in Kampung Dodol a surrounding overall environment of increased prosperity and the pressures of urban development had underscored certain moral questions having to do with such things as cultural continuity, the expression of

material values in life styles and housing situations, and other basic concerns such as practicality, thrift, and self-determination. In residents' minds, all of these were tied to residential aesthetics and valued traditions regarding the use of city space. The following section discusses how all of these components of spatial and social meaning converge in one particular kind of small-scale enterprise, based largely in people's homes, that seemingly everyone in Penang patronizes and that most would agree is especially significant. I show how processes of both production and consumption regarding this activity contribute to the creation of an urban space and experience that is widely appreciated as being culturally multiple and intrinsic to Penang's identity as a greater metropolitan region and as a place in which to live.

Buildings and Food: Economic and Social Bases of Urban Residential Space

More than a few households in both areas of the inner city made a living, at least in part, but often exclusively, in either of two types of independent small-scale enterprises: building trades and the preparation and sale of food. Each activity had always been central to life in the city and each contributed, in its own way, to the creation of a specifically urban space. While the prominence and significance of ethnic specificity in certain building trades has waned in recent years, the preparation and public consumption of very ethnically specific foods at hawker stalls throughout the city is something that is universally appreciated by people of all income levels and from all walks of life. Penang's highly diverse hawker cuisine continues to make a

substantial contribution to the ethnic articulation of residential urban space, to consciousness of difference, and to a pan-ethnic "Penang" identity. The requirements and activities of hawkers also greatly influence the design and uses of many of the public spaces in Penang but especially the particular space that is perhaps most representative of public uses of the inner city: the coffee shop. The viability of a hawker stall is largely dependent on its location, and hawker stalls, in turn, help define locations for residents, no matter where in the city they actually live.

George Town is a city of builders.[45] Its building boom in recent decades can be considered an extension, in transformed dimensions, of a long-standing impetus to grow and expand. The ready availability of work in building trades was what attracted some early immigrants to the city, where trade guilds were often very ethnically specific. For example, Cantonese were known to be excellent carpenters, and newly arriving Cantonese craftsmen would proceed to the Loo Pen Hong, the Carpenters' Guild headquarters building where they would be assured a bed, a venue in which to worship the patron deity of their trade, a degree of social and sometimes financial support, and connections for woodworking jobs. Though this organization and its building still exist, many of its current members are now more general contractors but, like most of the building tradesmen in the areas surveyed, they operate at a smaller scale than that required by most new development projects. New immigrants still man the lowest level jobs on most big new construction projects, but these are now almost all from Indonesia or Bangladesh and not China. Strict immigration policies and work

permits issued only for particular projects assure that there is little chance that any of these workers can ever remain in Malaysia legally once their visas expire. The same holds true for women working as maids, most of whom are from Indonesia and who are contracted, through agencies, to particular families for specific periods of time. Many of the long-term residents I spoke with in both inner city areas had been operating as independent contractors in positions somewhat more skilled than that of laborer. There were a few all-around laborers but other, more specialized building trades included sub-contractor, carpenter, electrician, tile layer, welder, aluminum worker, and water technician. These occupations were now not particular to any specific sub-category of ethnicity but many workers had inherited their trades or businesses from their fathers or grandfathers and sometimes several generations still worked together.

The pattern of inheriting one's trade from a previous generation also held true for many hawkers, and these were the people whose services helped to grease the wheels of many kinds of social interactions throughout the city, including the informal meetings in coffee shops at which independent building contractors were often hired. Many residents in both LST and Tanjung, and a fair number in Kampung Dodol worked in some capacity in the food industry (in retail markets or as wholesalers), but the most common food-related occupation in both areas was that of independent hawker selling prepared foods in public venues near their homes.[46] Most hawkers depended on the particular configuration of their residential situation in order to ply

their trade comfortably: a house big enough for an extended family who could all be put to work; a ground-floor location in which to easily load a portable cart (often bicycle driven); and easy access to a busy location with many customers. Hawkers might earn less per individual than some salaried jobs, but hours were often shorter, capital investment was minimal, income was steady, and hawking was "one's own" enterprise in which women and the elderly could be involved, if need be, in every aspect of the business. Most of the foods prepared in this way were very ethnically specific – certain dishes were Hokkien, Cantonese, or Hainanese, and so on (in addition to being Chinese); others were *mamak* (Indian Muslim), or Malay; and some were specific only to Penang.

The production and consumption of prepared foods in Penang not only substantially contributed to residents' understanding of the meanings and uses of both public and private buildings and urban space, they also expressed some of the cleavages in Penang society between ethnic identities and religious practices. Food was a way to understand and appreciate both identity and difference, and an appreciation of specificity within diversity was something that was widely shared. In many ways food was a way to bridge, while at the same time recognize, certain social, economic, and ethnic differences between people. Food was also a way to understand space and time. Where and when certain foods were available were often cited as significant features of the urban landscape as a place to live. Some residents also expressed a more general critique of the passage of time and how people had changed

in recent years in terms of perceived differences in the quality of hawker foods. Since household production and the public consumption of hawker fare is such an integral part of urban life in Penang and so intimately tied to both urban and ethnic identities, it is worth examining in some depth.

Food is the life's blood of the city. The varieties of foods prepared and served by hawkers is an important part of Penang's identity as an urban center and a point of pride among the people who live there. Billboards installed by the state and national tourist boards along Malaysia's new North-South highway proclaim Penang as the "food capital" of Malaysia, and acquaintances in other cities of Malaysia would frequently ask, sometimes with a touch of envy, how I was enjoying Penang's multiple culinary offerings. If they ever came to Penang they would usually ask me where the best places were to eat. The ready availability of inexpensive hawker fare, even more than the island's long stretch of recreational beach, seemed to be one of primary attractions of Penang as a tourist destination for Malaysians during school holidays, when every hotel room in the city would likely be booked well in advance. Malaysians of all classes and income levels enjoy the kinds of foods prepared and served by hawkers in largely open-air venues where everyone can see what goes on around them. Although there are indoor restaurants, most Penangites feel that food somehow tastes better, is certainly cheaper, and the atmosphere is livelier when it is consumed on the street. Venues for eating are everywhere and shift to different places according to the time of day. Most hawkers operate in the same regular locations and

they work at night markets, at tables set up on the street, and in coffee shops with one or more walls open to the street into which the dining spills out and becomes incorporated into other public activities. In a discussion with a member of Penang Heritage Trust I asked why some of the city's larger heritage mansions were not being turned into lucrative upscale restaurants instead of being demolished for condominiums or commercial development projects (as seemed to be the pattern). She replied that there would be little support for such enterprises, even among Penang's elite. Food is supposed to be cheap and is best on the street. When I asked if city planning in Penang might go the way of Singapore and attempt to relocate hawkers to confined areas or indoor "food courts," she replied that this was impossible: the people would not permit it and "the city would die." I heard many stories about hawkers who, when threatened with relocation from favorite spots or overly stringent regulation by the municipal council, would appeal directly to their state representative. Since the independent entrepreneurial spirit of hawkers, as well as what they produced, was popularly regarded with such high esteem, they were very often successful in being left alone.

The premise that hawking is an independently operated business and the wide support it enjoys by the public both serve to ensure that the old neighborhood coffee shop remains an important public institution. A hawker's stall is usually a self-contained unit, with everything needed to prepare, cook, and serve a particular dish and wash up afterward. Although mobile hawking (selling food as you go) is now

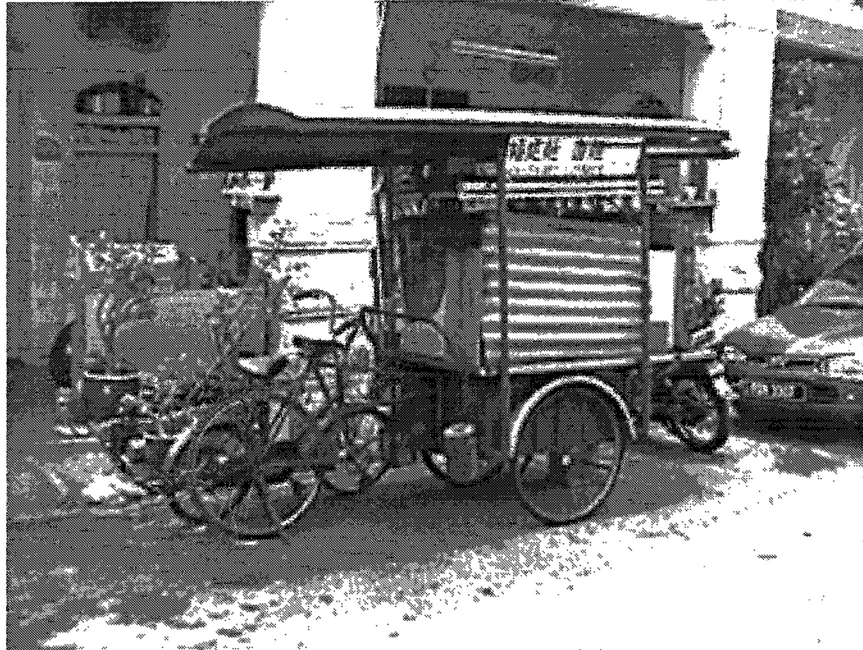
prohibited in most parts of the city, many stalls are still portable in that they are set up temporarily in more or less the same location every day and offer certain foods only at specific times, generally morning, lunchtime, dinner, or late night. These hawkers also supply their own generators for electricity, as well as tables and stools that can quickly transform a side street, an alleyway, or any other open space into a bright, bustling dining area. Many hawkers, however, are permanently attached to a coffee shop, to whose proprietors they pay a nominal fee for the privilege of setting up their stands in or near their establishments and utilizing their water and electricity.[47] Most coffee shops have at least one side completely open to the street; corner shops have an advantage in having two open sides and many have forecourts on which additional tables can be placed. Lining these open areas at the edge of the street are the hawkers and their carts, each of whom generally specializes in a single dish, or has only a very limited selection. Diners place their orders with different vendors, sit down, and the food is brought to them by each hawker, who is usually also the cook. Different styles and colors of dishes (usually plastic) identify the property of each vendor for later retrieval and washing. In these arrangements the coffee shop always maintains a monopoly on the sale of drinks, which can be prepared and served with a minimum of preparation and labor.[48] During off-peak hours, a single individual, or sometimes a couple whose children or grandchildren may be doing homework in the back, can run an entire coffee shop, since the food is prepared by individual hawkers on their own. Both the coffee shop management and each hawker stall are generally family-run

enterprises, with different generations of family members, or husband and wife teams, often working side by side. If a hawker does not wish to work for whatever reason,[49] the cart is either left at home or locked up either in, or just outside the coffee shop.

The Lim[50] household was perhaps typical of this arrangement and the role that hawking played in many domestic economies. Three generations of Lim lived in a small terrace house on Lorong Seratus Tahun throughout my stay on this street. Mr. Lim was 74 years old and was a specialist in the preparation of *Hokkien mee* (Hokkien noodles), one of Penang's most famous and popular dishes. This was the only item the family sold, and two of his children, an unmarried son and a daughter, both in their 40s, assisted at the enterprise. Each afternoon at home they prepared the soup stock for this noodle dish, cut the other fresh ingredients, and the brother and sister loaded them with all the supplies they needed onto their cart, which was attached to a bicycle and was parked each night in front of their house (Figure 29). At around five p.m. the son pedaled the cart to a nearby side street five minutes distant, and set up the stall just outside a coffee shop on the corner of MacAlister Road, a main artery leading to the center of town that was also near several large hotels and a number of small businesses. A dozen or so other hawkers, each offering different fare, did likewise, and by dinnertime the coffee shop was always bustling. Mr. Lim himself either walked over after the cart had left or rode his own bicycle to begin work as the stall's primary chef, although his daughter sometimes also assembled the final product. This was a busy location and attracted clientele from beyond the immediate area who drove

Figure 29

Top : A Cart for the Hawking of *Hokkien Mee*
Bottom : The Terrace House of the Household Operating the Cart



to the coffee shop, either by car or motorbike. To accommodate the vehicles, an Indian temple just down the street had set up a car parking business in its rear courtyard that charged by the hour. This particular coffee shop was only open in the evenings, six nights per week, but each stall could open or not as its proprietors chose. By 10 or 11 p.m. (later on weekends and holidays) the stalls started closing down and the Lims were usually back at their house, unloading the cart, well before midnight. A severe rainstorm might prevent some hawker stalls from opening at all, but most were well equipped with awnings and tarps if there was a sprinkle or a sudden downpour. Two people were sufficient to run the stand. Most often the daughter, who apparently purchased most of the supplies and cooked the stock, stayed home to look after her nieces and nephew, but if the father was not feeling well he could stay behind and she would go out to work the stall.

There were a total of eight people in the Lim household. Another son worked as a sub-contractor specializing in flooring and his wife sewed garments in factory. This couple had three young children that everyone else helped in looking after. Once the cost of ingredients and supplies had been deducted, the Lims said they earned approximately RM100 for each day they operated the stall. Working six nights per week, this amounted to a monthly income of RM2400 from hawking, considerably more than what a single factory job would pay, and for fewer hours (although in this case, it was a group effort). Mr. Lim had lived in this same house for most of his life,

and since it was rent controlled, the family's total housing costs were negligible. Although their rent had recently gone up, they still paid only RM50 per month.[51]

Although hawking could be considered a blue-collar occupation, hawkers are regarded as independent proprietors of their own businesses and are usually not poor. They are accorded great respect, and the products they produce are appreciated by people at all levels of society. Most hawkers take their work extremely seriously, and the intensity, concentration, and satisfaction that many display while preparing a much-appreciated dish is akin to artistry. The seriousness of the entire enterprise of hawking is indicated by the fact that, when a single stall is operated by a team, it is usually the eldest member, often a male, who does most of the cooking. (Elder family members are highly respected by all groups in Penang). Some hawkers achieve a degree of personal fame for their work and people drive miles to go to a particular stall.[52] Several hawkers in Penang told me with pride that they had been selected to go to places like Australia, Europe, or Hong Kong as part of nationally sponsored cultural exhibitions designed to represent Malaysia to the world. The Penang state government also sometimes caters various official receptions with stalls for hawkers to prepare individual dishes – and the selection available is usually carefully chosen to include Malay, Chinese and Indian specialties. This style of catering is also sometimes chosen for large wedding banquets and international conferences.[53] Penang's hawker fare is featured prominently in cookbooks, tourist literature, and guidebooks, and proximity to hawker stalls is frequently mentioned as a selling point in brochures advertising

hotels, service apartments, and longer-term residential properties, including upscale condominiums.

Consumption of hawker food may bridge certain class and ethnic divisions as a commonly enjoyed activity, but, on the production side, hawker food can reinforce consciousness of differences between ethnic and religious categories and identifications. For many people, it seems, the ethnicity of the person preparing a particular dish – whether he or she is Chinese, Indian or Malay – is something that does matter. Although an ethnic Cantonese entrepreneur could well work as a hawker of *Hokkien mee*, and anyone can be accepted as a hawker of "Western" food, there is a general expectation that only Chinese should cook "Chinese" food, Indians "Indian" food, etc, and that these foods are best and more authentic when prepared by someone of the same broad ethnic category. Although some Chinese hawkers venture to specialize in *sate*[54] (identified as Malay or Indonesian) and there is some slide between what is considered specifically Malay or Indian-Muslim cuisine, few hawkers attempt to cross the ethnic divide by preparing dishes identified with another major ethnic group. Chinese food is thought to be best when prepared by someone who is Chinese; the best *teh tarik*[55] should be made by an Indian (either Muslim or Hindu); and only Indian-Muslims "really know" how to make *nasi kandar*, [56] which is generally available only in establishments or stalls specializing in this cuisine.[57] On the consumption side, however, more boundaries are crossed. With fewer specifically religious dietary restrictions than other groups and as the demographically dominant

group in the city, many Chinese freely patronize any and every dining venue and are generally appreciative of all the cuisines that Penang has to offer.[58] It is not uncommon for a Malay vendor to operate a *sate* or *nasi lemak*[59] stall at a coffee shop serving a predominately Chinese clientele, and specifically Malay or Indian-Muslim dining establishments count Chinese among their regular patrons. The Muslim prohibition on the consumption of pork, however, limits integration the other way around. Muslims generally do not patronize coffee shops that are identified as "Chinese," despite the fact that there may be Muslim vendors working there and non-pork dishes are available. Few Muslims, it seems, are fans of Chinese cuisine: there is a concern that, given the Chinese love of pork, this ingredient may slip into any number of dishes not identified as containing it, that cooking may be done with lard, and that the cuisine as a whole is not *halal*.[60] Chinese or Indian vegetarian restaurants and coffee shops, however, whether run by Buddhists or Hindus (for whom vegetarianism is a positive value if not always a prescription), are safer on this account. These are the venues that are more likely to be patronized by Muslims than most "ordinary" Chinese coffee shops. Hawker food thus reinforces a major social divide between Muslims and non-Muslims and is a way in which consciousness of other, specifically ethnic differences can be reinforced in the everyday experience of urban space.

A particular coffee shop is usually known by the selection of hawker food it offers and a good hawker can be its primary attraction. Particular locations come to be

identified with particular kinds of foods, and most people in Penang are knowledgeable about which foods are best in which locations and when they are available. Comparative evaluations of different locations and the reputed fame (and whether a reputation was deserved or not) of specific stalls were popular topics of conversation. Traveling together with residents of all ethnicities through the city, people would frequently point out to me the locations of certain coffee shops or stalls and these, as much as any structure or example of architecture, were what they considered to be significant urban landmarks. For example, when I told people from outside the area that I lived on Lorong Seratus Tahun many did not know the name or where it was until I mentioned that there was a coffee shop famous for its *curry mee*[61] on the corner. Others knew immediately where it was because of the shop and first mentioned to me the fame of its noodles.

Quality of hawker food was also sometimes linked to critical evaluations of recent changes in the city wrought by "development," with some lamenting nostalgically that much of the hawker food of today was not now as good as it once was. The implication here was that artistry and care in preparation had declined because people nowadays were more concerned to make money quickly. This was the reason cited by both Chinese and Malay acquaintances, for example, to explain why the crispy dried fish that are often eaten as accompaniments to meals did not have as rich a taste as they had in the past: people now were too impatient to make a profit and had not left them long enough in the sun to cure. Nevertheless, despite changes in

how people lived, a good residential location was often identified, at least in part, by proximity to good hawker stalls and this was often a selling point mentioned in brochures advertising high-rise residential co-ops and condominiums, some of which have their own hawker centers. Hawker food also provides women in particular (many of whom do not drive) with an easy alternative to preparing a family meal.[62] Hawker food is not necessarily considered "second best" or likely to be appreciated any less than a home-cooked meal, and every hawker stall is equipped with plastic bags and rubber bands (to seal the bags) for quick take-out. If a stall is very nearby, women sometimes bring their own bowls to be filled and carry them back to the house.

The ethnic articulation of hawker food, the ways in which it continues to represent a valued tradition of small-scale independent entrepreneurship, and its significance to a regional and pan-ethnic urban Penang identity, appear to have limited the appeal of outside incursions into the city's very localized and specific food culture. There were few standardized national or transnational "fast food" franchises within the city itself. Most of these, like most of the newer forms of housing, were located outside the city's center, very often in the shopping malls that were often featured in many large new development projects in many other locations throughout the island.

The Shape and Perception of Residential Space

The ambivalence that many inner city residents expressed toward housing as an economic status indicator or toward a newly emerging and sometimes highly speculative housing market was complexly interwoven with their perceptions of the comparative differences between old and new housing situations. "Old" was often favored over "new" but for what it meant, not because age in itself was valued. People appreciated their long-term residential stability in a particular location and, to a somewhat lesser extent, ethnic vernacular expression in house design. But these features were not as often explicitly articulated as contributing to any kind of moral high ground as they were in Kampung Dodol, whose residents commonly spoke about the tradition of heritage of what a kampung once meant and what it still could be.

Many residents of the inner city were frank that they or their families had settled in the city to make money. They felt that their current location and housing situation was where and how this could best be accomplished and that moving to a more costly high-rise distant from the center might compromise or constrain the ease and ability to both earn a living and live how one pleased. Like the residents of Kampung Dodol, however, inner city residents also criticized new housing arrangements for social reasons and the negative impact they were thought to have on social interactions, both within the household and with neighbors. Households in high rises were thought to keep more to themselves, and their individual members were thought to prefer not to spend too much time together at home because most such

spaces were small. Residents of all three study areas well understood that new types of housing were supposed to represent such things as new, modern lifestyles, investment values, or a household's relative status in a new economic hierarchy of property types in which everyone was a potential participant. But participation in the status consciousness or competition of home ownership, for which indebtedness seemed to be something of a pre-requisite, was a game that many preferred not to play. What many residents of all three areas shared was that, given the extent and magnitude with which the fabric of the city's greater metropolitan area had changed, their current housing situation was modest – and this was what they liked about it, and not just because it was inexpensive. For some in all areas and of all ethnicities, this modesty was explicitly regarded as a positive feature that more or less adequately represented who they were and, in some cases, what they wanted to continue to be.[63] In the eyes of many, both insiders and outsiders, the inner city was not a particularly high status place in which to live. To many residents here, both owners and renters, this did not matter -- it was a convenient, comfortable, and familiar place in which to live and to do business that often involved ways of doing things that were not as easily possible elsewhere. Concern over the tangible expression of one's economic status in housing was something that many considered to be quite literally far from home. Such status concerns were what marked newer housing types in other locations. The old houses of the inner city were out of this picture and many inner city residents seemed glad that they were. Many of those remaining in the city's old houses understood that increased

economic power – and the status games that it could mobilize – did not always translate into a higher quality of life as far as housing and residential spaces were concerned.

When asked what they liked about their houses, residents of LST responded somewhat differently than those of Tanjung, but most responses in both areas were quite different from the reasons or features emphasized by the residents of Kampung Dodol. Many residents of the kampung initially mentioned things other than the structure of the house itself, and made statements expressing appreciation of either the religious or natural environmental context of the entire kampung, the social setting of their house, or knowledge that both house and setting were recognizably Malay and were sites of family and community histories or heritage. Although the convenience of the house's location in the city was frequently cited in all three areas, most initial responses in both LST and Tanjung referred to material, and not ethnic, religious, or social aspects of their house, although all of these aspects were subsequently recognized as significant in the course of further conversation. These differences in the perception of residential space are likely due to different senses of community at work in a busy grid of urban streets compared to that of a quiet village. They can also be attributed to the lack of any coherent or explicitly stated ideology of what the inner city was or should be compared to popular perceptions about kampungs, as well as a different weight of significance given to ethnicity according to whether one was

conscious of being part of an ethnic minority or majority in the city, and whether one lived in a relatively homogeneous area or in one recognized as ethnically "mixed."

Although inner city residents in both areas did eventually indicate that they valued such things as long-term residential stability, good relationships with neighbors, and the fact that different, and often previous generations of family had lived together in the same house, only six respondents (out of a total of 63 in both areas) initially mentioned that what they liked was that they were born there or had lived there a long time. No other explicitly social, or social-historical reasons were at first cited. Likewise, few respondents at first mentioned any appreciation of the age of their houses themselves, and for those that did their reasons were largely pragmatic rather than aesthetic or appreciative of age in itself. No one in LST and only three respondents in Tanjung initially said that they liked that their house itself was old. A 76 year old Chinese woman in Tanjung said she liked that her house was "historical" because it was so old, but quickly added that she had "no choice" but to live there – a statement that implies that its age was not any particular personal preference and that it could perhaps be viewed negatively. Similarly, a 73-year-old Indian-Muslim man liked that that his house was old because that made it cheap and he could not afford to buy a new one.

In both LST and Tanjung, many of the reasons residents cited for liking their house itself had to do with personal comfort rather than any explicit ideology of sociability or the temporal continuity of an ethnically specific heritage, such as were

expressed in Kampung Dodol (although the expression of appreciation for the long-term occupancy of a house, when it occurred, was sometimes made with great fervor[64]). Many of the houses surveyed in Tanjung were small and in poor condition, with leaking roofs and crumbling doors and windows; and some residents, even if they could afford to fix things up, were reluctant to do so because they were only renters.[65] Nevertheless, only one respondent, a 16- year-old Indian-Muslim student whose father ran a sundry shop, frankly stated that he did not like the house – one reason was that it did not have a toilet.[66] Similarly, a 14-year-old student said that her entire house was in need of repair and lacked bathrooms, toilets, extra rooms, chairs, tables, and windows.

Most residents in Tanjung, however, expressed satisfaction with their house, in whatever condition it was in and however it was equipped. Many here, however, did not specify particular reasons for feeling this way apart from a general, but individualized, statement of emotion. It was often the elderly who expressed the greatest satisfaction. "I feel happy and content in this house," said a 78-year-old pensioner. Others said that the house was "comfortable," or that they "liked everything" about it, but these statements were sometimes tinged with an awareness that their requirements were modest and that living conditions might be better elsewhere in terms of material comfort. "I don't ask for much," said a man in his seventies. "What can I say?" asked an electrician in his 40s, "I have nothing that I don't like." A retired Indian Hindu ship laborer, also in his 70s, said that he liked

"everything about the house" but especially its separate altar room. In contrast to the residents of Kampung Dodol, who frequently mentioned proximity to the mosque as something they liked about their houses, he was the only respondent in Tanjung to include an explicitly religious reason for liking his house in his immediate initial response. Household altars and area temples were quite important to other Indian Hindu and to most Chinese residents in both areas, but in the case of the Chinese, their significance was often assumed and less frequently or explicitly stated for reasons that are further discussed below.

Most residents of Tanjung said they would be quite content to live in the same kind of house they were occupying now, even if money were not a concern. Most in LST felt likewise and most in both areas said they would want to live in the same area if they ever had to move. In rating as positive, negative or neutral twelve different features of their neighborhoods, convenience was the most frequently cited positive, and a lack of green vegetation the most frequently cited negative feature in both areas. A majority in each neighborhood also rated the same four features positively (nearness to workplace, liveliness, relationships with neighbors and favorability for old people). In LST, however, where household incomes and education levels were generally higher, more residents, especially women, were critical about the air quality, the beauty, and the cost of living than residents of Tanjung were about their area. (See Appendices C and D.)

In LST, however, there were some residents who were attracted to new and/or more economic status-conscious forms of housing. Most of these were under 40 years of age and what they chose as their ideal house was a bungalow or a condominium – the two highest house types in the local economic status hierarchy (already detailed in the previous chapter). Just as age in itself was not often valorized, neither was newness. Several respondents laughed when, given the hypothetical case of money not being an obstacle, they described the most elite of residential properties – a large house with extensive grounds fronting the sea. This was a type that was built by Penang's first generations of urban elites, many of whom were millionaires, but was now no longer being built. Their laughter likely stemmed from recognition of the impossibility of ever living in such a house – it was expressed as a distant dream, not a definite or realizable goal. Likewise, and in regard to home furnishings, some teenagers and residents in their 20s said what their houses really lacked were large-screen televisions or "home entertainment centers." These responses by young people perhaps confirm popular suspicions that a new generation of youth are becoming too materialistic in their thinking, but they also can be taken as expressions of differences in standards of sociability and personal privacy between some youth and their elders. For example, a twenty-year-old computer student chose a bungalow as his ideal type because, unlike a condominium or apartment complex, living in a detached house meant that one did not have to share facilities with neighbors. A middle aged Indian

woman, also living in LST, chose a semi-detached house but for precisely the opposite reasons – because "a bungalow is too far from neighbors; you want someone near."

In most cases, if investment value and status consciousness in housing were recognized as significant, these often pertained to people, housing types and locations distant from one's current residential situation, which was still valued for its familiarity, modest lifestyles, and closeness to others. A young Chinese man in his early 30s who lived in a terrace house in LST with his parents and worked as a freelance residential real estate salesman observed that condominiums in Penang are "mostly for foreigners" – people from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore who were used to living in high-rises and for whom equivalent properties in Penang were much cheaper. They bought them to speculate and if they were not able to rent them out they had a nice vacation home that they could use themselves until such time as they could sell at a profit. Penangites themselves, he said, preferred houses with some land around them, or at least to live close to the street. This young man was very ambitious and attracted to stories of wealth. He had read all he could about Bill Gates (of Microsoft) and said he preferred his billions to those of the Sultan of Brunei because, unlike the sultan, Gates had earned it all himself, though his own effort.[67] He was unsure if he himself would ever want to live in a condominium or a high rise, but he admitted that what made them especially attractive to young people was that, as he put it, some young people "like that they don't have to talk to neighbors."[68] A widespread perception was that doors to high-rise units were always kept closed, and

this was what many people, including many young people I spoke with, did *not* like about them. Houses that were bigger, higher or "better" in terms of exchange value or status consciousness were not always so desirable once people thought more about it, nor were these features uppermost in the sights of every budding young professional. For example, a twenty-year-old electrical engineering student living in a six-person household said that a bungalow would be "too big for us." He added that it would be "spooky."[69] His statement also confirms that the increased personal privacy that a big house with many rooms or a high-rise apartment might make possible was not always a priority, even among youth.

Few people I spoke to in the inner city imagined themselves living in a high-rise by choice, or even in a freestanding house. Their expressions of ideal housing preferences, though often initially framed in terms of personal comfort, underscore an underlying common denominator: that while living in an old house in the city may be convenient, inexpensive, and a good location in which to earn a living, at the same time houses and their locations were not valued primarily as economic status indicators but for other social, human, and sometimes moral aspects. What was often positively valorized was modesty of lifestyle and a sense that social consciousness should extend beyond one's own household. Most people were deeply attached to the inner city locations where they or their families had lived so long, but it should be noted that not everyone was enamored of the inner city in itself as a place to live. While many said they liked "everything" about their houses and neighborhoods and

even more said they did not ever want to move, there was one resident, an Indian Hindu businessman living in Tanjung, who said he did not like living there: he was "fed up" with the area because of the beggars and the noise[70] and wanted to move to the suburbs. Several others thought that living in a less densely urban context might better facilitate neighborly interaction, personal comfort or a sense of social responsibility, and these were among the reasons to imagine living elsewhere, as in the following examples. A 31-year-old Indian-Muslim resident of Tanjung said that he would prefer living in a kampung house for the same reason that many residents of Kampung Dodol cited. "You can mix together easier" with others, he said, and he added (in a comment already cited) that "in a flat, you don't know what is happening around you." Two relatively prosperous Indian Hindu business owners living above their shops in Tanjung (and whose incomes[71] put the purchase of high-rise units well within the realm of possibility) explicitly chose non-urban living arrangements as their ideals. One said he would like to live in a farmhouse near the hills, for a "life of peace" and enjoyment of the natural environment. The other added a social concern to a similar vision of personal comfort: she said she would like to establish and live on an ashram of several acres somewhere outside the city, where she could grow vegetables and plants and care for "at least ten" old people or disabled children who might not have any other place to live. In expanding a vision of one's current housing situation to imagine other possibilities, the ambitions that were expressed were not always

materially economic or only about personal comfort; they could also be social and moral.

Unlike many of the residents of Kampung Dodol, who positively valued that both their houses and the kampung as a whole were recognizably Malay and Muslim (and these were cited as reasons why they liked living there), few residents in both LST and Tanjung expressed with equivalent emphasis analogous sentiments regarding public expression of their own ethnicity or religion. No one mentioned their own or anyone else's ethnicity or religion as reasons to either to stay in the inner city or to move out, unlike residents of the kampung who wanted to live in an area identified as more or less exclusively Malay. A possible reason for this difference was that there were people and things in the inner city with which both Chinese and Indians could readily identify, and that for them, the proximity of groups was not much of a concern because Chinese and Indians had both maintained a historical presence in the central part of town. Other reasons, I suggest, were that residents of the inner city had an everyday experience of diversity and were conscious that difference was something much closer to home than in the kampung. For the Chinese, in particular, there was also an awareness that they were part of a locally dominant majority whose presence and practices were prevalent almost everywhere and therefore need not be emphasized -- they were a kind of assumed standard. Each group was thus aware of its own demographic position relative to territories that mattered at somewhat different scales,

and this consciousness, I maintain, contributed to different emphases by different groups on the expression of ethnicity in the built environment.

As already discussed most shop and terrace houses in Penang occupied by Chinese can themselves be visually identified as "Chinese," whether through architectural features, outdoor religious equipment, or the visibility of an altar for Chinese deities just inside the door. Only one respondent in LST and one in Tanjung, however, initially mentioned the public expression of ethnic or religious identity as a likeable feature of their house, in contrast to many respondents in Kampung Dodol who liked that their houses were prominently Malay and Muslim. I maintain that this difference is due to the status that ethnic Chinese in George Town enjoy as the majority population. With the assumption of "Chineseness" as the norm, there may be less pressure or need on the part of Chinese to assert self-consciously or publicly a specifically Chinese identity, compared to Malays whose visual presence in the urban built environment is generally less evident. Malay respondents in Kampung Dodol often mentioned that Malays, Chinese, and Indians each have distinct aesthetic preferences in certain features of their houses, but only one Chinese respondent in LST expressed a similar idea with an equivalent emphasis.[72] Although most residents in both LST and Tanjung did cite a variety of reasons that made their houses identifiable to strangers as Chinese or Indian, there was much less concern to specify one's own aesthetic preference by ethnicity.

Like the residents of Kampung Dodol, most respondents in both LST and Tanjung said they liked living in their neighborhoods but, unlike many of the responses in Kampung Dodol, none in even the predominately Chinese area of LST mentioned as a reason that most of the people there were of their own ethnicity. This is not to say that residents in LST did not value that their neighborhood was relatively homogenous ethnically or that they lived in houses that were themselves "Chinese" in basic structure or design – it was just assumed that most people and many things in this neighborhood were Chinese just like much of the rest of the city. As discussed further in a later section on "mental maps," people could be acutely conscious of difference in their immediate social and built residential environment, but these differences did not always matter. A member of one of the few Indian households in LST said that she liked living there because everyone is "very friendly." She admitted that some Chinese might view Indians negatively, but she said that here "they don't think of us as Indian" and everyone mixes together. Similarly, in the "ethnically mixed" area of Tanjung (which was recognized as such by most respondents), the proximity of residents of different ethnicities was not expressed as a problem or concern. Like the Malays, Indians were a minority in Penang, and they did appreciate that their presence in the old city center was publicly recognized in the designation of a part of Tanjung as "Little India" even though there were Chinese who lived in this area as well. The significance of this and other names in local understandings of urban space is further discussed in a later section and in the in the next chapter.

Religious Practice, Residential Aesthetics, and the Imagination of Space

Perceptions of spaces and structures in Penang cannot be understood apart from residents' expressions of religious beliefs in practice. For Muslims, the focus is often unitary and clear: the mosque in Kampung Dodol, where most residents worshipped, was a primary center of religious and social life for the community that lived around it. In Chinese religious practice, there is much less unanimity in belief systems and local venues for worship do not serve everyone or only those living nearby. Instead, there are multiple centers on which to focus religious practice: temples, one's own house, and the human body. Although the latter two also figure into Muslim and all three into Hindu religious practice, this section discusses some of the Chinese and specifically Taoist[73] practices, prevalent in the area in which I lived, that explicitly involved establishing and maintaining a series of sometimes very material connections between all three centers. I found that, in various ways, Chinese religious practice and belief systems informed the meaning of urban residential space in Penang, even for residents whose degree of involvement with Chinese religion may be minimal or vary widely. In a widely cited essay, Wolf points out that Chinese religion "mirrors the social landscape of its adherents" and that "there are as many meanings as there are vantage points" (Wolf 1974:131). I maintain that this landscape can be profitably discussed quite literally in terms of spatial territory, even in urban settings more socially diverse than many villages. Without going into too much detail

regarding the spiritual and cosmological principles at work in the beliefs and in the practices of my Chinese neighbors in LST (which I witnessed daily and in which I often participated), the particular vantage point I offer here is a brief account of the spatial imagination at work in these multiple foci of temple, house, and human body, and of the often very personal and intimate relationships to the spiritual that people maintain in making connections between them. I show how, in many of these beliefs and practices, consciousness of difference and a valorization of individual and household autonomy in spiritual expression was incorporated into a religious world view that was spatially and temporally expansive, as well as socially inclusive, in ways that contributed to the meanings and uses of houses and urban spaces for the people who inhabited them.

For many of my neighbors, temples, shrines, altars, houses themselves, city streets and the human body were or had the potential to be the abodes of spirits. Though people may use and understand each of these quite differently, I found that the most basic and commonly shared conception regarding a built structure was that the world outside it can be the site of a swirling mass of spirits, some of whom can be harmful (especially to the human body) – hence the need to protect or manage the boundary between the interior and the exterior through various means. At the same time, this boundary ideally should be porous, to let that which is good enter, be it spirits, *chi* (vital breath), good luck, money or air (Figure 30, bottom).[74] These two principles inform the basic architectural structure of a Straits Chinese terrace house. A

household's main altar[75] usually faces the door (Figure 31, top), so that the household's particular combination of deities can keep a watchful eye on it, and thus possibly prevent, through a kind of unseen force field, any malevolent spirits from entering. Such spirits are thought to travel in straight lines, and a mirror,[76] a talisman (Figure 30, top), or an architectural feature, such as a screen just inside the door, can block their progress. An additional interior screen or wall – against which the altar is placed – also faces the front door and thus also serves to prevent direct penetration further inside.[77] Portals on either or both sides of this screen, however, provide access to inner rooms for both people and *chi*.

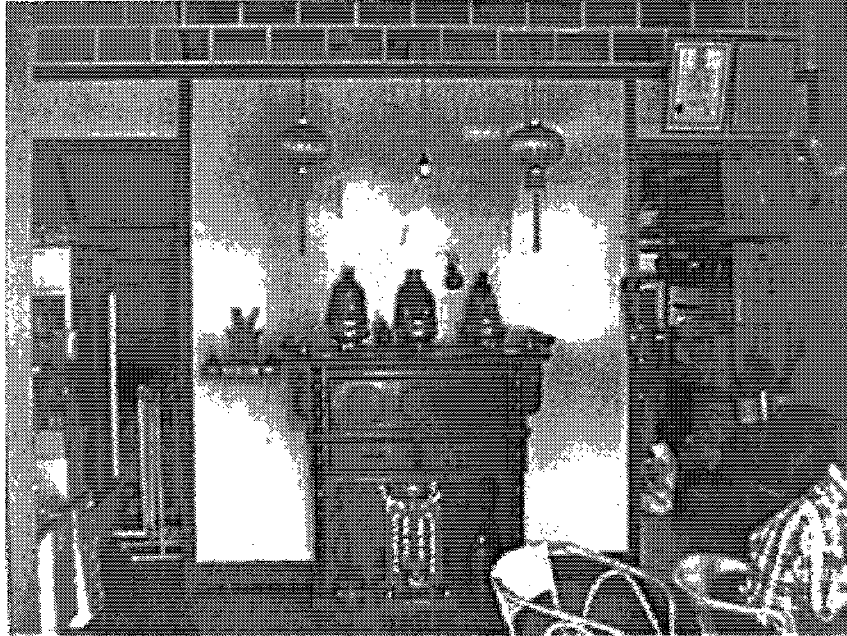
As already mentioned in Chapter 1, people of all ethnicities, religions, and levels of income and education were among those who believed in ghosts in one way or another. In Chinese religion, however, these were but one category of spirits. Some of my Chinese neighbors were Christian, but considering oneself a Christian (or having been educated in Christian schools) often did not prevent someone from being involved, in one way or another, with activities concerning what have been called the three major categories of spirits, both among the Hokkien in contemporary Taiwan, and in religious practice in late imperial (16th to 19th century) China: deities or gods (*sin*),[78] ancestors (*kong-ma*), and ghosts (*kui*), who mirror the social categories of government officials, kin, and strangers (Ahern 1981:1; Feuchtwang 1974; Wolf 1974). In Penang, attending to these spirits literally began at home, but also regularly extended outside people's houses in ways that established a series of connections

Figure 30

Top: Talismans Over The Door of A Chinese Household
Bottom: Porous Boundary between Inside and Outside of A Chinese House

Figure 31

Top: Altar for Deities in A Chinese Household
Bottom: Offerings to T'u Ti Kung underneath A Household Altar



between one's house and any number of temples or smaller shrines which are ubiquitous throughout the city and the island. People often had very personal relationships with the various types of spirits, as evidenced in the way they spoke of them and sometimes with them, the love and care with which people maintained altars and prepared offerings, and the multiple ways in which spirits and their actions were a part of the space of everyday life. People could speak directly with certain deities through a medium (*tang-ki*) in trance but also maintained relationships with spirits in other venues. In these, often very intimate and interpersonal exchanges both humans and spirits were regarded as autonomous social actors. One could ask a deity for something and give him or her food and gifts in order to influence action, but there was no guarantee that one would get what one wanted. The deities with which one had established a regular relationship or with which one was most intimate could freely act on their own or they might be influenced or constrained by higher, more powerful and more distant spirits in ways that mirrored an earthly bureaucratic hierarchy of officials and administrative powers in imperial China (cf. Wolf 1974:140).

It has been called "an axiom of Chinese ritual (and social) life. . . that the visible and invisible worlds are mutually dependent. One does not exist without the other" (Zito 1997: xv). This is the sense in which no space is ever really empty, even if it is uninhabited by humans. Abandoned houses and empty or unsold high-rise condominium units in Penang were thought to have been quickly taken up by

unknown spirits or ghosts, who must kindly be persuaded to leave before new human tenants can feel comfortable living there. Steps should also be taken to ensure that these spirits, as well as others who may be unwanted, do not return. This can be accomplished by affixing a talisman or charm (*hu*) to the top of the frame outside the front door (Figure 30, top). These talismans often consist of strips of paper or cloth that have been inked and duly stamped by deities themselves (through mediums in trance) and "can be understood as intended to have the same kind of effect as orders, mandates, or injunctions" (Ahern 1981:16) from higher spirits to lower.[79] Similar talismans, also obtained from deities through trance mediums in temples, are meant to be carried on one's person, often in one's wallet, to ensure luck and prosperity as well as protection. On days of special temple events, such as deities' birthdays, some deities also "bless" wallets themselves and other items worn close to the body, such as jewelry or shirts and blouses. The latter are stamped with a large woodblock seal inked in red (in the style of imperial seals), on the back of the garment just underneath the collar, either while being worn by those in attendance, or on items brought to the temple that belong to other family members remaining at home. Such practices thus establish material symbolic connections between houses, temples and bodies, and between this world and an unseen cosmic realm. Tangible traces of deities' presence and power thus do not reside only in temples or on home altars – they are mobile as people are mobile and as spirits themselves move unseen through the spaces of everyday life.[80]

Of the three types of spirits who can inhabit both visible and invisible worlds – gods, ghosts, and ancestors – ritual practices concerning the latter were those that had often been pushed farthest away from home and the space of everyday life for most of my neighbors. Some households had a special place, often part of another altar or a separate shelf on which there was an incense burner with a distinctive shape, which meant that ancestors were worshipped at home. The inclusion of this special urn on household altars was rare, however, and few engaged in at-home ancestor worship on any regular basis. Much has been made in this chapter of the "convenience" residents said they appreciated in their living situation and this consideration extended to the worship of ancestors. Most Chinese householders I knew preferred the convenience of not having the responsibility of keeping ancestral tablets[81] at home, which would make daily worship more or less a necessity.[82] Most families kept these tablets, inscribed with the names of the dead and thought to be one of the locations immanent with their spirits (another was the bones or ashes), in a shared central location such as a clan temple or the headquarters of a district or other voluntary association,[83] where they would be assured of daily worship in common by caretakers. This did not mean, however, that the dead were any less present to the living in everyday life. Awareness that the dead were still somehow present was something widely shared even among those who did not engage in any or very many ritual practices concerning spirits. Most households had framed paintings, or large studio photo portraits, some beautifully hand colored, of deceased parents and/or grandparents hanging

prominently somewhere in the main front room even if they had no separate ancestral altar or were Christian, had no altar at all and did not claim to worship any Chinese deities. The following is illustrative of additional ways in which the dead, though they may be unseen, were still considered present in one way or another.

One married couple, who had become Catholic Christians before they were married, nevertheless still had an altar in their front room on which there was a single figure of the monkey god, an arrangement that was unusual for its minimalism since most household altars were crowded with multiple deities. I asked them why they had this if they were Christian and the husband replied that it was "to keep her mother happy." The monkey god was a favorite of his mother-in-law, whom I then assumed must have still visited the house and either worshipped this deity while she was there or liked to see that the figure had been retained. Only later did I find out that this woman had died six years previously but was still considered present or watchful of what the family did. This and many other examples confirmed that people did not think of the dead as completely gone or absent. A widespread belief in their continued presence, without necessarily being explicit about it, was often confirmed in how people spoke of them. Most of the Chinese people I knew in Penang, regardless of their religious practice, spoke of dead parents (in English) in the present tense, even if their English was grammatically perfect. These were people who still did things, still liked certain things and not others and who were pleased or displeased with certain turns of events in ways – all of which were spoken about in a way that, had I not

known they were deceased, would have communicated to me that they were still alive. Being dead did not make one any less of an individual person with particular tastes than he or she had been before. Favorite items of the deceased – such as articles of clothing or the cushions of favorite chairs -- are sometimes burnt at funerals while the body is being cremated. This is so that the dead can continue to have them in the other world but it is also to prevent their spirits from returning to the house to look for them and bothering those who still live there. Likewise, items such as eyeglasses, favorite brands of cologne or cigarettes, or toys such as hand-held electronic games are often placed in niches in columbaria that house urns containing cremated remains.[84]

The most common everyday or at-home ritual practices, however, concerned kinds of spirits other than ancestors – deities and ghosts or unknown spirits[85] – and these were worshipped or dealt with both at home and at temples or shrines. People often had favorite deities whom they felt to be particularly effective or to whom they were personally attached in some way, and it was understood that each household had its own combination of favorites on their home altar. The most popular were Toh Peh Kung, a local god of prosperity, and Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy who was a bodhisattva in the Buddhist pantheon but who was thought to bridge both Taoist and Buddhist traditions. On the floor beneath the altar (Figure 31, bottom), some households also had T'u Ti Kung, who was explained to me as the god of the earth that was beneath the house (cf. Wolf 1974: 135-145). Most of these deities had protective functions in addition to other specific domains of jurisdiction. There was

no one deity whose presence was required if one had an altar, and there were many different ways, and degrees in which a spirit could act and an individual or household could worship.

Relationships with the deities that were worshipped could be quite intimate, both at home and in the temple, and spirits were often interwoven with the activities and fabric of everyday life. At home the household altar and the space in front of it were not discrete sacrosanct places isolated from everyday activities but were integrated into the texture of life. The front room was often the largest and coolest in the house and the space in front of the altar was where most household activities took place during the day. Surfaces of altars and display shelves often installed below them was where many households also kept telephones, utility bills and other important mail, and other non-religious items such as ornamental figurines, crafts projects, trophies won at school, decorative porcelain cups, bottles of liquor or other special items. Likewise, interactions with deities sometimes involved formal and distancing forms of communication that reiterated a distinction between spiritual and human realms,[86] but many more were interpersonal, intimate and easy going. The latter often involved casual conversation with a deity (though a medium in trance) that could include (depending on the particular deity) joking and gossip on both sides as well as the sharing of cake, food, wine, stout, brandy or tea that had been brought as offering but which the deity would sometimes offer to devotees for mutual consumption after taking the first tastes.[87] Temple rituals were often extensions of practices that could

also take place at home but they were inclusive and further expansive in that they drew participants from many different areas in Penang. Temples also regularly conducted rituals to protect the entire area in proximity to the temple and this meant protection for everyone who lived near it and not just those defined by any particular "community of faith" or religious practice. At several times during the year, the *tang-ki* who had been possessed by deities ran to the intersections on either side of the temple and cracked whips both to display their power and to dispel any evil spirits that might bring harm or disease into the area. Much ritual activity thus literally began at home or explicitly pertained to protecting one's home as a vulnerable place, but mobility of ritual action was a key motif. Deities would commonly ask for the address of someone who came to see them, "travel" to the location to assess the situation, and then advise the person who had come them on what to do, such as initiate or intensify worship of a particular deity or make an adjustment to the house's *feng shui* by re-arranging furnishings[88] -- during which time the body of the medium, through which he or she[89] spoke, remained in the temple.

There were two small temples in LST, each of which had started at the altars inside the front room of houses in the area and had since expanded outside.[90] One had moved outside to a specially built small red metal structure with dragons on its roof in the front yard of the boarding house bungalow where it originated; and the other now occupied the entire ground floor of a terrace house across the street from the private house where it had previously been based at the altar in the front room. Each of these

attracted worshippers from both LST and other areas but the same people did not go to both. Each temple held several sessions on certain specific days each week at which mediums, most of whom lived or worked in the area,[91] would go into trance and the deities who possessed them would have both individual consultations with each person who came to see them and sometimes conversations with small groups. The people who spoke with them came for worship and also to ask for such things as advice with relationships, lucky numbers, health and healing.

The basic format of these sessions was as follows. Once the particular deity that had come to the medium was identified, the medium would be dressed in that god's clothing and people would wait in turn to be seen individually. Much of the deity's time in the temple was spent listening and writing – in largely undecipherable script on either talismans or charms to be kept on one's person or pasted over one's door, or, when healing was required, on slips of yellow paper that were to be burnt, dropped blazing into a glass of water, and drunk.[92] Writing or walking by the deity was always accompanied by chants, the clanging of cymbals and the beating of a hand drum by assistants who stood nearby and followed the deity's movements closely. A special assistant was also assigned to translate what the deity said, for those deities who spoke in what was described to me as "old Hokkien," an archaic form of contemporary colloquial Hokkien that was not known by most supplicants.[93] Some deities, however, lapsed into ordinary Hokkien and even initiated jokes that would get people laughing.[94] These assistants also wrote out prescriptions for Chinese medicines

that were sometimes dictated by the deity. The energetic sounds produced whenever a deity wrote or walked about to exorcise bad spirits from people or places could be clearly heard throughout the immediate vicinity. They were clear signs, even to those not participating in temple activities, that a deity at the temple was taking care of matters at hand. Some casual passersby, both Chinese and Indian, who happened to be riding by on motorbikes or in cars, would often slow down a moment to pay respect (*pai-pai*) by bringing hands together and bowing slightly, when they saw or heard that a deity was present and at work.

Not every practitioner of Chinese religion in LST went to one of these nearby temples – some had favorite places of worship elsewhere, but many people throughout the immediate area, even some Christians and non-Chinese, got involved with temple activities when deities' birthdays and other holidays were celebrated with multiple days of special rituals that spilled out onto the street. These were times when temporary altars, and awnings to protect them, would be set up on the street, professional Taoist priests and musicians would be hired, and there would be feasting on food offerings by both devotees and non-devotees alike once the spirits or their unseen henchmen were through with them. These times were also when certain deities came out to survey and protect the territory under their control, and both gods and the public were entertained with performances of Chinese opera or puppet shows, pop singers with their own costumes and light shows, and the screening of action films on the street. They were also times when neighbors who never went to the temple for

worship would do things such as contribute food and drink to the busy temple committee and to worshipers, or donate hook-ups to their own supply of electricity to power amps, lights, and projectors. At these festive times, some casual passersby of all ethnicities and religions would often linger and stay on to watch the show, and organizers would offer leftover food offerings to Malays, Chinese and Indians alike. Temple activities were also occasions at which one could expand one's business connections, find new clients or customers, or to get hired for odd jobs.[95] Festivals were also times at which donations would be collected for charity, with a favorite destination for leftover uncooked rice offerings being old folks' homes. Under the sponsorship of the Penang State assemblyman for the area (who donated a sedan chair to be used in processions of one of the temple's primary deities), temple members joined together in a *gotong-royong* (Malay for "mutual help") to dig out and clean the clogged storm drains in the entire area. Though most devotees had their own very personalized encounters with deities and specifically asked for help with their own problems, moral responsibility was directed toward a wider communal space and was inclusive of the needs of more people than just those who went to the temple or worshipped in particular ways.

A basic principle at work in these temples' ritual acts of protection and healing can be thought of as similar to what Mauss (2001 [1902]:78-84) has described as one of the foundational principles of "magical action" – contiguity. Mueggler (2001) has recently explicated how a version of this principle operates in the lived space and

domestic architecture of a village in southwest China. According to Mueggler (in his version of Mauss and Hubert):

> Under the principle of contiguity, beings and things are in sympathy by virtue of their close proximity in space. Influences, ideas, and sentiments flow from one being to those that adjoin it in a spatial ensemble (Mueggler 2001: 40).

The Chinese terrace and shop houses of urban Penang are very different from the self-designed and self-built houses of the village Mueggler describes, but I contend that, aside from the efficacy of specific rituals, this principle of contiguity is very much evident in residents' understandings of the urban space in which they live and the diversity that this space encompasses. This understanding is territorially expansive and socially and temporally inclusive in that it encompasses an awareness of the contiguity in urban space of religious and cultural differences, and, within this, respect for a certain individual autonomy of expression. For Chinese residents in particular, this understanding is acted out in a series of often very material connections that people create and maintain between spiritual beings, places, people and things. These connections are spatially mobile and subject to creative innovation and change in ways that contribute to residents' senses of their own place within a particular local and national political history that has long been inflected by diversity.

For example, the history of one of the temples in LST was explained to me as follows. Incense burners and the ash from the burning joss sticks that they once contained are considered especially significant ritual items. This temple's ultimate origin was as a temple for a particular lineage in China. When one of the members of

this lineage came to Penang he brought with him an incense burner and some ash from this temple, which became the basis for founding a new temple in one of the terrace houses of George Town.[96] This temple attracted as members other residents who lived nearby regardless of their ancestry. The temple thus lost its lineage exclusivity and served anyone who came to ask for help, while protecting everyone who lived in the vicinity however and wherever they worshipped.[97] When the first house occupied was no longer available to rent, a descendent of its original immigrant founder moved it some distance away to his wife's father's house because his father-in-law had offered the use of his own household altar for temple and trance medium activities. This move can be considered expansive and socially inclusive in an additional sense in that a location in the wife's family home was not considered problematic.[98] The temple retained many of its members from the first area, found new ones, and its presence and the activities of its mediums now protected a different residential territory now in its immediate proximity. The temple's ambitions to expand and include were even further realized when its membership eventually rented an entire terrace house for it across the street from the father-in-law's home,[99] which facilitated the production of even larger annual celebrations. Throughout each move, a material connection to the temple in China had been maintained by the practice, common in many temples, of always retaining some of the ash of spent joss stick offerings when an incense burner was cleaned or replaced by a new one. Connections between temples, houses, spaces and times were further maintained by an annual event in which divination blocks

(*pue*)[100] were thrown to determine a deity's choice of a worshipper to take home one of the deity's incense burners and keep it at home for special worship for a period of a year, after which time the urns were returned to the temple to be re-distributed according to the deity's will.

These examples show that, although certain ritual practices were deeply tied to particular places which the practices helped to characterize or define, these practices were mobile, creatively adaptive to new material and social contexts, and not resistant to change. This resiliency left little doubt that specifically religious Chinese practices could continue to inform and create spaces in new and changing urban environmental contexts and even withstand the dispersal of originally place-based communities of worship. Old temples were moving into or new ones were being created in such new spaces as storefronts in strip malls just as new, smaller altar units were now designed for use in the cramped spaces of high-rise housing projects. "New" urban space was not being created in a moral vacuum. There was a sense, however, that these new locations were not quite the same in terms of convenience, urban visibility, and the easy access to the public streets that was explicitly valued as the focus of certain large-scale ritual practices by both temples and individual households.[101]

Consciousness of social, ethnic, or religious differences and their incorporation into worldviews fostered by Chinese religious practice was also expressed in many other ways. A common motif was that a certain moral responsibility over territory encompassed more than one's own particular practices or the identity of any one group

and that respect should be shown to the autonomous expression of difference. In an example of the latter, the presence of a common design feature of many Chinese terrace houses – a raised threshold that one must step over to enter the front door – was explained to me as a way to get people entering one's house to look down as they passed across it and, in effect, bow to the particular deities and/or ancestors on the household's altar whether they wanted to or not. Sometimes the differences that were spatially expressed lay within what some would consider should be a closely shared identity. Walking with a woman from one temple in LST to the other to deliver a gift of candles and joss sticks to the second temple's committee on a day when both temples were celebrating the same god's birthday, she remarked to me that "This temple is just down the street and we worship the same gods but it's like it's a different world." She was recognizing in her comments that different people worshipped there (each temple had its own devotees) who did many things differently and that the ritual calendar they used was somewhat different.[102] Yet she still felt compelled to recognize their presence and the good that was being done there and to maintain a relationship with difference by giving its committee a gift because they were neighbors sharing a contiguous space.

In other cases consciousness of difference within a shared space was a way to understand local and national political as well as religious history. A major festival in Penang involves propitiating "hungry ghosts" – spirits of the dead who were either improperly buried or have no family to pray for them who come back from the other

world once a year and cause mischief if they are not properly appeased. Many of the participants I spoke to frequently mentioned that they thought the spirits of soldiers who had died on both sides during the Japanese invasion of Penang in World War II (but especially the spirits of the Japanese invaders themselves) were among those most in need of attention. In another popular and widespread practice, Chinese devotees have taken upon themselves the worship of Datuk, a Malay earth spirit whose worship was thought to have been dangerously abandoned by Malays due to periodic reforms purging Muslim practice in Malaysia of pre-Islamic motifs (such as the reforms recently inspired by the return of the Ayatollah Komeini to Iran (cf. Nagata 1984)). Chinese worshippers of Datuk told me that Malays once worshipped this spirit but that they were now officially discouraged from maintaining the practice. Taking up the slack and recognizing a territorially local god who should be worshipped for the good all, Datuk shrines are maintained throughout Penang by Chinese devotees who address this deity in Malay, offer him Muslim clothing, feed him Malay curries that are *halal*, and themselves refrain from eating pork on the day that they honor his birthday. In this case, Chinese devotees are recognizing ritual differences between themselves and Muslims as well as a local social, political, and religious history that has been marked by their own difference as non-indigenous inhabitants. Religious practice and indigeneity are two distinctions that very much matter in the shared space of national politics – and these devotees were bringing both under the umbrella of their own view

of responsible moral action within a shared space that they imagined in very material symbolic terms.

Even deities themselves can be conscious or respectful of difference and attempt to bring it under their own wing. Once, when I had a particularly bad cold with a slight fever, I went to trance medium session to ask for a cure. The deity told me that "even though you are Christian I can help you," and dictated a prescription.[103] These remarks were followed by telling the deity's assistants how the Virgin Mary was similar to Kwan Yin, the goddess of compassion (who herself was widely understood to bridge Buddhism and Taoism). The proprietor of this temple was the man who on another occasion told me that "all religions are they same – they teach you to be good." He also told me that "Christians go to the same heaven as Chinese," perhaps as a way to assure me that I could be included, although he conceded that "perhaps they go to a different part of it." His imagination of it as a place was that "in heaven everything is all one color," he said, "There are no Malays, Chinese, and Indians – only one color." After some thought he added, "I think that color might be yellow." In this last comment he was giving a bit of an edge to the Chinese and to his own cultural capital as someone knowledgeable about Chinese history and practices, since yellow is the imperial color of China and the color of the center.

Mental Maps

As discussed in the previous chapter, a "mental map" refers to the product of a research method in which respondents are asked to draw a map of a locality; and it also refers to a person's subjective perception of an area. Approximations or representations of the latter can also be elicited through verbal means. This section presents a comparison of the "mental maps" of the residents interviewed in LST and Tanjung, who, as in Kampung Dodol, were asked to describe and draw the location of their house and any prominent features of the area in which they lived. Comparing the results from all three study areas revealed some significant differences in what residents chose to emphasize or represent. In general, residents of the inner city chose to include features of the built environment that were much further from their homes than the features that were included by residents of the kampung. In the inner city, there was also no single focus for residents' spatial attention such as that provided by the mosque in Kampung Dodol, which is where most villagers worshipped. There were also some significant differences in the ways in which residents of the two inner city areas expressed an awareness of ethnic and religious differences in their neighborhoods. As discussed in more detail below, residents of the predominantly Chinese area of LST chose to emphasize landmarks that were not Chinese, and in the more densely built, culturally diverse, and ethnically mixed area of Tanjung, most residents chose to focus only on features identified with their own ethnicity. In both areas, that which was "new" and ethnically or religiously unmarked in the built

environment had been incorporated into most mental maps, but only to a limited extent. Interpretations of these findings will be offered in the course of the discussion that follows.

In characterizing LST as predominantly "Chinese" and Tanjung as ethnically "mixed" I am following the ways in which most residents in each of these areas characterized their neighborhoods themselves. In each case a specifically visual proximity, as well as an awareness of ethnic demographics and personal familiarity with area residents, appeared to be decisive factors in identifying the ethnicity of an area. In LST, most residents, including the very few Indians who lived there, said that theirs was a "Chinese neighborhood." Significantly, the only Chinese resident who said it was ethnically "mixed" lived directly across the street or within close proximity to the three Indian households that were the only ones in the immediate area. Another Chinese resident, who lived several hundred feet away and around a corner from these households and an equivalent distance away from the only Malay household in the area, apparently did not know any of these non-Chinese residents. He said the area was Chinese and that "we have all good Chinese neighbors. There are no Malays and no Indians." The identification of LST as "Chinese" thus seemed to depend on social knowledge or interaction, as well as visual proximity.

Responses articulating the overall ethnic character of Tanjung were much more complex, and varied decisively according to the ethnicity of residents, with most Chinese and Indian-Muslim residents saying their residential area was "mixed" and

most Indian Hindus saying it was "Indian," for reasons that will presently be explained. Here, where houses and streets were smaller and more closely packed together than in LST, the spatial scale at which residents considered the area around their houses appeared to be a factor in whether they identified it with their own ethnicity or considered the area "mixed." But here there was also another dimension that was not evident in LST: place names as codifiers of ethnic identifications. The residents of LST were unanimous in their responses when asked what their neighborhood was called: it had no name, although some mentioned the names of individual streets. In Tanjung, however, apart from some responses that cited the official, municipally defined name of the street on which residents lived, eleven different names for residents' neighborhoods were offered, in various languages. These did not always refer to exactly the same area or to eleven different ones, however, and there was much territorial overlap between different place names in different vernaculars. There had been a tradition in George Town, since its earliest days, of each cultural group having its own terms for certain areas, streets, or parts of streets (Meeran n.d.). In having their own terms for some (but not all) places in the city, each language group had imagined and articulated certain urban spaces according to their own criteria, and thereby, in at least a partial sense, could make them "their own" in ways that stood apart from, or cross cut, the English names assigned by the city's British colonial administrators.

Some of these "unofficial" names were still in popular use in Tanjung and were not always direct translations of either the historical English names or current official names, which were often in Malay. (Most street names were in English during the colonial era, and often either translated into Malay or completely changed in the current post-colonial context).[104] Some of the names that current Tanjung residents used referred specifically to the street on which their houses were located, but others were more descriptive phrases that referred not to streets but to locations, such as "Behind the Kuan Yin Temple," "In Back of the Nine Houses" (translations from Hokkien), "The Kapitan Kling Mosque Area," (Malay), and "The Seventh Junction" (Tamil), which meant the area near the seventh street from the sea. The linguistic specificity of these names, and their continued use since the colonial period, could be taken as facilitating a certain identification of a street or an area with one's own culture group and not the group represented by either the language of the official street name (English but now often Malay), or the specific individual for whom a street had been named. (Some streets in George Town retained the names of British colonial administrators, but others had been renamed to honor local, post-colonial administrators.)

Despite such complex ethnic articulations and overlaps in both terminology and the areas referred to, the continued use of such vernacular names did not always indicate that residents identified their neighborhoods solely with their own ethnicity. Only 6 of the 16 Chinese respondents in Tanjung said that theirs was a "Chinese"

neighborhood, and only 3 of the 8 Indian-Muslims said their area was "Indian."[105] All the others in these two groups said that their areas were "mixed." Significantly, however, all but one of the 8 Indian Hindu respondents said that their neighborhood was "Indian." I maintain that, in this latter case, the reason does have to do with place name terminology, but one that has an official and recent, rather than a vernacular and historical origin. Cultural multiplicity is a now a keynote of George Town's identity as both a national and international tourist destination. According to several informants, at some point in the mid-1980s, the state sought to underscore the "colorful" character of Indian Hindu culture (demographically, one of the smallest culture groups in Penang, but with a strong presence in the old inner city) by promoting to tourists the area centered on Market Street as "Little India." Although not every household or business on this street was Hindu, or even Indian, its four-block length was where many Hindu proprietors had long operated their businesses. Many of these were visually distinctive with colorful displays of religious equipment, textiles, shawls and saris spilling onto the street from open shop fronts. With the help of the state's tourist office and the encouragement of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, the street was enthusiastically described as an attraction in magazines, guidebooks, and brochures, which helped to reinforce the pride with which local residents and businesses identified a larger immediate area as Indian.[106] The name stuck and was embraced by the area's Hindu inhabitants who understood that it was both good for business and that it also gave additional prominence to their minority

culture on an even larger urban "map." Most of the Hindu respondents thus clearly expressed that their neighborhood was both called "Little India" and that it was "Indian" – an example of state intervention as a possible contributing cause for identifying a particular location with a particular ethnicity. This was not, however, how Chinese residents who lived there saw the same area or street. Significantly, unlike LST, where Indian respondents said that the neighborhood was "Chinese," no residents in Tanjung considered their neighborhoods to be identified by any single ethnicity other than their own. For both Chinese and Indian respondents, if their neighborhood was not "Chinese" or "Indian" it was "mixed." This pattern of response perhaps indicates a reluctance to cede any more symbolic ground than was necessary to any particular group not one's own.

Turning now to specific features articulated in residents' "mental maps" and combining consideration of both verbal and visual representations, the most striking difference between the responses of the Malays of Kampung Dodol and the Chinese and Indians of LST and Tanjung is that in the latter two more densely urban inner-city areas landmarks associated with religious practice outside the home were cited much less frequently. In Kampung Dodol, the Hashim Yahya mosque and the burial grounds were clearly the most visually prominent features of the built environment and the former was indisputably the focal point of the community. Although non-Muslim religious practices in Penang were quite diverse, places of public worship appropriate to one's faith in the areas of LST and Tanjung were generally not much

further distant from respondents' homes than the mosque was to the houses of Kampung Dodol. Nevertheless, these public venues for religious worship were mentioned less often and drawn smaller in scale relative to the streets than the kampung residents' representations of their mosque and burial grounds. Only two Chinese residents of LST mentioned, and none drew either of the two Taoist temples in that area, despite the fact that both of these were very active and held public gatherings that spilled onto the street at least twice per week. Their small size and lack of architectural distinction, however, may have been a factor in not considering them prominent enough to be landmarks: one occupied the ground floor of a terrace house identical to those in its row, and the other was housed in a modest wrought iron structure, painted red and with a pair of small dragons on the roof, in the front yard of a bungalow. In Tanjung, however, neither size nor prominence could be limiting factors: every household visited here was within a short walk from a number of large Chinese temples, spectacular by any standards, including an elaborately decorated structure dedicated to Kuan Yin, Penang's oldest and perhaps its most famous Chinese temple. Nevertheless, only 9 of the 16 Chinese respondents in this area mentioned or drew the Kuan Yin Temple (and only one other respondent mentioned another Chinese temple). Among the Indian-Muslims and Indian Hindus in Tanjung, exactly half of each group cited nearby mosques or Hindu temples.

Although the differences between these responses and those of Kampung Dodol do not necessarily reflect differences in religious consciousness or degree of

involvement in religious practice between residents of the kampung and the inner city, I attribute this difference to a number of factors other than differences between religious homogeneity and diversity. Thought Taoist, Buddhist and Hindu religious practices in Penang are themselves quite diverse and different temples for each can attract very different devotees, these practices are nevertheless similar in that they are not congregational in the same way that attendance at a mosque for communal worship is a significant component of Muslim religious practice. Though groups do gather in temples at certain times and perform certain special ritual activities together, these activities are generally not prescribed, and most activities in temples are individual acts of worship that devotees sometimes wait their turn to perform alone. Much non-Muslim worship takes place in front of private altars at home and, except perhaps for Christians, regular attendance at any other location is not a requirement. Most of the people I spoke with worshipped at temples considerably less frequently than once per week, whereas many Muslims said they prayed at the mosque daily in addition to attending Friday prayers -- another factor that perhaps contributed to kampung residents singling out the mosque as a primary focus of their mental maps. Chinese and Hindu temples attract devotees from areas not confined to their immediate proximity and there is a great variety of temples from which to choose. Other factors accounting for fewer non-Muslims in the inner city citing or drawing temples than Muslims in the kampung cited their mosque may be that, apart from this great diversity of possible venues for non-Muslim religious practice, there are also

many more commercial and secular structures competing for visual attention in the inner city; and these are often larger and could be considered more prominent in the urban landscape than any particular public religious structure.

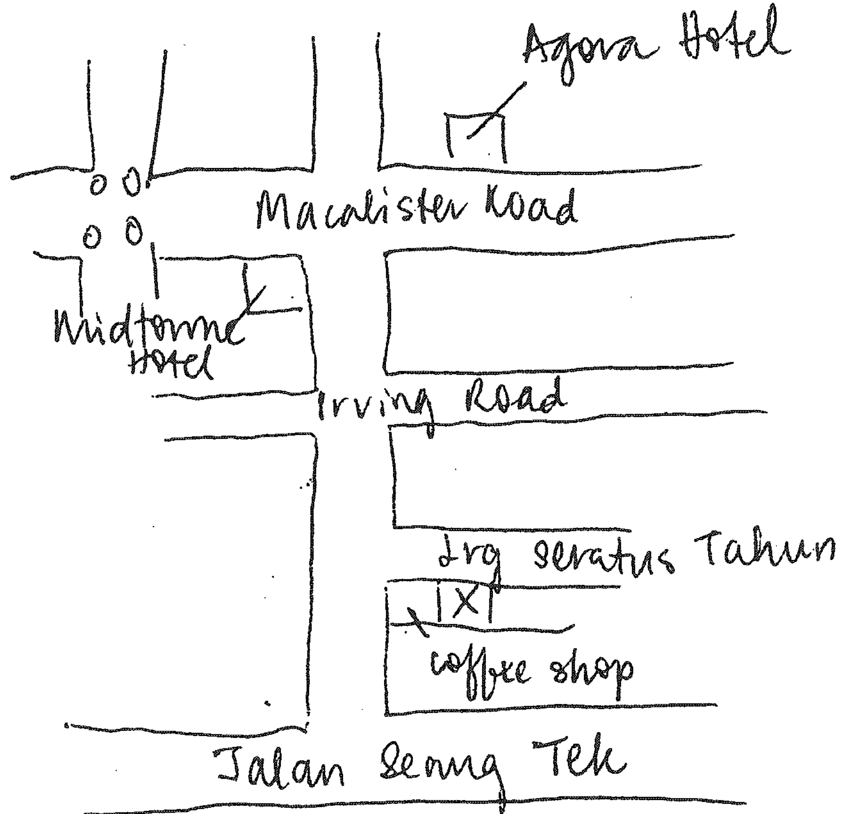
In the inner city size apparently does matter in the make up of a mental map but so too does the availability of food, services, commercial outlets, and the presence of facilities for non-residents, such as hotels. Each of these can figure more prominently than a street name, an address, or an area's name as a definer of where one lives. A resident of LST told me what I had already experienced myself as a resident of this area, that "when someone asks me where I live and I say 'Lorong Seratus Tahun' they usually don't know where that is – but if I say it's near the [famous] *curry mee* [shop], then they know."[107] Likewise, several residents of Tanjung mentioned nearby shops, such as a liquor store, tea or flower stalls, a wet market, and a popular two-story discount housewares emporium as prominent features of their neighborhood. Two Indian-Muslim respondents in Tanjung, one a fourteen year old girl and the other a ship worker nearing retirement age, mentioned with some concern the presence of a toddy shop[108] near their houses. For the teenager, the presence of this shop, which was considered somewhat unsavory by some because alcohol was sold there and its patrons could get rowdy, did not prevent her from waxing enthusiastic about her neighborhood and characterizing it as "a blend of residential and business areas, where you can get whatever you want – it's the best place in the whole state." The ship worker, however, said, "We don't like the toddy

shop because we are Muslims." This shop was a "major problem," he said, and he complained that its patrons, whom he characterized as "mostly Indians [Hindus], Chinese and Punjabis," made lots of noise and sometimes fought. These comments underscore that residents of Tanjung were conscious of the diversity the area represented and the diverse things it had to offer and that elements of this diversity could variously be understood as a positive or negative features of their residential environment.

Sites of moral dubiousness were only rarely mentioned in either inner city area, however. In the "quieter" inner city area of LST, only one resident mentioned as something of a landmark the availability of a service to outsiders that he construed as a negative feature of the area, but he cited it with much less opprobrium than the ship worker had applied to the toddy shop: an alleyway off a nearby intersection and a "hotel" where transvestite prostitutes plied their trade late at night. In general, residents of LST cited much more frequently than residents of Tanjung or of the kampung, commercial aspects of the built environment that did not always represent activities they participated in but which were ethnically non-specific. Other residents of LST either cited or drew several large, new high-rise hotels, such as the Agora and the Midtowne, as urban landmarks near their houses even though they rarely or never went there themselves. (See Map 6, Figure 32.) This map is also an example of the prominence given to the coffee shop with the famous *curry mee*.) Others included the new UMNO office tower, which was near these hotels on the main thoroughfare

Figure 32

Map 6
Drawn by A Resident of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area

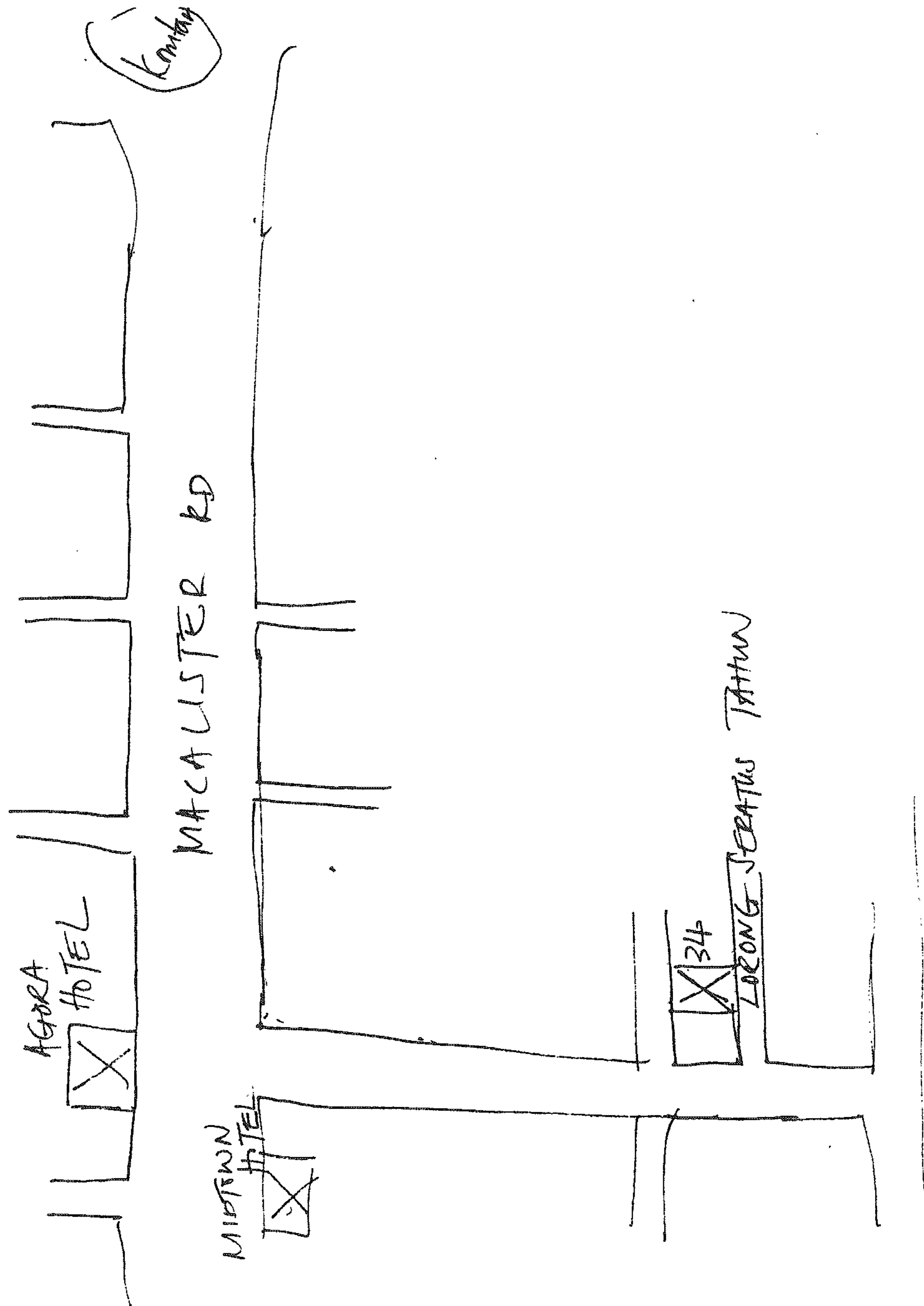


(Macalister Road), or GAMA, Penang's first large department store, and the distinctive circular 65-story Komtar tower complex, both of which were somewhat more distant from the area and at one of the city's largest intersections. (See Map 7, Figure 33). These large modern structures marked the furthest points from their houses that respondents in LST mentioned, and they indicate that new buildings, located quite some distance away and constructed long after most of the area's residents had moved into their homes, had assumed the status of urban landmarks and had now become points of orientation relative to where they had long lived.

Conversely, few residents in Tanjung cited any recently built, strictly commercial structures at all, despite the fact that there were several modern bank buildings and hotels, even larger than those near LST, that were located at approximately the same range of distance. On the whole, most respondents here cited features that were much closer to home than the respondents in LST, perhaps because, in the more densely articulated built environment of the old inner city, there was more that was considered distinctive in their immediate vicinity. Apart from a single mention and a few depictions of the modern Komtar complex on their maps, and a single mention of a smaller MARA shop/office complex built in the 1970s, the most distant points cited were all historical structures or locations built during the colonial period and still associated with that era – an indication that the Tanjung area still continued to be perceived to be the "old inner city," or that people still resident here

Figure 33

Map 7
Drawn by a Resident of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area



had been able or had chosen to disregard what was new in the built environment around their homes.

Comparisons between the "mental maps" of residents in the "Chinese" area of LST and the "mixed" area of Tanjung reveal some decisive differences as far as ethnic identification of the built environment is concerned. When asked to indicate the "prominent" features of their neighborhood, many of the Chinese respondents in LST either mentioned or drew structures associated with ethnicities other than their own. In Tanjung, with only two exceptions[109] (and apart from several mentions of British colonial structures), no one did so. Here, the Chinese, Indian-Muslim, and Indian Hindu residents all preferred to mention only those features in the vicinity that were identified with their own cultural group. The differences are instructive and exemplify, in different ways, two of the processes at work in ethnic identification in general: identity by contrast with difference, and identity by affiliation, as will be discussed below.

The single most often cited feature among the respondents in LST was the new UMNO tower that had been under construction for many months and was completed during the time of my field research. The United Malay National Organization (UMNO) is the dominant political party in Malaysia and is identified as an organization that seeks to advance specifically Malay interests.[110] Its new headquarters in Penang, built in a distinctive high-tech style by one of Malaysia's most prominent architects, is currently the second tallest structure in Penang (after

Komtar) and it loomed over the terra-cotta roofs of the surrounding terrace and shop houses like a giant silver behemoth. Much more modest is the Pakistan House Mosque (a place of worship for both Indian-Muslims and Malays) across the main street from it -- a two-story reinforced concrete structure that is more in keeping with the scale of the adjoining Chinese terrace houses. Both of these structures are indicated in the maps drawn by Chinese respondents living on Selangor Road and Lorong Seratus Tahun. (See Map 8, Figure 34; Map 9, Figure 35; and Map 10, Figure 36.) The inclusion of the modern, stylistically nondescript Pakistan Mosque in these rawings likely indicates that it was not size alone, but also cultural difference that was a criterion for including both of these buildings in residents' maps.

Streets are prominent connecting pathways in all three of these maps. In Map 8 (Figure 34), the resident centralizes the street he lives on, continues it as a central axis, and identifies what is found along it; but in Map 9 (Figure 35), the author marks his house (with an "x") as part of a continuous turning path that links his own house and street to the same buildings: the mosque and the UMNO building (the pointed top of which is indicated), and he additionally includes the more distant Komtar tower. In Map 10 (Figure 36), the streets are depicted as a rigid abstract grid and none are named. Only three elements are depicted as significant here: the mosque, the UMNO building and the author's house. The latter (also marked with an "x") stands in stark opposition to the other two structures in a triad of primary elements.

Figure 34

Map 8
Drawn by A Resident of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area

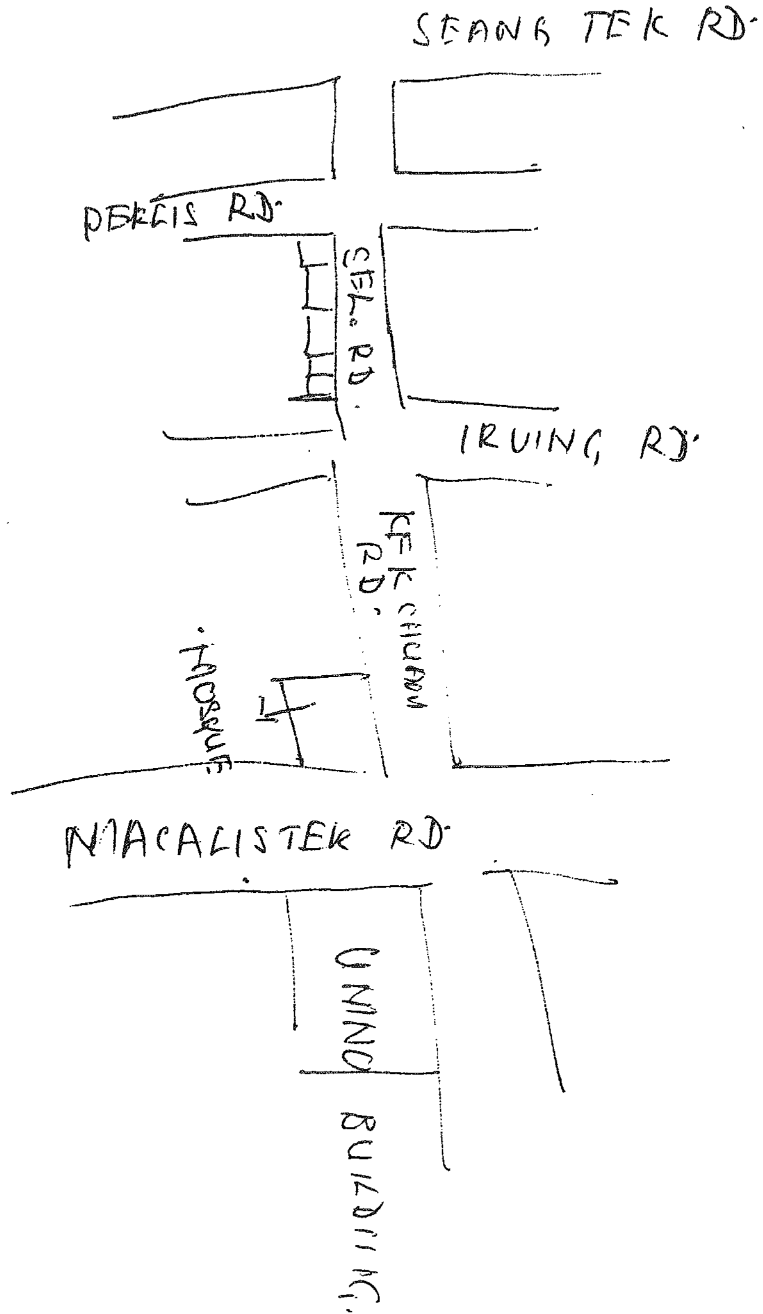


Figure 35

Map 9
Drawn by A Resident of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area

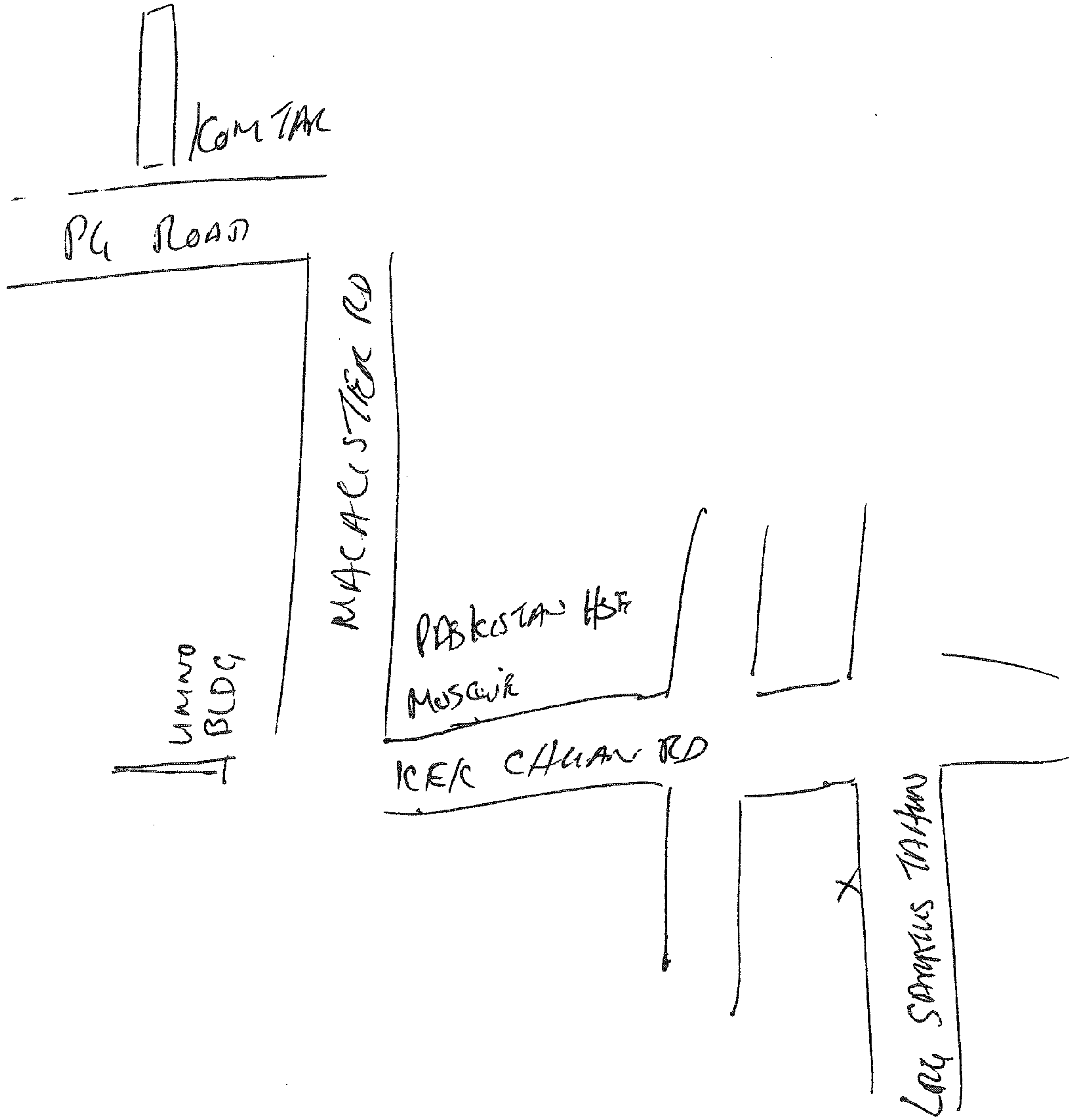
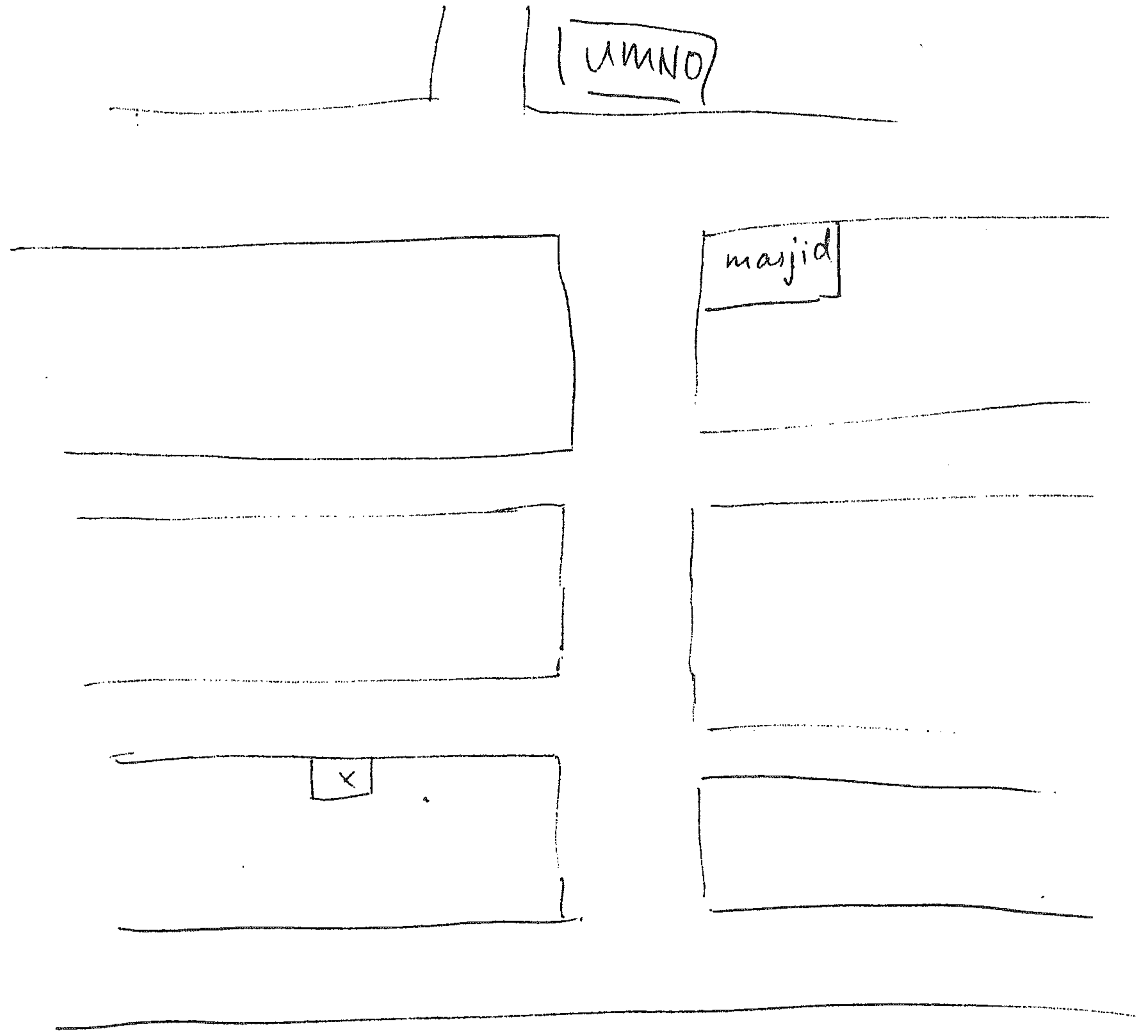


Figure 36

Map 10
Drawn by a Resident of Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area



Without unduly stretching the point I offer the following interpretation. Responses to previous questions revealed that the residents surveyed in LST were nearly unanimous in their estimations that their neighborhood was Chinese and their houses themselves were Chinese structures. With "Chineseness" as the norm on both accounts, aberrations from the standard became features that were considered prominent and could therefore be comfortably cited precisely because they were aberrant, with little effect upon the primary identification of the area as one that was predominantly Chinese, both socially and architecturally. Their position secure, they could, in a sense, "afford" to accommodate difference into their perceptual world. Several residents did express concern, however, with the large scale of the UMNO building as a harbinger of things to come, not just in their own area but throughout the city: continued high rise development would likely turn most single-unit houses in the city, including their own, into unsustainable remnants of the past.[111]

A very different process was at work in representations of the "mental maps" offered by the residents of Tanjung. In this ethnically "mixed" area, cultural homogeneity could not be assumed, and there was certainly no lack of structures that were unambiguously associated with each of Penang's major cultural groups: Chinese, Indian-Muslim, Indian Hindu, and, in smaller numbers, Malay. There were also urban landmarks representing the British during the colonial era. Each of these groups were well represented by historic and visually elaborate architectural monuments such as the Kuan Yin Temple and the Kapitan Kling Mosque (both founded 1801), the Sri

Mariamam Temple (1833), the Syed Alatas Mansion (mid 19th-century) and Penang's famous clock tower, 60 feet tall, built 1897-1902 by a wealthy Chinese merchant to commemorate Queen Victoria's sixtieth birthday (Khoo 1993). If any type of building could be considered "under-represented" here architecturally, it was the ethnically "unmarked" style of modernity, which perhaps explains why, apart from several citations of the modern Komtar tower and a single mention of the recent MARA shop/office building development, no respondents in Tanjung mentioned or drew any of these recently built, ethnically or religiously unmarked structures.

As already discussed, there certainly were a number of "modern" buildings in the area but these apparently could be easily ignored. Based on both drawings and verbal responses, residents could also largely ignore urban landmarks or monuments not pertaining to their own cultural group. On the whole, respondents chose to depict or cite as prominent only structures that were identified with their own ethnicity or cultural group. Likewise, with the exception of the Indian Hindu respondents (which will be discussed below), there were also few mentions of any of the British colonial structures. Only one Chinese respondent – a twenty-year-old student – mentioned anything associated with colonial history. In addition to citing Komtar and Gurney Drive (the seaside avenue that was a favored residential location of colonial-era elites), this young man included in his list of "prominent features" Fort Cornwallis, the first structure built by the British upon the founding of the city in the 18th century – but he may have done so only because he played basketball in a public court in the park

adjoining it several times each week. Every other respondent chose to concentrate almost solely on features that were in some sense their "own." Some examples follow.

Map 11 (Figure 37) was drawn by a middle aged Chinese man who lived with his mother, wife, and two children in the same terrace house in Tanjung since he was born. Komtar is furthest point from his house that he includes and he also indicates the streets that connect it to or from his house, which he situates relative to the Kuan Yin Temple (indicated on the map as *Kuan Yin Teng*). No other feature is included. Even closer to his house than Komtar is the Kapitan Kling Mosque – on the same street as the temple – but this structure is not indicated, and the area in which it is located is left ambiguously undefined, with the delineation of both the street (Pitt Street[112]) and the block on which the mosque is located being left incomplete. The drawing stops at the location of the mosque. The location of the same mosque is similarly left blank in Map 12 (Figure 38), drawn by a woman who said she goes to the Kuan Yin Temple two to three times per month. She also includes Komtar and the main roads that lead from her house (which she indicates with an arrow), and she indicates (in Chinese characters) both the temple and the Penang Chinese Town Hall[113] around the corner. This temple and the Chinese Town Hall were the two most frequently cited structures among the Chinese residents of Tanjung.[114]

There was an analogous pattern of responses among the Indian respondents: Muslims most frequently cited mosques (and did not mention any temples), and

Figure 37

Map 11
Drawn by a Resident of Tanjung Area

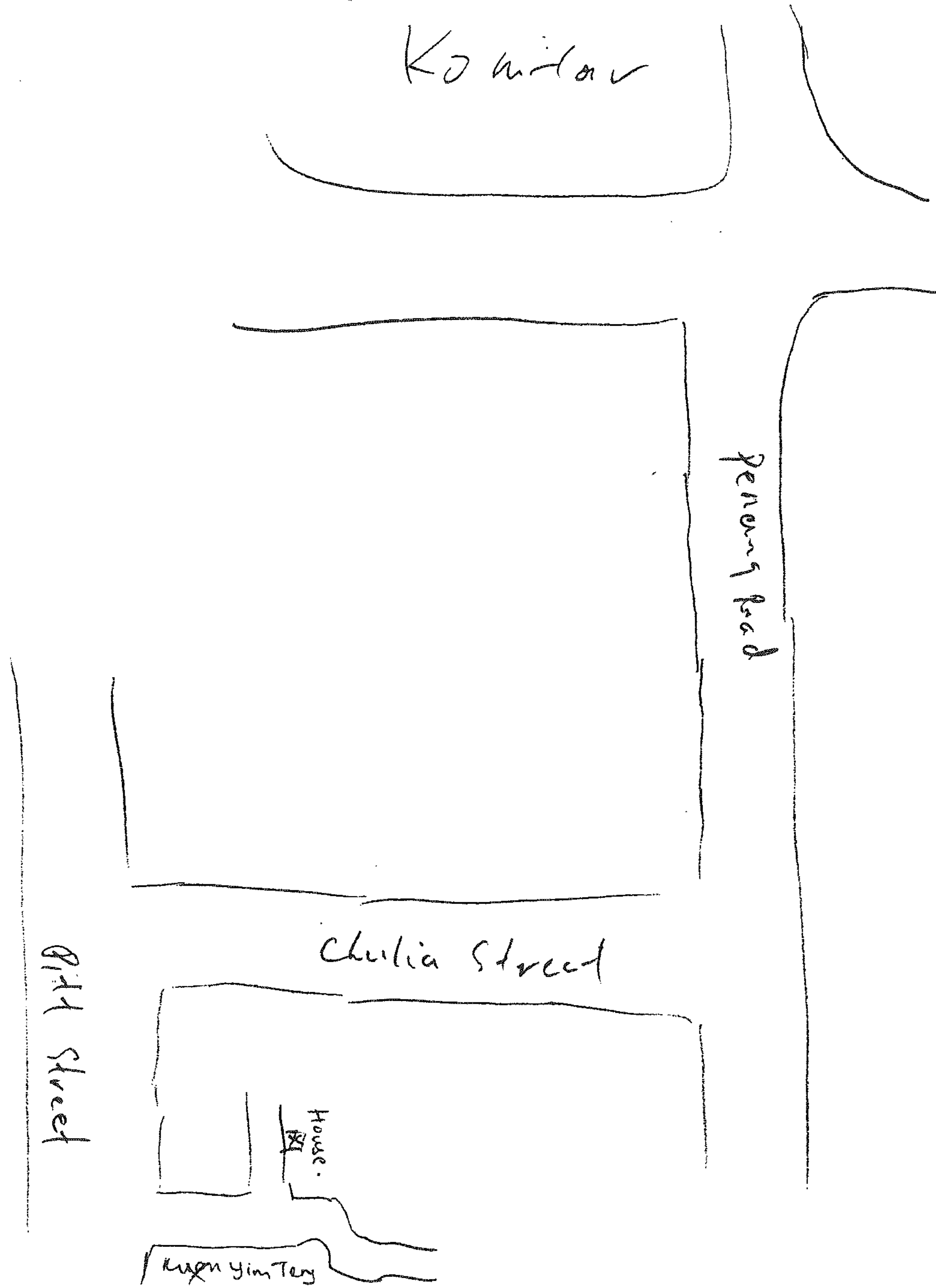
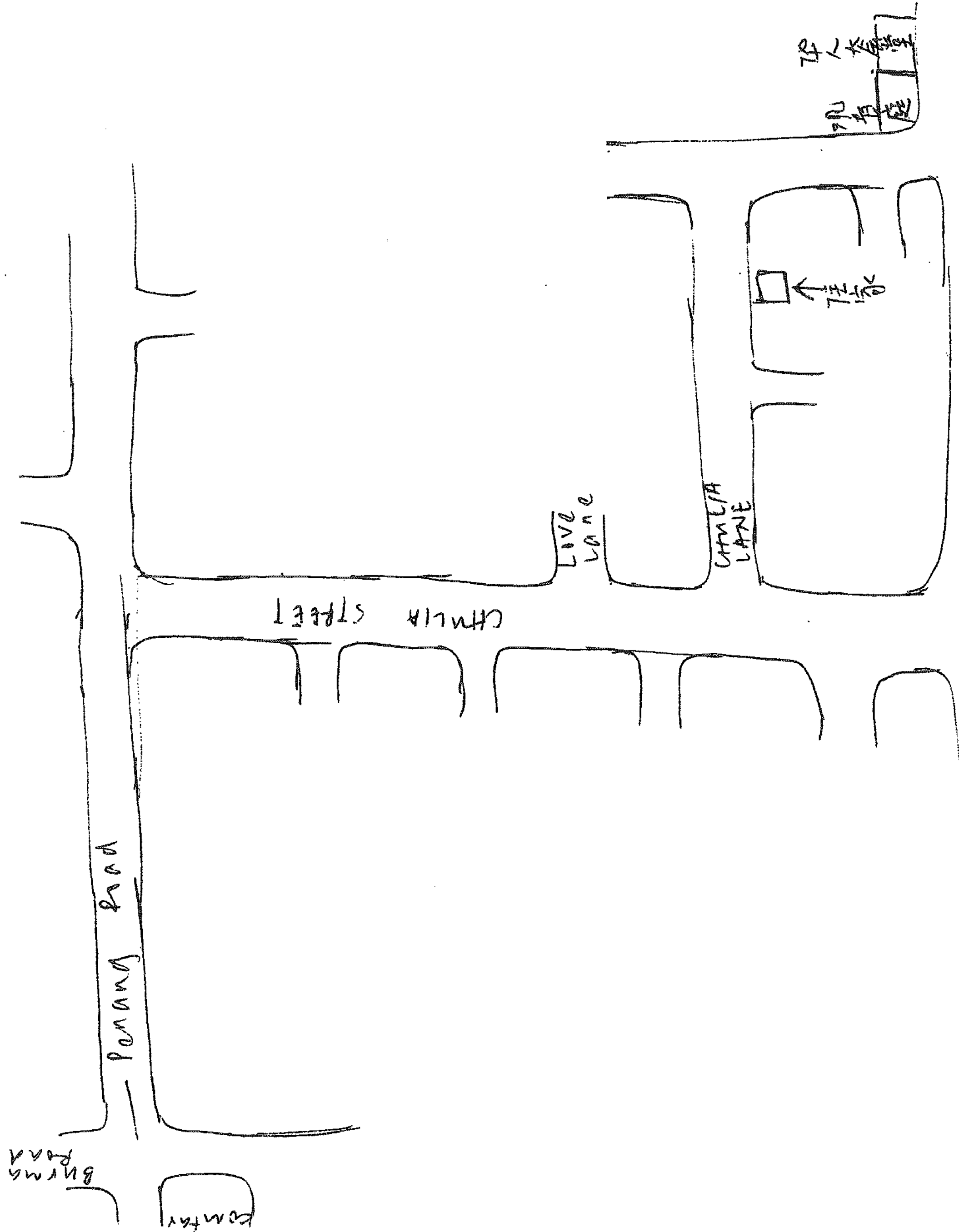


Figure 38

Map 12
Drawn by a Resident of Tanjung Area



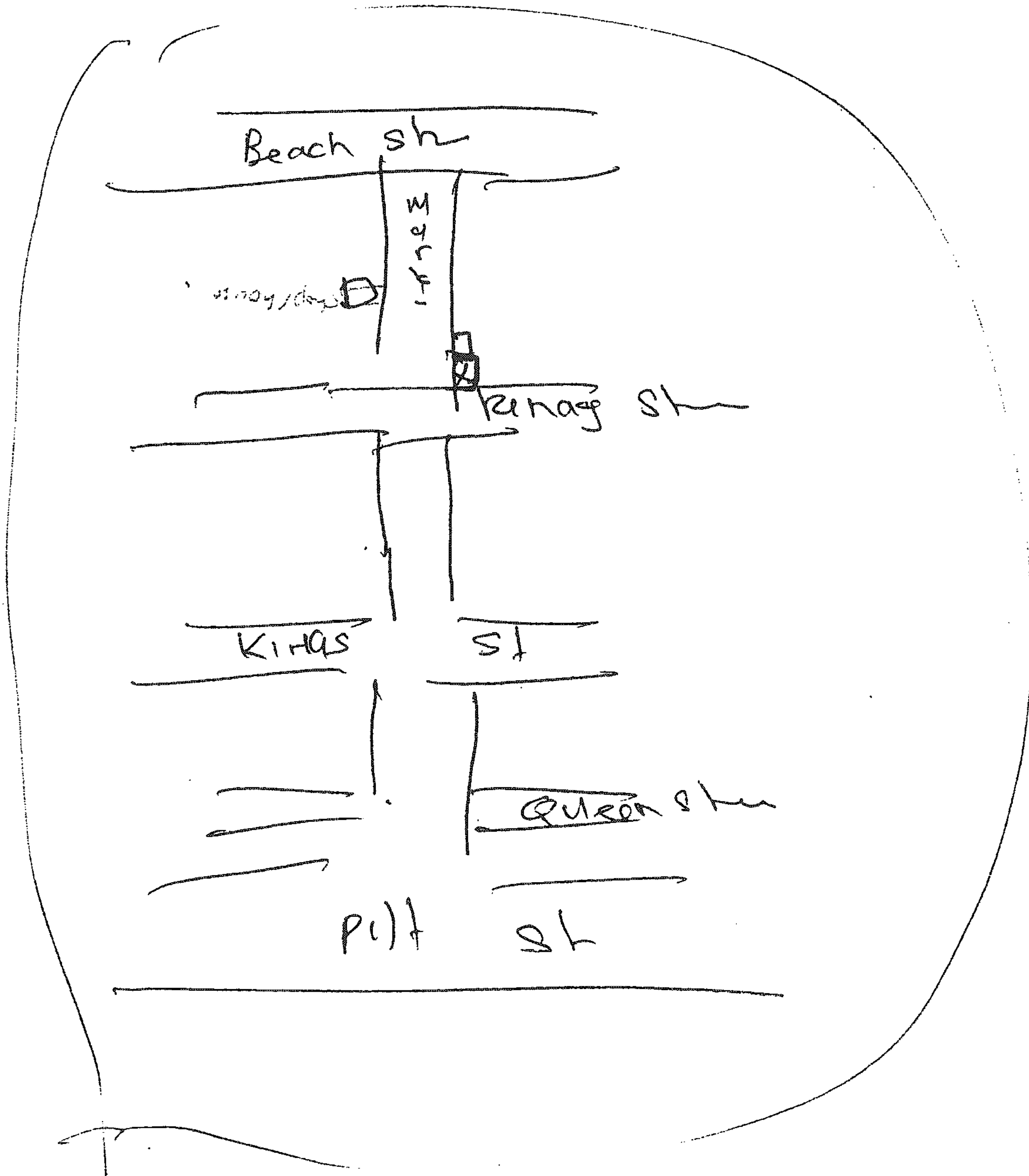
Hindus most frequently cited Hindu temples (and not mosques or Chinese temples) as prominent features, although one Indian-Muslim did mention a Chinese shop on his street and two others mentioned shops whose proprietors were Indian but not Muslim. Among commercial venues mentioned by Muslims the one most frequently cited was a hostel favored by Muslim travelers. Although no Hindus mentioned or drew any features identifiably Chinese or Muslim, the second most frequently mentioned category of structures they cited (after Hindu temples) were those associated with or built by the British during the colonial era, even though many of these were somewhat distant from their houses. These features included the clock tower, the colonial Supreme Court building, St. George's Church, and the Esplanade, a popular walkway along the waterfront that connects Fort Cornwallis to the original British town hall buildings. I attribute these references to a widely held social memory among Indians that it was laborers from India who had built much of the early city's municipal infrastructure, and also to the same kind of objectification that was at work in the state's promotion of the concept and the name of "Little India" as an area that is identifiably both Indian and Hindu. These colonial monuments are often portrayed together with Little India itself as inner-city attractions in promotional literature for tourists, and several Hindu respondents also cited them as monuments that marked the furthest boundaries of Little India. (Also, more Hindus than Muslims or Chinese in Tanjung included "tourist area" as a characteristic of their neighborhood.) By embracing the term "Little India" Hindus could be a part of something that had local

and national prominence, just as citing a connection to colonial monuments associated with the British, whose largest and most famous colony was India, also asserted a relationship to something large and historically prominent.

Interestingly, the concept of a bounded enclave, or even the idea of boundaries at all, only arose among the Hindu respondents, who represent a minority population in Tanjung. When asked what the boundaries of their neighborhoods were Chinese and Muslim respondents said either that there were no boundaries or they indicated that the question did not make much sense to them. All but one of the Hindu respondents, however, readily named streets or monuments that they considered to be the boundaries of what they previously said was "Little India" (even though few agreed on what these boundaries were). Map 13 (Figure 39), drawn by a Hindu shop owner, illustrates the most common denominator of the definition of Little India: it is centered on Market Street (the site of an annual state-sponsored celebration of the Hindu "new year" holiday of Deepavali that helps define the area as "Little India") and radiates outward along the side streets off this road (along several of which, if he had continued, the colonial monuments would be indicated). Rather than go into any more detail, however, the author here encloses the area in a closed circle – perhaps as an assertion of the objectification of the area as a definite bounded area, even though what actually constitutes the boundaries is left indistinct. In this case, the Indian resident seems to have appreciated that, as a minority in Penang, Indians had their own clearly demarcated turf. Malays in Kampung Dodol, though they appreciated that

Figure 39

Map 13
Drawn by A Resident of Tanjung Area



their kampung was identifiably Malay, had expressed no equivalent sense of the boundedness of their space, perhaps because they were conscious that they were a majority nationally or perhaps because they felt their moral position to be generally relevant even outside or beyond their own living situation. The Chinese, likewise but conversely, had ample opportunities throughout Penang to find aspects of the built environment with which they could identity, since people and things Chinese were a local majority. They too were not much concerned with boundaries. Residents of LST, where most people were Chinese, emphasized that which was not Chinese around them as prominent because it was different and in doing so they also assumed their own identity or position to be normative or widely applicable and thus perhaps less in need of a boundary in any defensive sense.

Conclusion

This chapter and the previous one have shown that the people I worked with in George Town, in locating their own places within a larger spatial and social arena marked by diversity, considered the residential space in which they lived at a range of scales and in various dimensions, including the temporal. People saw in both houses and neighborhoods multiple ways in which both sameness and difference could be reflected. Despite the fact that many were second or third generation and some were themselves immigrants, most were deeply attached to where they or their families had lived for so long and had made them their own. These locations also represented, to

residents themselves and to others, identities that were not exclusively ethnic but also referred to lifestyles, household economies, and ways of making a living that were sometimes roughly sorted into opposing categories of old versus new. Residents of both the kampung and the inner city resisted participating in a new market of new types of housing -- and the increased emphasis on housing as an indicator of a household's income level that these often entailed – because, at least until the end of rent control, they could afford to distance themselves from this powerful socioeconomic trend. Inner city residents were enjoying the material fruits of a current regional and nationwide economic prosperity but they were doing so on their own terms. As long as they could continue to live where and how they had for so long, these terms need not include home ownership. State and corporate interests (usually working in tandem) were encouraging everyone to buy units in new projects, but most of these were in high-rises distant from the heart of the city that would entail, for many households, loans requiring regular salaried incomes or personal age requirements that resulted in a long-term indebtedness that many would prefer to avoid. As renters but not owners, households were investing in other things than housing, such as education of their youth and smaller-scale consumer items, less costly than a house or apartment, that made their lives more comfortable. The ambitions of succeeding generations of immigrants continued to focus on ways of making money in an urban economy, but expressing these ambitions in lavish homes or lifestyles was not a very common concern. New types of housing may represent

new and different lifestyles and ways of doing things, but for many residents who still lived in old single-unit houses in the city they also represented certain social liabilities. High-rises in particular were thought to be too small to keep youth at home very often, too socially isolating for old people, and their design created spaces that, for some, were too private and individual in ways that could possibly compromise a wider sense of communal responsibility.

People valued their houses and old neighborhoods because they were convenient, comfortable and familiar -- and because they felt they reflected who they were – not just because they were inexpensive. The selves and identities that they understood to be reflected and reinforced in their current residential situations – both the domestic architecture itself and the disposition of a wider residential space, whether in the kampung and the inner city – significantly expressed ethnic specificity within diversity, but also, perhaps more importantly, the public presence of particular religious practices. For both Muslims and non-Muslims, but especially for the latter, outfitting a house in order to meet certain ritual requirements was a key factor in making it truly inhabitable and comfortable. These additions facilitated religious consciousness and personal worship within or just outside the house and seem to have been only secondarily significant as public indicators of personal or household identity. Malays took pride in the fact that, in many cases, they or previous generations of family had built the houses they now lived in and that both houses here and the kampung itself were recognizably Malay and Muslim. But Chinese and

Indians in the inner city could easily customize an existing house built by someone else to suit their own religious and ethnic expression. Self-determination in creating or fashioning one's housing situation was thus a value that was widely shared but the significance of ethnicity in this process was weighted according to whether one was conscious of being part of minority or majority when territory at a range of scales was considered. Conscious of being a minority locally (in the city and in the state of Penang) but also sharing the culture of a national majority that was validated by national-level policy and both official and popular discourse, Malays were keenly appreciative of the ways in which they, their houses, and their kampung were exemplars of Malay identity. Likewise, as another kind of minority, in this case on both local and national levels, Indian Hindus appreciated that a part of the oldest area of the city was recognized by the public and promoted by the state as "Little India," which some saw as a clearly demarcated turf that was both Indian and Hindu. Conversely, this chapter has also shown how some Chinese residents took for granted that their houses and residential environments were Chinese or predominantly Chinese. With this identification applicable to so many people and things throughout the city, being Chinese had become something of an assumed standard.

At the same time, however, city residents of all ethnicities were also conscious of difference. Residents of the predominantly Chinese area of LST, even those who were not Chinese, identified the area as Chinese but Chinese residents there chose to emphasize what was not Chinese in their mental maps precisely because it was

different. Residents of Tanjung more or less agreed that their area was ethnically "mixed," perhaps because they had a more direct and daily experience of diversity. This was where different people lived in closer proximity than in the other two areas and where there were multiple examples of ethnically specific structures more monumental and imposing than shop or terrace houses. With diversity here closer to home than in the kampung or in LST, many residents chose to include in their mental maps only those features of their environment with which they themselves could identify.

The significance of temporal and territorial continuity and contiguity to residents' spatial imaginations, and the ways in which these imaginations encounter and attempt to incorporate into their conceptual structure both material and social differences and changes through time, were discussed in regard to all three neighborhoods. The previous chapter showed how, based on their existing cultural capital, residents of Kampung Dodol went their own way in imagining or locating the residential space in which they lived and how, on this basis, they formed a residents' association whose focus cut across a major city thoroughfare, different names for places, and two *wakaf* properties defined as separate territories by the Penang State Muslim Religious Council. Participation in the contiguity of a shared space was a primary factor in their attempts to bring present and future residential life in the area more in line with what they imagined to be the social and moral values embodied in village territory in an esteemed past. The result was a local civic association with an

elaborate managerial bureaucracy articulated with a departmental complexity akin to that of the state government. As shown in the current chapter, some Chinese residents of LST were also involved in their own locally autonomous bureaucratic structure that attempted to manage certain aspects of their immediate residential space in ways that stood apart from, but were still conscious of, national political history and state control. The terms of this management were just as moral as those articulated in Kampung Dodol but they were differently focused and directed and had multiple centers. For adherents to certain Chinese ritual practices these terms referred to management of relations between this world and an unseen cosmic realm, and to an elaborate network of spirits of different categories whose worship in, or appeasement and/or deflection from multiple locations was undertaken in order to manage their very real influence and effect on the space of everyday life. These efforts were undertaken for individual benefit but also for the good of all – who were defined as everyone living in a particular house or near to a particular temple. As has been shown, this bureaucratic structure of variously situated spiritual powers and responsibilities has been interpreted as mirroring the bureaucratic structure of late imperial China, but it has proven resilient enough in overseas Chinese contexts to incorporate more recent and more locally specific political and religious histories into its embrace. In the case of Penang, this creatively expansive incorporation and management of both difference and change through time can be seen in the inclusion of Japanese war dead in the annual appeasement of "hungry ghosts" and the regular

worship of Datuk, an indigenous pre-Muslim Malay earth spirit thought to have been abandoned by Malays under Muslim reform. Though not everyone believed in these spirits, those who worshipped them did so not just to help themselves but to help everyone living in a particular place, and their activities helped to define the character of residential space as an arena for moral action, even for residents who did not participate in ritual practices.

Living in a space that was perceived to be shared with others different, in multiple ways, from oneself was an organizing principle flexible enough, and polysemic enough, (or perhaps ambiguous enough) to be an umbrella that could encompass history and change over time and assist residents in coming to terms with both. At the same time the perception that space was truly shared provided a ground for the incorporation, into one's own particular world view, of a wide range of possible social, cultural, and ethnic and religious differences, many of which inescapably confronted one another in the close quarters of urban residential space. The following chapters provide more details on state and corporate involvement in the meaning and disposition of urban space and in the ways in which residents of the city, in establishing relationships with these powers, attempted to insure that Penang, as a place in which to live and as a greater metropolitan region with an identity of its own, would continue to be marked by expressions of autonomy, diversity, and difference and still retain a certain moral content and a valued connection to the past, despite the

sometimes massively transforming material and social consequences of new kinds of urban development.

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[1] A shop house is distinguished by moveable elements that allow the ground floor façade to open completely to facilitate business. A terrace house usually has windows on either side of a central and permanent double panel door.

[2] A few residents, however, did specify that their houses were not just Chinese but specifically Hokkien.

[3] A *linga* is a stylized phallic symbol of the masculine cosmic principle embodied by the Hindu god Siva.

[4] From the sounds of singing and the clanging of bells during worship, neighbors would likely have known that the house's inhabitants were Hindu and likely Indian, even if they did not know them personally. The house was used for weekly worship by a group of devotees who gathered there each week from various parts of Penang and it hosted even larger gatherings on important festival days of the Hindu calendar. Like the owner of the house, many of those who attended these events were also Gujarati.

[5] One Indian respondent said that a stranger could tell that the house was Indian by the "structure of the windows."

[6] Jawi is a form of Arabic script used for writing Malay.

[7] This altar, or shelf, for the worship of T'ien-King would usually be attached to a pillar to the left of the front door on a shop or terrace house and would hold a receptacle to hold burning joss sticks/.

[8] These outside religious accessories were also sometimes considered to serve a practical secular purpose in that they identified a house's occupants for the purpose of specifying the associations or causes to which they were likely to donate. For example, a woman who said she had no religious identifier outside her house said that representatives of every organization and religion knocked on her door to volunteer or donate to various causes.

[9] There are some exceptions that span this temporal divide. Architectural styles such as Art Deco, or streamlined "moderne," with origins dating prior to World War II, continued to be utilized for some buildings in Malaysia up until the early 1960s.

[10] Under Malaysian property law, the ultimate use of such seized properties is not confined to public purposes but can be returned to the private sector. This topic is discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

[11] As discussed further in the next chapter, this image of the "new" and "tall" rising in the midst of an "old," and largely two-story pre-war urban fabric, was consciously sought by the chief architect and planner of the KOMAR redevelopment project, whose 66-story tower was once the tallest structure in Asia. Transposing the

modernist idea of a "tower in a park" into a tower rising out of the old city, his concept was that by concentrating new development in a single high-rise, the low-rise fabric of the old city could be preserved. This has not turned out to be the case and limited numbers of modern buildings have arisen throughout the city. Areas such as Pulau Tikus and Gurney Drive are well on their way toward becoming characterized by predominantly new buildings, but these areas are exceptions. Although the total square footage of built-up space in post-war structures in the city may now exceed that of pre-war structures, pre-war single-unit structures remain numerically dominant within the city. They are also visually dominant if the horizon line at the level of the street, and not the skyline, is considered.

[12] Malaysian architects appreciative of the deeper cultural and ecological value of vernacular forms generally faced an uphill battle in advocating that these forms be incorporated into contemporary designs (see Yeang 1987).

[13] Komtar is an acronym for Komplex Tunku Abdul Razaq – the Tunku Abdul Razaq Complex,

[14] One inner city resident speculated that it might specifically be the paint fumes of new construction that contributed to old people feeling sick when they moved to new apartments. Another resident of an inner-city house, an elderly woman, said she thought that the air was too thin in a high-rise, making it difficult for old people to breathe.

[15] This was a non-governmental organization devoted to the preservation of Penang's historic architecture and living cultural heritage.

[16] These residents were asked to answer the questions in the survey questionnaire (Appendix 1), already discussed. Selection of households here was based on contiguity, with almost every house along the entire length of Lorong Seratus Tahun visted (27 in all); two additional households were visited on Selangor Street and one each on Naning and Irving Streets.

[17] Many Malay and Chinese informants told me that Malays prefer cats and Chinese prefer dogs. Several Muslims told me that being licked by a dog makes one unclean and in need of ritual purification.

[18] These streets were Stewart Lane (8 respondents), Chulia Lane (4), King Street (3), Market Street (2), Market Lane (2), Queen Street (2), and one respondent each on the following streets or lanes: Armenian, Kampung Kaka, Muda, Tok Aka, Ah Quee, Che Em, and Penang.

[19] "Indian-Muslim" is a locally used term that appears to have originated in British India, of which Penang was once a part. Bose and Jalal (1997:104) note that is was a construct of what they call "British social engineering," operative through census categories, that helped create supra-local caste and religious identities with political implications. The term "Indian Hindu" is not generally used in Penang, where most Hindus are presumed to also be Indian, but I use the term (unhyphenated) to specify a

combination of these identities since there are ethnic Chinese in Penang who identify themselves as Hindu.
[20] Only one location in the study area could be considered segregated: an enclave of wooden houses adjoining the compound of the Acheen Street Mosque that was home to Malays and Indian-Muslims.
[21] I often heard comments that Cantonese was becoming more widely known in Penang than previously because of the increased popularity of Cantonese language films, television shows, and popular music from Hong Kong. Some people also said that American English had largely superseded British English as the most commonly spoken form because of the influence of American media.
[22] One of the Indian families in LST knew both English and some Hokkien, which was the most commonly spoken language in this neighborhood. In the Tanjung sample a Tamil businesswoman said she knew both Cantonese and Mandarin.
[23] Mandarin is the language of literature and the other Chinese languages mentioned here are not generally written. A pre-World War II literature in Baba-Malay, based largely on Hokkien, was written in Roman script. Mandarin is sometimes used in formal speeches and/or in an attempt to span diverse Chinese ethnicities. I attended several banquets, however, at which many guests listened politely to speeches delivered in Mandarin and could understand little.
[24] Asking English educated Chinese friends for further information about some of the ritual practices I had observed, I was often told that I would do better to ask someone who had been "Chinese educated" because he or she would be likely to know more details. According to one informant, three of the most important standard texts were The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Origins of the Gods, and the T'ung Shu, an almanac of practical advice regarding the Chinese calendar (see Palmer 1990). Several informants mentioned that the perspectives on current events offered by Mandarin, English, Malay and Tamil language newspapers, all of which are read in Penang, can sometimes be quite different. For a discussion of Malaysia's linguistically diverse media see Heuvel 1993:146-160.
[25] One man in LST, who was educated during the war, had studied in Mandarin and Japanese.
[26] A sense of inclusion and an awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity were sometimes celebrated in these street performances in ways that can be considered highpoints of postmodern performative pastiche. For example during a street performance at the festival of the hungry ghosts I a troupe sang and performed the Macarena in Hokkien but with an Alpine motif that included long blonde braided wigs on the dancers and yodeling.
[27] China's turbulent history in the early decades of the 20th century and the eventual establishment of the People's Republic precluded easy return or very much back and forth communication. Conversely, Penang was once governed as part of British India

and then became one of the Straits Settlements, a separately administered British colony. These historical factors facilitated travel and communication between Penang and India but not between Penang and China.

[28] For memoirs of the Baba or Straits Chinese era in Penang see Liang 1983, Lim 1997, and Yeap 1993

[29] An association of descendants of Babas publishes newsletters and has a large annual convention at which they celebrate their distinctive cultural heritage. At one such meeting, a woman told me, "We are not Chinese – we are not good with money" – a statement that re-affirms the association of specifically Chinese culture with financial acumen and enterprise.

[30] Chinese respondents were somewhat less forthcoming about income levels than most of the Malay or Indian respondents to the survey. Most Chinese residents I spoke to could be very frank about costs and expenditures (I was frequently asked how much rent I paid for my flat), but some preferred not to quote a figure for their income, and some young adults did not know or said they did not know how much money their parents earned.

[31] The ages of the individual respondents to the questionnaire/survey ranged from 19 to 68 in LST (15 woman and 17 men), and 14 to 78 in Tanjung (11 women and 20 men).

[32] This name is a pseudonym.

[33] The houses included in the survey that were bungalows or renovated kampung-style houses most likely were built much earlier.

[34] This man considered his family "small" because he only had two children, and he said he had bought his terrace house in LST in the mid-1950s, when it was "quite cheap" because it was "suitable for a small family." The interior of this house was approximately 1,500 square feet, which gives an indication of what he considered an appropriate or desirable amount of living space for a family of four.

[35] In LST, out of a total of 32 households, 22 were renters and 10 were owners.

[36] This discrepancy in rents between the two areas likely indicates greater pressure to raise rents in the most central part of inner city, which had always been identified as a prime business location, than in the quieter area of LST where the potential for business enterprises or commercial re-development of properties seemed less certain, or at least less prominent. In the years leading up to the end of rent control as of January 1, 2000, owners were permitted gradual periodic increases, but many of the owners in LST had not taken advantage of this provision and had continued to charge at the old rates. Some renters there thought that the increases were so small that the owner, who often had little to do with the property since it was not generating much income, simply did not bother to charge more.

[37] As an example of the financial terms involved in purchasing a RM25,000 unit, one man said he had made a down payment of RM2500, with a monthly payment of RM220 for 15 years, which amounts to a total payment of RM42,100.

[38] Among those who had already been offered an apartment and could afford the down payment, some had refused the offer because the location was too far from town. As already mentioned, others took the apartment and rented it out so that they could avoid or reduce the monthly payments and continue to live in town.

[39] For example, a 1990 socio-economic survey of five percent of all households in Tanjung (roughly equivalent to the current survey area) found that 79% had refrigerators, 38% had washing machines, 88% had televisions, and 64% had VCRs (Tan 1990:52). Although the current 1998-99 Tanjung sample is not strictly comparable, 97% of the households surveyed had refrigerators, 69% had washing machines, 97% had televisions – all substantial increases – but only 66% (2% more than in 1990) had VCRs, indicating greater emphasis on "basic" items over "luxury" goods such as VCRs. Tan also found that, in 1990, 10% of the households in Tanjung still cooked with charcoal stoves.

[40] Citing a 1988 survey, Tan observes that walking was the most frequent mode of transport among residents of Tanjung and that trips to work, school, the market, or to social activities, were generally short. Walking was followed (in order of frequency) by motorbike, bus, bicycle/trishaw, and car (Tan 1990:31).

[41] Department stores advertise the availability of interest-bearing time payments even for items as small as fans or blenders.

[42] In like manner, the heritage activist already mentioned said that he "valued freedom even more than heritage" – meaning that people should be allowed to do what they liked with their own properties and that the proper task facing a heritage preservation movement was therefore education and not coercion.

[43] This man's shop was on *wakaf* property and when the Penang State Islamic Religious Council wanted to raise his rent to RM 140, he hired a lawyer, took the Council to court, and succeeded in maintaining his rent at the old rate of RM41, at least for the time being. He and other long-term Indian tenants in the inner city also said that they would go back to India if their rents in Penang became too high.

[44] Conversely, in a different Taoist temple located elsewhere in the inner city, a devotee told me that Americans and Europeans could perhaps be better equipped to pursue the *tao* because, unlike many Chinese, they are often prepared to leave the families in pursuit of certain goals and can be less caught up in a drive to make money.

[45] Penang is also known as the state from which many of Malaysia's architects originate.

[46] Not all participants in food-related occupations or at-home production worked directly with the public. One household in LST prepared and sold roasted ducks for

use in Chinese rituals (and eventual consumption by their participants) and hung them out to cool in the back alley behind their house. The head of another household was a butcher who worked in a slaughterhouse and who also sold meat in a nearby market. Another household manufactured chili sauce and *kueh kah* (rice cakes) for sale to hawkers. Another was a wholesale distributor of fresh fish. Both of the latter involved work by several generations of household members.

[47] This fee is sometimes as low as RM5 per day.

[48] The owners or the primary tenants of a commercial property usually reserve for themselves the prerogative of being the establishment's exclusive purveyor of drinks. There are few public bars in Penang not attached to hotels; most public consumption of alcohol also takes place in coffee shops operated by non-Muslims.

[49] A commonly cited reason for not opening the stall was in order to attend certain family events that required travel. Many hawkers worked six days per week and many coffee shops were closed one day per week which was when the hawkers they rented space took their day off.

[50] This name is a pseudonym.

[51] On a trip to Penang in April 2002, twenty-eight months after rent control ended, I found the Lims gone and their house empty and for rent, along with several others in its row that had the same non-resident owner.

[52] Long distance driving to eat at a particular hawker stall also occurs in Kuala Lumpur. Friends there got on a highway and drove twenty minutes to a central part of the city just so we could have a bowl of *laksa* (sour fish soup) at a particular stall. Another friend there told me that a ramshackle hut in a squatter's area of Kuala Lumpur, where a particularly good *roti canai* (Malaysian-Indian bread) was served, would often be surrounded by shiny new BMWs during mornings before work. He remarked that, if the hut ever suddenly collapsed, a number of CEOs of major corporations would likely be injured.

[53] Hawkers working in these venues do not usually continue to have stalls on the street but work exclusively for catering companies.

[54] *Sate* are skewers of barbecued meat that are dipped in a sauce before eating.

[55] *Teh tarik* (literally "pulled tea") is made by pouring, often with great bravado, hot tea with condensed milk back and forth from two glasses held some distance apart, which produces a foam similar to cappuccino.

[56] *Nasi kandar* is a cuisine of Indian-Muslims, who are sometimes called "*mamak.*" *Nasi* is the Malay word for rice; *kandar* is the pole held across the shoulders to which containers would be attached at either end for transport. In an earlier era, Indian-Muslims would sell curries and rice door to door in the city and the cuisine took the name of this instrument of transport.

[57] A Hindu informant mentioned with some amusement the case of an Indian Hindu family who attempted to pass themselves off as Muslim in order to operate a nasi

kandar stall. Nasi kandar is generally higher priced than Hindu vegetarian cuisine and therefore more lucrative.

[58] Some Buddhists are strict vegetarians. Other, less strict adherents, both Buddhist and Taoist, do not eat meat (and some do not have sex) on the first and the fifteenth of each lunar month. On the level of health, Chinese, Malays, and Indians are generally all variously concerned with whether certain foods are "heaty" or "cooling" and which foods should or should not be consumed together or a certain times, determinations that are often dependent on one's personal health and whether the weather at the time is hot, cold, or rainy.

[59] *Nasi lemak* (literally "rich rice") is rice cooked with coconut milk

[60] A Muslim acquaintance observed that there were no halal Chinese restaurants in Penang as there were in other states of Malaysia and he cited this as an example of "food chauvinism." Fast food franchises in Malaysia, such as MacDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, are generally all halal.

[61] Names of dishes often combine English or Malay words with transliterations of Chinese terms and signboards advertising them sometimes additionally include Mandarin characters.

[62] Most cooking at home is done by women. Many, if not most hawkers are men.

[63] I heard many stories of entrepreneurs in Penang who had become millionaires but who preferred to live in a modest house, dress as they always had, and patronize the same coffee shop as when they were just starting out. Such stories were often framed in contrast to analogous cases in Kuala Lumpur where successful businessmen were thought to publicly flaunt their wealth, build grandly, and live lavishly.

[64] For example, an Indian Hindu woman was adamant that her house was "very sentimental for me because I was born and bred here. My last breath will be from this house and my last wish is that my soul will go out from here."

[65] Terms of rentals were such that tenants and not owners were responsible for repairs. There was no established mechanism in Malaysia for "fixture fees" in which one tenant can pass along changes for improvements to either a new tenant or the owner upon terminating a tenancy.

[66] Flush toilets are still not ubiquitous in every shop or terrace house in Tanjung and the inner city saw much of its development, well into the twentieth century, take place without them. "Night soil" would be collected in a bucket and placed in a covered opening in the back wall with an outside door for periodic collection via the back alley.

[67] In a case of global demographic imagination, this young man had also calculated that Bill Gates had enough money to give every person on earth three U.S. dollars.

[68] This man also said that he would often be ready to close on the sale of a high-rise unit to a young person and the purchase would be discouraged by the potential buyer's parents, sometimes for cultural reasons such as poor *feng-shui* or because the address

contained the number four in it which, in Chinese, is a homonym of the word for death. For this reason high rises often skip from three to five when floors are numbered.

[69] This statement likely refers to the widespread belief that unused interior spaces that are devoid of human presence, including vacant apartments and new, unsold condominiums, can be taken up by ghosts or other spirits who can afflict mischief on later inhabitants if they are not properly dispelled. Belief in ghosts is not an indicator of either socioeconomic status or a particular type of education. People of all levels of income or education expressed beliefs in ghosts or spirits to me.

[70] The Indian shopkeepers in the "Little India" section of Tanjung were taking steps to mitigate the problem of problem by getting the beggars to agree to solicit donations from shopkeepers only one day per week. The problem of noise mostly pertained to vehicular traffic, but there was also a cross-ethnic dimension. Several Muslim residents of Tanjung (not part of the current survey) expressed discomfort with the noise from generators and loudspeakers set up on the street for performances of karaoke and Chinese opera on temporary stages during Chinese temple festivals. Significantly, however, they did not question anyone's rights to hold such religious activities or the performance itself, only the noise level of the equipment used to support such events.

[71] Each earned approximately RM 4,000 per month.

[72] This man said that he liked that his house was light green in color, and explained that Malays and Indians also like green but they prefer it much stronger and darker. Indians generally like strong colors he said, but Chinese prefer light colors like white, grey, or pale green or blue. Green is popularly identified as the color of Islam and is widely used to express this identity in signage and graphic design. Many old Chinese mansions, bungalows and terrace houses in Penang initially had deep blue exteriors, created by mixing cobalt pigments into a lime plaster that would eventually fade with time to become paler. There were still traces of this blue on some Chinese houses in the city.

[73] Elliott (1955) coins the term "shenism" (after *shen*, Mandarin for "spirit") in preference to "Taoism" in writing about similar Chinese religious practices in Singapore.

[74] The circulation of *ch'i* between exterior and interior spaces is a fundamental concern of *feng-shui*, the art and science of Chinese geomancy. Proper circulation is thought to bring benefits such as good health, energy, good luck, and money (cf. Feuchtwang 1974).

[75] There could be others outside the house – for the worship of T'ien, the god of the heavens, or for the Jade Emperor; and inside near the stove, for the Kitchen God.

[76] A mirror is thought to repel a bad spirit by showing to it a reflection of its own ugliness.

[77] One of the principles of *fung-shui* (Chinese geomancy) is that *chi* (vital breath, energy or life force) should be welcomed from outside and be retained but allowed to circulate freely inside with a minimum of obstruction. No front or back door should be parallel to each other with an unobstructed space between them lest *chi* enter and immediately leave by exiting through the opposite portal. Popular guidebooks to *fung-shui* circulated widely in Penang. .

[78] These and other terms throughout the following are Hokkien.

[79] Ahern notes that charms (*hu*) are

> used to communicate between men and spiritual officials, for the special purpose of controlling a third party, be it man or spirit. One obtains a charm from a spiritual official or his delegate and brings the command it contains to bear on the third party one wishes to control (Ahern 1981:24).

Ahern goes on to quote the following elaboration by McCreery:

> Paper charms embody commands from higher ranking gods to lower ranking spirits or human beings. Properly drawn, activated, and sealed, they exercise the gods' authority in a way precisely analogous to the way in which secular legal documents exercise political authority among men (McCreery 1973:107).

[80] There are certain occasions, such as festivals and deities birthdays, when deities *are* seen as moving through everyday space, in the form of statues or mediums in trance carried on carts or trucks or pulled by devotees in procession.

[81] Zito explains ancestral tablets as follows:

> In China, the person splits after death. Its bones return to earth in the grave, while its pneuma is captured in the tablets that return to the ancestral hall to reside in words on a surface. That name is both iconic and symbolic; a signal to worship and a symbol of transformation after death to ancestorhood (Zito 1997:169).

In Malaysia it was common to inscribe the names of both parents on a single ancestral tablet upon the death of one and to cover the name of living spouse with a slip of paper which would be removed in a ritual upon the latter's death. Photographs are also sometimes included on the tablets.

[82] In one version of funerary practices and beliefs the spirit of the deceased was thought to be immanent on a special altar inside the home where it remained for 100 days and was served three meals per day.

[83] Clan temples in Penang were most often associations of people who shared the same family name, even if details of their relatedness to each other were unknown. District associations had members who traced their family origins to the same administrative district or village in China. One of the primary functions of these associations was to provide for communal worship of members' ancestral tablets, if they chose to place them in the association's temple or headquarters. Daily worship at its most basic

consisted of the burning of joss sticks but periodically more elaborate offerings were provided.

[84] Other items for the dead are burnt outside the home, generally on the night before the cremation or burial. These are usually made of paper and almost always include a model of a house, often complete with paper servants. Other items to be burnt can include paper versions of cell phones, televisions and VCRs (with remote controls), cars, bicycles, and six packs of beer. I witnessed the burning of a full-sized paper Mercedes (with chauffeur) for a woman who never drove and an elaborate admonition by a Taoist priest to paper household staff to be honest and faithful and not ever cheat their mistress.

[85] Wolf suggests that the category "ghosts" includes "the souls of all people who die as members of some other group" and that this category is always relative: "Your ancestors are strangers to me, and my relatives are strangers to you" (Wolf 1974: 172-173)/

[86] Communication with deities who were not possessing the body of medium could be established by throwing into the air two wooden crescent-shaped blocks (*pue*) flat on one side and rounded on the other that were explained to me as having a *yin yang* shape. How the blocks had landed would indicate a deity's response to a question, with both flat sides up indicating "laughing," both flat sides down, "no," and one up, one down, indicating "yes." Most communication with deities through mediums in trance was much more direct and personal, but when they spoke in what was called "Old Hokkien," or, more rarely in Mandarin, most devotees required the help of translator assistants who stood by.

[87] Some partakers would note a change in flavor or taste of something after a spirit had consumed its essence.

[88] A deity could also be asked for assistance in finding a suitable house to rent, as well as how to furnish it and equip its altar.

[89] Trance mediums (*tong-ki*) could be either male or female but all of the mediums I witnessed in Penang were male. Some of these were possessed by female deities. Most mediums had a repertoire of several deities who regularly possessed them and these could be either male or female. Once the particular deity possessing the medium was identified, the medium would usually be dressed in clothing appropriate to and indicating that deity.

[90] Some venues for trance mediums never expand even this far beyond the altar of a house or shop. I saw mediums at work in places and times such as the front rooms of mechanics' or car repair shops after hours.

[91] A regular medium in one of the temples worked as a construction laborer. Two others were employed as electricians in the workshop of an electric sign company located down the street.

[92] Some people explained to me that it was not necessary to consume the ash, just the water that had been in contact with it – an example of the principle of contiguity that is explained below.
[93] A fewer number of deities spoke Mandarin, for which many devotees also required a translation. Mediums possessed by deities who spoke Old Hokkien or Mandarin claimed not to know these languages when not in trance.
[94] Participants explained to me that different deities have different degrees of formality/informality and that the highest level of deity, such as the Jade Emperor, never "come down" into the body of a medium.
[95] Whether or not they went to the temples to worship residents of the area often turned to temple members and sometimes to the mediums themselves when they needed home repairs or plumbing or electrical work done.
[96] Wolf documents a similar procedure in Taiwan, in which ashes from a large temple are brought to fill a new incense burner in a smaller temple. According to his informant, "This is like asking the god in the big temple to send someone to live in our temple and protect us" (Wolf 1974: 136).
[97] Other temples in Penang retained a certain exclusivity that, however, was usually based on broader criteria than a particular family lineage. Some of the Hindu temples in Penang also remain caste specific.
[98] Though this couple did not live in the wife's family home, I found matrilocality among second and third generation Chinese couples in Penang to be quite common, in contrast to a pattern often prevalent in China.
[99] The other temple in LST also had ambitions to expand by buying land in some other location and building a new freestanding temple. A sketch of a design for this temple was hung on the wall next to the medium's chair and donations were solicited for a building fund.
[100] See description in note 86.
[101] Households at street level would set up altars with offerings outside their doors on one of the nights of Chinese New Year. During funerals the casket would lie for several days in the front room of a house or, in the case of shop houses, in a tent on the street, and mourners would fill the immediate area to stand watch and to fold joss paper offerings. Although there are funeral parlors, and spaces for funeral services near or underneath high-rise flats that have similar open-air configurations, many mourners said they preferred having wakes at home. Ideally, a body should be placed in a coffin in the home. A concern sometimes voiced by elderly people about high-rises was that it might be difficult to get a coffin down the stairs or into the elevator.
[102] I found that devotees of certain temples often criticized aspects of the ritual practices of other temples and their members.
[103] I took this prescription to a pharmacy specializing in Chinese herbal medicine and it turned out to be for a packaged brand of herbal tea specially formulated for

symptoms of "heatiness." I took the tea and it relieved my symptoms immediately. In this case the deity seemed to have determined that my illness was "within the body" and caused by an imbalance between hot and cold or an excess of some substance; it was not caused by "being hit" by a ghost, spirit or other agent (cf. Ahern 1981:9). Devotees who had seen deities for much more serious illnesses after medical doctors had failed them claimed they had been cured by the deities' ministrations and/or by consuming the charm (*hu*) he or she had provided.

[104] Many streets in George Town were originally in English or were named after prominent British administrators of early Penang. Following independence in 1947, many of the former were simply translated into Malay ("Market Street" became "Leboh Pasar"), and some of the latter were completely changed ("Pitt Street" became "Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling" – Kapitan Kling Mosque Street.), a practice that continues today. At the same time, speakers of Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, and Tamil occasionally had their own, unrelated names, for some of the same streets, parts of streets, or areas.

[105] These ascriptions were made despite the fact that, in each case, there were shops or households of different ethnicities than that of the respondents within approximately one hundred feet, or less, of their houses.

[106] A keynote of the state's strategy to promote "Little India" was its annual sponsorship of an official celebration of the Hindu festival of Deepavali in the form of a street festival and cultural show, held on a stage erected in the center of the street, which is attended by state officials. This is not a neighborhood event. Tourists are bussed from the beach resorts on the other side of the island and a tent is erected to accommodate them. Prizes are awarded for the best decorated food stalls sponsored by each hotel.

[107] A total of five residents of LST mentioned the curry mee shop as a landmark and several drew it on their maps.

[108] Most Muslims in Penang take seriously the proscription against the consumption of alcohol. Toddy is an alcoholic beverage made from fermented coconut water. At this particular shop, customers brought their own containers to be filled, which they sometimes consumed on the street outside.

[109] One Chinese respondent mentioned the Kapitan Kling Mosque across the street from her shop and one Indian-Muslim mentioned a "Chinese shop" nearby.

[110] As already discussed, UNMO is the dominant political party in the Barisan Nasional (BN), the National Coalition. Other member parties include the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Gerakan (a pan-ethnic party currently dominant in the Penang State Government), among others. Opposition political parties not members of the coalition include Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and Keadilan (Justice Party).

[111] A Chinese informant who did not live in the city considered the height and the sharp angles of the UMNO building to constitute a *feng-shui* attack on the old city, and, by implication, its Chinese inhabitants, but no residents of the LST area mentioned this idea to me. Similar concerns had been expressed following the construction of the Komtar complex. Several other informants mentioned that some Chinese business owners in the city had attributed a decline in their businesses to the fact that Komtar tower blocked the flow of beneficial *chi* (energy or life force) from the mountains to their shops. Other shop owners or workers I spoke to attributed a decline in their business to a more mundane reason – that there was a large indoor and air conditioned shopping mall in the Komtar complex that drew away a lot of customers.

[112] Pitt Street was named by the founder of Penang after the then-current British Prime Minister William Pitt (also the namesake of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) and is still commonly referred to as such despite having been officially re-named Jalan Masjid Kapitan Kling (Kaptian Kling Mosque Street).

[113] The Chinese Town Hall was founded in the 1880s to administer the economic and social functions of the Kuan Yin Temple. (See Khoo 1993: 150). Its new building, built in this location in the 1980s with Chinese sculptures and decorative elements at its entrance, has a large banquet hall/meeting room on the first floor, and offices on the floors above that house private business concerns as well as the headquarters of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce.

[114] The frequency with which these two particular structures, and not other "Chinese" monuments, were singled out by the Chinese residents in Tanjung is perhaps due to their close proximity to most of the respondents' houses as well as to their prominence (The Kuan Yin Temple is the most popularly visited Chinese temple in Tanjung and the Penang Chinese Town Hall is the largest "Chinese" structure in the area). My point is that no cross-ethnically identified structures were cited between the respondents houses and Komtar and that there were numerous such structures that were closer to their homes than Komtar.

Chapter 4

The Moral Ecology of the City: A Residents' Action Committee, Development, Governance, and New Forms of Place-based Action

Introduction

The previous two chapters showed how residents of George Town were deeply attached to where they lived and how many valued their houses, not always or necessarily for their structure or form, and not primarily for their exchange values or as indicators of economic status, but for what their housing situation was thought to embody or represent as an entire social and economic context. The values embraced in this context included the public visual expression of ethnic and religious identities, but they also extended to less publicly tangible expressions such as an appreciation of the continuity and familiarity of long-term-residential stability; convenience to urban venues and nearness to work; spaces that were comfortable and large enough to keep families together or that could house both family and work; and other, more generally applicable values such as self-reliance, resiliency, resourcefulness, and modesty in the material expression of household lifestyles. For residents of the inner city, in particular, the immediate urban space in which they lived was marked by multiple, and often very individualized expressions of autonomy, diversity, and difference – and these were among the reasons why people liked living there. The current chapter describes what occurred when challenges to many of these values were highlighted in

the aftermath of a crisis that hit a particular part of the inner city, the effects of which were tangibly felt and shared by many of its residents. This was no ordinary part of town, however, but what had recently been turned into its new center by the construction of a massive re-development project. This project adjoined the old inner city and its distinctive features were an indoor shopping complex topped by a 65-story office tower surrounding which there were still many single-unit shop and terrace houses. The crisis discussed here was the immediate consequence of the construction of one of the most recent phases of this project. The intensity with which the events were covered in the press was fueled by that fact that many people in Penang could readily identify with or recognize in their own family histories the values that were at stake in the crisis, even though they might no longer live in the city's most central part. This recognition factor, combined with such a prominent location, meant that the implications of many of the events were writ large in people's imaginations and in public discourse. This chapter describes how residents' actions and state re-actions or inactions, as mediated by and reported in the press, inspired those residents who were directly affected by the crisis to take certain matters into their own hands and not only organize themselves but propose legislation. I show how a particular chain of events ultimately led to residents' creation of a new form of place-based social action that additionally entailed a proposal for what was, in effect, a new kind of identity. This was to be a pan-ethnic civic identity, also place-based, that was articulated in tandem

with, but apart from, an existing state-fostered identity -- that of citizen of Penang and of Malaysia.

This chapter and the one that follows specifically discuss the origins, functions and aspirations of two new voluntary associations or initiatives that I am calling new forms of "place-based" social action, both of which were organized in Penang at the time of my research. The first was initially formed in response to this crisis in the new city center but it went on to address wider concerns in a larger territory. The second was focused from the start on a range of social and material problems that had arisen with the recent development of the entire greater metropolitan region. In terms of their ambitions if not necessarily their achievements, both could be considered nascent social movements with a long-term goal of social change. Though very different in membership and the specifics of their programs, their overall concerns and strategies were similar. Both groups wanted to assure that the future trajectory of development in Penang would be humane and just, and both sought to work with, not against the state in achieving this goal. These groups were formed in direct response to some of the pressures of urban development felt daily in the lives of the people of Penang, not all of which had positive impacts on everyday quality of life. For the first time ever in Penang, a sense of a shared urban space became, literally, the ground for new forms of social action resulting in new forms of activist organization directed toward long-term outcomes of the management of this space.[1] In these efforts partisanship was defined, not by the historically dominant rallying points of religion, place of origin, language,

ethnicity, clan, or class, but by a strong conviction that it was now the commonly shared living space of the city itself that mattered if any desirable social or cultural future for anyone was to be achieved.

In a continuation of what has already been discussed in the previous two chapters, I show how the spatial imagination at work in the perspectives of these two was territorially expansive and socially inclusive. What these activists and organizers felt they were up against was not any "other" marked by religious, ethnic or cultural difference (dynamics that have figured so largely in the literature on the politics and history of development in Malaysia) but rather a series of newly prominent social actors, forces and phenomena whose impact upon everyday life was inescapably and seemed to be veering out of control: corporate developers of ambitious large-scale projects, mega malls, traffic, pollution, unseen outsider property speculation, and urban decay, as well as the perceived negative values of consumerism, corporate greed, public indifference, governmental inefficiency, "social ills" among youth, and the break up of extended families. Each of these issues seemed to be playing out publicly in urban space and each was avidly discussed in coffee shops and at food stalls, in print and in broadcast media, and in numerous symposia organized by religious organizations, political groups, and NGOs. What distinguished the perspectives of these organizations was that their memberships explicitly held that both the origin of, and the solution to many of these recent points of concern was intimately tied to the urban environment itself, and that the physical and social fabrics

of the city were inextricably linked. This latter conception was similar to that articulated by the residents of Kampung Dodol who started a village residents' association to address common concerns about material and social change. The difference here, however, is that, for these two, more publicly activist groups, the links between the material and the social in the built environment were an explicit focus of their concern, the rationale for their organization, and the specific object of concerted group action.

Like the residents of Kampung Dodol, the vision expressed and enacted by these two groups was essentially a moral one: a better way to live, rooted in and reinforced by the physical urban fabric. In order to achieve their goals, each group felt it necessary to inform themselves and their community about a wide range of inter-connected factors and forces that contribute to human experience in the city, such as the relationship between the built environment and the natural world, current trends in governance and business, as well as a multiplicity of cultural traditions, social dynamics, and individual needs. Their activities thus focused on what I am calling a "moral ecology" of the city. The term is a conscious reference to James Scott's (1976) discussion of "The Moral Economy of the Peasant," via E.P. Thompson (1966). Though the social phenomenon I am describing here is very different – it is about the activities of city residents and not rural peasants – the connotation I wish to retain in this reference is that, for members of these two activist groups, the economy of urban development was something that is, or properly should be, a moral issue. Scott's

Malay peasants resisted seeing the production of food in an exclusively capitalist economic sense of "profit maximalization." Though the terms are very different, and I do not wish to infer any reactionary or provincial connotations, I suggest that the two groups I am discussing resisted seeing the production of urban space in Penang solely in terms of the profit seeking that, increasingly and for many new building projects, seemed to be all that mattered. They sought, instead, to protect and preserve their city and its quality of life from the vagaries of unfettered capitalist urban development that so often appeared to favor profits over people.

For these groups, the economy was part of a broader network of interconnections that they felt should also be considered in moral terms. Activated in one case by a neighborhood construction crisis, and in the other by an informed awareness of transnational environmental/ecological activist movements, the formulators of these new forms of "place-based" action saw the greater urban space they inhabit as deeply ecological. They understood the material and the social fabric of that which was both near and far in their environment to be linked together into an even larger space of human habitation and they upheld this space to have a certain moral content. Reformulating flows of information, ideas and constraints from external sources into an expanded understanding of what they valued about their own local senses of place, they, in turn, saw this value as having relevance well beyond their own immediate environment or the concerns of only their own group. In trying to work out some kind of reconciliation between the values inherent in their own

"mental" space (to use Lefebvre's term) and those currently emphasized by recent trends in the physical and social spheres of real space, these groups attempted to guide the latter toward forms more conducive to an imagined ideal. In doing so, they were making bids to be recognized as players in the future and on-going process of what Lefebvre calls the "production of space" (Lefebvre 1981). Capitalism, profit making, and capitalist ambitions were not completely out of the picture in the expression of these concerns – but they were things that needed to be checked and put in proper perspective within a moral framework.

The two organizations to be discussed were, by self-definition, a "Representative Action Committee" and a "think tank." Each had a very different relationship with the state government of Penang, toward which they developed very different stances. The first – the subject of the current chapter -- formed when excavation for a new shopping mall in their central city area caused massive cracks and damage to their old single-unit homes, resulting in the crisis already mentioned. The second was convened by a research arm of the state government in order to produce a "People's Report Card" that would identify good, mixed and negative trends in the current state of development of Penang's greater metropolitan area and, in effect, evaluate the existing and future social implications of each. Each group also took varying stances toward a series of distinctly urban environmental and social problems that were understood as the reverse of the same coin whose obverse was a nationally promulgated but, at times, empty rhetoric that everything wrought in the

name of "development" and economic growth was unquestionably good and good for everyone. They were thus reacting to what Indian political scientist Neera Chandhoke and others (Hefner 2001b; Loh Kok Wah 2001; Shamsul 2001; Williamson 2002) have called the post-colonial "developmentalist" state. Chandhoke argues that

> post-colonial societies gave to their states enormous power in every domain. This power was made possible because it was couched in the language of development. Since the former colonies had to "develop" in order to overturn their legacies of underdevelopment, every other process was sacrificed to the idea of development. . . . Politics became subordinated to economics; politics and political norms were not considered to be the product of debates and discussions in society, as is the basic assumption of democratic theory. On the contrary, they were to be dictated by states pursuing their chosen paths of development (Chandhoke 1998:31-32).

Given such a developmentalist orientation, she notes, "states were allotted a new criteria of evaluation and were not to be judged on the principles of democracy or that of respect for human rights but on whether they could achieve and deliver development" (Chandhoke 1998:32-33). In one way or another, both of the organizations discussed here were asserting alterative ways to evaluate state power and the development it had wrought.

It was, however, only the perceived narrowness of the state's developmentalist achievements and the ways in which it these were assessed that these groups were challenging, and not the state itself or even its rhetoric of progress and prosperity. The discursive tactics of the first organization, who called themselves the "Tanjung Area Crack-Affected Houses Representative Action Committee" because their houses were cracking due to a nearby construction project, consciously mirrored a national rhetoric

that emphasized harmony and unity as prerequisites to universal prosperity in development. It was critical of the status quo only insofar as it sought to underscore what it felt was being neglected in their case: a proper moral component to this developmentalist ideology. The second case, to be discussed in the next chapter, is the "Sustainable Penang Initiative." This movement, despite being sponsored by the state, was deeply critical of many more of the uncontrolled negative effects of development, and, by implication, the state's complicity in these disturbing trends. One of the key issues faced by each group was the structure and efficacy of governance itself: municipal neglect and inefficiency,[2] the centralization of power and the potential for cronyism and corruption that this entailed, and limited popular participatory representation.[3] What united them in their approaches was that each group recognized that a necessary first step was an understanding of the history and recent past of the place that constituted their immediate physical environment – shared urban space. Without being nostalgic or reactionary, each movement emphasized that there were lessons to be learned in the history of the development of the city that were immediately applicable to its future. Each also looked beyond their own place-specific concerns and saw their organizational efforts as relevant, not only to the people and values of the city as a whole and to entire state of Penang, but also to the future of the nation itself, the greater Southeast Asian region, and even, in the case discussed here, the world.

These two groups can thus be considered as examples of "urban social movements" insofar as such movements can be characterized as "disengaged from association with political parties as initiators of change and stand as autonomous organizations constantly generating the possibility of new 'meaning systems'" (Lowe 1986:2, paraphrasing Castells 1983). But locating in the distinctly urban "a focal point of a range of new challenges to the dominant capitalist order, matching the industrial class struggle as a fundamental source of social change" (Lowe 1982:2) and the idea that urban social movements typically organize around "urban issues of collective consumption" (Dunleavy 1980:156) are not completely applicable in these cases, and perhaps better characterize such movements in a more socialist-minded era. These groups were not concerned to counter capitalism with class consciousness, nor were they organized around issues of collective consumption per se or even a more equitable distribution of resources. Rather, it was *production* that was their focal point, specifically the production of urban space and the shaping of policies and meaning systems that affected and helped to create everyone's quality of life in the city. This organizational focus was thus not always or exclusively about ways to meet collective material needs, but it was concerned with ensuring greater popular participation, not just in the production of meaning, but also in the shape and trajectory of the city's future capitalist development.

As will be seen, at times among the major targets of these groups' place-based organizational efforts was the democratic process itself and how greater popular

participation in decisions that affected urban space could be achieved. Though issues of democracy were important concerns, however, these were not political action groups. They clearly saw the advantages and the higher moral ground that could be maintained by their positions as autonomous organizations separate from the state (even though one was directly state sponsored). Though the state apparatus was occasionally a specific target, a better characterization of these groups' focus is that it targeted what their members hoped would be the emergence of a morally committed civil society. In observing that the notion of civil society provides a way to comprehend the struggles of new social movements, Chandhoke notes that civil society "can, in one sense, be identified with democratization and political liberalization, but it is a far more comprehensive and deep concept than democracy" (Chandhoke 1998:29). This is the sense in which the two organizations discussed here self- consciously positioned themselves in relationship to the state and how the shared spaces they were defending figured into their movements: both groups sought to foster a human and moral baseline wider in scope or more fundamental than the state but upon which the state itself should rightfully stand.

Chandhoke also notes that civil society-state relations in the post-colonial world have a different history than those in the West:

> The assertion of civil society in the West is. . . based upon a shared collective memory of how absolutist states were limited and constrained by the activities of the self-conscious, rights-bearing individual in association with others. . . .
>
> For the people of the post-colonial world, the context is different. It is not the remembrance of, but the *creation* of civil society as the sphere where

> democratic politics can be constructed. Civil society has become the leitmotif of movements struggling to free themselves from unresponsive and often tyrannical post-colonial elites (Chandhoke 1998:30).

The two place-based social action groups I discuss here are engaged in precisely this kind of productive process: the on-going creation of a civil society. This is not to say that democratic participation or civil society do not yet exist in any form in Malaysia but that, as Johan Saravanamuttu, a Penang political scientist, confirmed in a recent large-scale local research project, the notion of a civil society in Penang and Malaysia is somewhat rudimentary and still in the process of being firmly established. (Saravanamuttu 1998). I maintain that, in Penang, a primary arena for the on-going creative production of a civil society is urban space itself, especially residential urban space, together with the epistemological space (cf. Shamsul 1998) of everyday life whereby residents see the spaces and places they inhabit as truly shared among diverse and different people, practices, values and socioeconomic forces. For activists in both groups, this diversity and difference was both the ground and the explicit focus of concern in their efforts to contribute to the creation of a civil society. To their minds, the diversity and differences embodied in this space were assets that could bring people together to achieve this common goal – they did not have to be things that kept them apart, as seemed to have been the case historically under colonialism and currently under an entrenched post-colonial political elite seeking justification for the centralization of political power (cf. Shamsul 2001).

The organizations discussed in this chapter were not the only place-based organizations in Penang, but they were among the first to have multi-ethnic memberships with a long-term goal of social change growing out of and directed toward the idea that space is truly shared. Other voluntary associations had memberships of residents of diverse ethnicities who lived in a particular area but most of these were temporarily organized for the specific purpose of fighting evictions or seeking compensation when threatened with displacement by development projects. Most of these types of organizations would disband soon after these specific objectives were met or not longer achievable.[4] As mentioned in Chapter 1, Malaysian anthropologist Beng-Lan Goh (2001; 2002) has recently detailed the identity politics at work in one such organization of residents, many of whom were Portuguese-Eurasian. She shows how these Portuguese-Eurasians and other residents of a kampung who were members of this group were betrayed by their own absentee Portuguese-Eurasian elites. Because of their greater social and political prominence, the latter put themselves in a position of settling with the developers on their own and guaranteeing that the residents of the kampung would leave in exchange for the construction of a Portuguese-Eurasian "Heritage House" on the grounds of the new condominium project where their own elite association could hold meetings. As already discussed in the first chapter, such an account is greatly revealing of the identity politics at work in Penang's current political economy, but identity politics as it had previously been known was precisely something that the two groups I discuss

here were making efforts to overcome, and they explicitly sought ways to check the power of an entrenched and often unseen elite to decide the future of urban spaces in which the elite themselves did not live. In doing so, these groups looked beyond their own immediate place-based concerns into a much broader territory and further into the future. Although, as will subsequently be explained, the ultimate outcomes of their efforts fell far short of the grandiloquence of their stated intentions, these groups, and not the temporary associations of residents, can be considered as nascent social movements because or their expansive and more broadly applicable goals.

The current chapter discusses in some detail the events that took place as the first of the two groups to be considered – Representative Action Committee – moved from an organization formed to address a specific and immediate crisis in the area to one that came to articulate much greater ambitions both spatially and temporally. Though the parallels are not exact, this series of events can be understood, in part, from the perspective of what Victor Turner has called a "social drama" (Turner 1974:33). Noting that conflict was rife in Ndembu villages and that it "manifested itself in public episodes of tensional irruption" which he calls "social dramas," Turner noted that such "aharmonic phases" (Turner 1974:33) were part of an ongoing social process whose ultimate outcome can be a creative reintegration or reformulation of a structural status quo. Though not all of the events I describe pertain to the specifically ritual processes that were Turner's concern, my rationale for treating them as a social drama in Turner's sense lies in his declaration that social dramas are "minutely

describable units of social process" that can be "isolated for study in societies at all levels of scale and complexity," and that "this is particularly the case in political situations" (Turner 1974:33). Turner observed that "in the social drama. . . stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation, as much as interest" (Turner 1974:35). This dual emphasis certainly rings true as a characterization of what was being expressed and appealed to in many of the efforts of the Action Committee, who sought to work with, and not against the state, while at the same time attempting to at least partially transform the structure of how it did business and who could participate in decisions about the future of urban space. "Harmony" and its opposite likewise figured into this social drama, but the harmony that was sought in efforts to achieve a resolution of the conflict was not the nationally espoused harmony that the nation-state advocated should exist between the social groups that it had itself defined as separate (Malay, Chinese, Indian). Rather the harmony that was sought as an outcome of the drama was a harmony that was locally reformulated to embrace a different set of terms. These terms included the enterprises and the quality of life of residents (of whatever ethnicity), the affects of the policies and practices of the state, the actions of developers, and the forces of nature. Each of these contributed to the production of the particular space in which the Action Committee was formed and each became the explicit focus of its concern as factors that needed to be reintegrated into a harmonious whole.

A Leader and a Hunger Strike

In August of 1996 an event occurred which would eventually involve approximately 2,000 residents in the central Tanjung area of George Town, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties, the president of the Penang Municipal Council, numerous state executive councilors and assemblymen, the head of the opposition in Malaysia's parliament, and the chief minister of Penang state. If some of the affected residents' hopes are realized, this event may even one day result in the passing of a resolution by the United Nations. This event escalated into a crisis that turned out to be the first in a series of dramatic events in this area that would galvanize public opinion and action and serve to clarify, for many, what heretofore may have been less than clearly articulated: that not everything about large-scale urban development was good. What happened raised many questions about individual and communal responsibility over urban space, power, morality, and the values of local knowledge, self-determination and certain temporal and spatial links to the past whose continued relevance seemed to have been swept aside in the rush to build and grow.

What sparked this expanding web of concern was an occurrence that, by then, was common enough for Penang: piling and excavation work began for another new shopping mall. Penang island already had six enclosed shopping malls, with several more on the way, but this particular mall project (Prangin Mall), in addition to being located in the center of George Town (Figure 40), was the most recent phase of the

Figure 40

Top: The Completed Prangin Mall in 2002
Bottom: Inner-City Area where Houses Cracked and The Action Committee Met

massive re-development project known as Komtar (Komplex Tun Abdul Razak[5]), an important symbol of the state's modernist aspirations. Sheet piles were driven to a depth of fifteen meters around the perimeter of the construction site and the following month excavation work began to remove the enclosed soil. Almost immediately, cracks began to appear on the walls, roof beams and pillars of a number of the area's old two and three-story terrace and shop houses where many residents had been living and/or working in small family businesses for generations. By early December forty-seven houses were affected, some so severely that they required outside supporting beams for fear they might collapse. Others had sunk as much as three centimeters below their original level. People began to feel that their personal safety and livelihoods were being threatened. Police reports were filed by owners, caretakers, and residential and commercial tenants alike, including the imam of the tiny 109-year old Prangin Road Mosque, who said that the mosque's roof was now leaking, plaster had fallen off the walls, and "strong vibrations could be felt during the piling works at the mall." As one resident who lived down the street from the mosque and who became the community's spokesperson put it:

> "It is difficult to sleep with such a nightmare hanging over our heads. At times we can even hear the sound of sand and wall plaster cracking and falling.
>
> For some, the fear of their houses collapsing has been so real that they have decided to move out. For those of us who do not have any choice, we have to stay put and to live with the risks.
>
> We alerted the authorities but they were rather slow in responding. The MPPP [Penang island Municipal Council][6] acted only when more cracks had

> appeared and old ones had widened. . . and when the issue was given more coverage in the press" (quoted in Utusan Konsumer 1997).[7]

By the time the story was finally reported in the press, the developer of the project was already attempting to repair several of the more severely damaged structures, but by then the residents had organized and were seeking comprehensive, and immediate, remedial action. On December 7, the Penang state assemblyman for Tanjung called a meeting for affected residents. Those attending elected a chairman and decided to call themselves, in English (for a wider audience than the speakers of any other single language), the "Tanjung Area Crack-Affected Houses Representative Action Committee."[8] As it turned out, there would be no such thing as an immediate solution.

Approximately one and a half years later, accompanied by one of the journalists who first broke the story, I met this chairman (and the author of the above statement), Mr. Lau Heng Loon, shortly after the committee's sixty-ninth meeting.[9] Mr. Lau was a psychologist by profession who lived with his wife and two children above his office in a pre-war shop house where he counseled clients. What brought us there was a tip that my journalist friend had received that one of the residents on the street where Mr. Lau lived had threatened to go on a hunger strike because his house, one of the five or six remaining in the "severely damaged" category, was still not adequately repaired after its support beams had repeatedly cracked less than a week after a first repair completed over a year beforehand. This resident was a man in his mid-thirties who had lived in the house all his life and who operated an automobile

exhaust-pipe business on the ground floor. His father had bought the building a number of years ago but had recently moved out and the son stayed on to "look after the building" by continuing to live where both still worked. At the Action Committee's regular Sunday meeting the week before, all those in attendance had signed, in support, this man's announcement of his hunger strike, and on Monday it was faxed to the developer of the mall project, to the chief minister of Penang, and to the chairmen of two state committees that had been formed to deal with the problem. The catalyst for this dramatic individual action was that the developer had recently told the group that, for reasons unknown, the state would not release additional funds from the RM2.3 million[10] bond that the state had required the developer to post as a guarantee that the repairs would be completed. The developer had also said that, due to the current "Asian financial crisis," which by now was in its second year, his company had insufficient cash with which to finance repair of the man's house, which was estimated to cost RM150-270,000. As Mr. Lau put it,

> "[Regarding] the minor cracks, if it drags on a little bit, what to do, given the economic situation? It's not that we aren't trying to understand. But to ask us to understand with him having no place to stay, it's not right."

Apparently, the hunger striker had felt himself to be up against the limits of his personal patience and understanding. In any case, through a decision made by processes unseen and parties unidentified to Mr. Lau and his group, repair work recommenced on the man's house within days after the first round of faxes announcing this man's hunger strike. Mr. Lau then helped the man compose a letter of

thanks to "whomever" it was who had provided assistance, informing them that repairs were underway. Not knowing whom, specifically, this was, they faxed this letter to all the recipients of the original message announcing the hunger strike, which was now averted.

Several keynotes to this remarkable series of connections -- that link the action of an individual to the office of the chief minister by way of the Asian financial crisis, and which resulted in a "thank you" note – need to be underscored. These involve the structure of political culture in Malaysia, the character of public expression, the role of the press, a national goal of nurturing a "caring society" within an agenda of rapid development, and the issues of efficiency, transparency and popular participation in governance. As the members of the Action Committee fully understood, each of these issues was highlighted when something went "wrong" with a large development project in their neighborhood. Each of these issues will be discussed in the following sections in a more detailed presentation of the situation in which the residents found themselves; and each can perhaps best be understood against a sliding scale of different kinds of social action, with face-to-face personal interaction at one end, and the impersonal public control of legal codes and restrictions at the other.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that many residents of the inner city spoke of their housing situation in a language of emotion and not a language of rights when broaching the subject that they might no longer be able to remain in their homes and familiar neighborhoods for very much longer. Though rent control was due to end in a

few short years and no previously protected tenant had any long-term rights in this regard, some residents seemed detached from the idea that they had any rights at all or had any decision-making power over the future of their housing arrangements. This was a sentiment that Mr. Lau wanted to change. A good part of what he and his Action Committee faced was sorting though what should properly pertain to a language of emotion and what to a language of rights, along with the differences between the power of personal connection and the power of "impersonal" law. It was "not right" for residents to be asked to understand when the hunger striker had no place to stay, but in the current situation a personal emotional appeal was the only recourse this individual felt he had in the absence of any clear, or enforceable "impersonal" mechanism for dealing with the problem. The challenge was to translate what felt like a moral given into some kind of legal structure that clarified and assured rights and that would obviate the need for any more direct emotional appeals.

Mr. Lau did not quite approve of the tactic of a hunger strike, but he respected the man's decision as an autonomous individual to do something on his own and his desire to communicate the acute and immediate seriousness of the situation. Over the years Mr. Lau and the committee had made many emotional appeals, both directly to state officials and mediated through the press, but he told me that everyone would have preferred that the repairs to their houses be handled as the outcome of an impersonal legal procedure without emotional drama. The communication of emotion and drama, however, were sometimes the only sources of power or influence that they

had, and often the only way in which they could press for a timetable for repairs. In approaching the study of temporal structures and goals, Turner states that

> since. . .goals significantly include social goals, the study of temporal structures involves the study of the communication process, including the sources of pressure to communicate within and among groups; this leads inevitably to the study of the symbols, signs, and tokens, verbal and non-verbal, that people employ in order to attain personal and group goals (Turner 1974:37).

The Action Committee had become adept at understanding the pressures they could exert by using the forms of communication that were available to them, establishing some sort of time structure for repairs had always been one of their primary goals. Whenever their attempts to communicate with those in power met with little or inadequate response, they turned to the press for assistance in assuring that their concerns were at least heard in a more public forum and in ways that might exert pressure on the authorities to act. But at the same time mediating their concerns though the press, and thus by-passing whatever relationship they had previous established with state authorities was a strategy to be avoided if at all possible, as evidenced in the way the committee approached the threat of the hunger strike and sent out rounds of faxes before it could be made public.

Turner notes that "in the social drama. . .stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation, as much as interest" (Turner 1974:35). Loyalty to the state was certainly something that the Action Committee wanted to make clear they felt, and in expressing this loyalty they appealed to what they hoped would be the state's

reciprocal sense of obligation. Pressuring the state to act through an emotional appeal such as a hunger strike was unpleasant business. A hunger strike in which an individual singled him or herself out to the point of personal harm because of something the state had or had not done was a strong statement that could cause the authorities to lose face upon public recognition that they had incompetently or irresponsibly allowed the situation to deteriorate to one of such extreme emotion. Such a move might jeopardize whatever personal connections the Action Committee had already established with certain state officials – hence the opportunity they gave the authorities to act before making the strike public, and the thank-you note after the goal had been achieved. Even so, in resolving the situation as they had, the Action Committee was relying on precisely those dynamics of state governance that they were reacting against: that things often "got done" through personal connection and behind closed doors. In this case, however, calling upon a personal connection that was likely too weak to stand much pressure from the Action Committee in pressing its interests was backed by the potential power of the press whose interests were a good story but whose bottom line was also the expectation that they be loyal to the state and to the nation.[11]

A hungers strike would be a good story because it was potentially transgressive and would have pushed the boundaries of accepted social behavior in at least two senses. Conversations and interactions in public, even if potentially heated, rarely erupt into actual conflict and harsh words or threats are generally avoided. Likewise,

there is sometimes a certain cultural value placed on self-effacement and avoidance of calling attention to oneself or others that even extends to such venues as the classroom. (Several educators lamented to me that their students, whatever their ethnicity, often found it difficult or embarrassing to be singled out or to single themselves out from a group – making critical discussion of a topic sometimes difficult to achieve). The hunger striker was willing to single himself out and state his point of view in this case, but the harshness of his announcement (which might embarrass the state if it were made publicly), was veiled by allowing the state an opportunity to act before informing the press – in effect, forcing a decision to be made "behind closed doors. Significantly, the press was not on the list of those who had received the announcement of the hunger strike, despite what was, by now, a regular routine of faxing notices to every Chinese, English and Malay language newspaper whenever the Action Committee wished to hold a press conference. Mr. Lau repeatedly expressed discomfort with the need for drama and public visibility, reiterating several times that he and his group had "no choice" but to organize, hold press conferences, and occasionally even demonstrate. For example, he was relieved when the group's plans to create banners in support of the hunger striker turned out not to be necessary, "and that monkey show [didn't] have to go on." Regarding reportage about the group in general he asked me and my journalist friend to "please put in such a way that people don't feel that we are here to make a hoo hah, win publicity. We mean business."

Mr. Lau expressed surprise that my journalist friend knew about the threatened strike because they had wanted to keep it "hush hush." "All we want is the repair – nothing else," he said. "We're not here to make headlines against anybody. We understand that whoever is sitting on top there hopefully is helping us," he continued, but he added that they might call my journalist friend back to help again later by writing another story if the work stopped again. "We might have no choice," he told my friend, "if the work is [stopped] halfway -- but that is not happening yet so don't [write a story now]," he admonished with a chuckle.

Mr. Lau's guardedness toward involvement of the press at this moment can perhaps be interpreted as indicative of the successes he and the Action Committee had already achieved in working to rectify the damage to their houses. By now, Mr. Lau and a handful of members held regular seats on two official committees formed by the state to deal with the problem, the State Residents' Affairs Committee, and the State Technical Advisory Committee. They also had the power to call meetings of each committee as they felt necessary and had worked personally with the developers, their contractors, and an outside technical consulting firm in order to come up with possible solutions. After some effort, they had also met with the chief minister of Penang. In a political culture in which things often "get done" through personal connection, to have gone directly to the public via the press to announce the potential hunger strike would have belied the potential of these committees to privately come up with an amicable solution in good faith. It might also have been considered disloyal to, or destructive

of, the degree of personal connection to these government officials that the Action Committee had managed to achieve, even though this relationship was tentative at best. Under Mr. Lau's astute guidance of the Action Committee, the state government was spared the embarrassment of a hunger strike, a certain relationship and loyalty to those in power was maintained, and, at the same time, the striker's threat, as backed by the Action Committee, achieved its purpose: repairs began on man's house.

Mr. Lau was articulate and successful in his role as chairman, and some of his jokes were even reported in the press, but he had no particular desire or ambition to single himself out as a community leader before the houses in his neighborhood had started to crack. He had, however, long been involved in other kinds of community work. He had volunteered to work with handicapped children, served on the Juvenile Welfare Committee for some fifteen years, and was, until recently, Assistant District Commissioner of the Boy Scouts. Once the residents' Action Committee was formed, however, he had been forced to limit these other activities because his current committee memberships regarding the cracks took up too much time. A compelling speaker who was nonetheless quick to laugh at the apparent absurdity of a situation as well as at his own pretensions (and sometimes those of others), his genial self-effacement belied a far-sighted and subtle understanding of political tactics and of some of the problems inherent in the current mechanisms of local governance. Observing his command of the Action Committee during a meeting I attended, he seemed to me to be a natural leader. Therefore I was surprised when he told me that it

was not his idea to form the Action Committee but that of the state assemblyman for the area:

> "Oh, I didn't start the group – I joined as one of the affected persons. I had no choice, my house cracked up along with all the others. . . .so I just went along to see what was happening. And somehow or other I was elected as chairman."

He went on to explain that the state assemblyman seemed to lose interest in the situation and could not attend their regular Sunday afternoon meetings, claiming that he had to see his son at those times. "That seemed to be the time that the rest of the people could come – so you have to go by the majority," Mr. Lau said. "And that was how I somehow ended up being the so-called speaker," he added with a laugh. These statements reiterated that the state was not averse to inculcating a sense of civic responsibility among the public by encouraging the formation of independent voluntary associations. They also indicate that Mr. Lau felt that residents had "no choice" but to organize and the group had only reluctantly assumed the role of gadfly to the state. As the matter dragged on for years, however, and little seemed to get resolved despite their best efforts, he and the Action Committee came to clarify their points of view more clearly and the scope of their concern quickly expanded well beyond their own immediate spatial and temporal concerns to encompass how things got done throughout Penang and Malaysia more generally as products of a political culture prevalent throughout the nation.

Speaking up as a concerned citizen, Mr. Lau had a lot to say about the common practice of the Penang Municipal Council (MPPP) to hire outside experts and consultants to plan local infrastructure projects without consulting any of the nearby residents whose well being and livelihood might well be severely affected. "There are so many experts you could call," he said "and each and every one of them [can] give you a different opinion. Why don't you get the people involved? They are the information source." A true populist, he affirmed to me several times that it is only the people themselves who have a true understanding of what needs to be done, or what should or should not be done, in a particular place. When I remarked how everyone who attended his meeting had something to say, Mr. Lau replied:

> "It is important that everyone share his mind. I hate the idea of getting someone to a meeting and he doesn't say a word. He doesn't ask one question. And he comes in and goes away – very quietly as a mouse. What is the use of getting this person in and out of the meeting room? . . . . I always make sure each and every person has his chance. It's not that he is denied an opportunity. He is in fact encouraged to let us know what he thinks on the issues, and together we try to find out what we want to do. I feel that they have been constructive in the way they add their opinion. It is not a negative way. They try to say what they think and ask what the others think – that kind of thing. It's good."

In his view, communication of knowledge, needs, and particular points of view was itself a moral responsibility. It was this kind of open, participatory atmosphere, fostered by Mr. Lau in the meetings, that provided the social support for the extraordinary position taken by the man whose threat of a hunger strike, while never publicly declared, was nevertheless directed successfully at the chief minister of the

state, the chairmen of two state committees, and the developer of a RM200 million development project. The way it was accomplished – indirectly through faxes and without the press – was an example of what he meant by the group not being "negative," and, in contrast to the general lack of popular participation in urban planning processes, the Action Committee, at least, was one venue in which no one was "denied an opportunity to speak."

Above all, Mr. Lau was adept at recognizing the role and function – and the limits -- of social action at each end of a scale marked by personal expression and connections at one end and public legal regulation at the other. For example, given the economic crisis and rumor of bankruptcy of several of the developers and contractors involved in the shopping mall, he expressed concern that the representatives of the developer with whom his group had worked and whom they had gotten to know might be retrenched. If all their efforts had resulted only in establishing relationships with people who were no longer on the scene they would be left with nothing. Given this possible scenario, he felt it was doubly important to press for what, early on, had become two of the Action Committee's goals: legal guarantees that the repairs would be completed in a timely manner and be permanent, and new legislation that would prevent similar situations from reoccurring again or elsewhere. These public controls would obviate the need for any more committees or personal contacts to resolve the matter.

Given the strength of his conviction in the validity of the open process in which his group was engaged, what disturbed Mr. Lau the most were precisely those points at which, despite everyone's input and the state's sincere efforts in consulting with those affected, decisions to act, or not act, on many of the most important matters were made behind closed doors by persons or parties unknown.[12] Each of these, his reasoning went, should by now properly be a matter of public record and legal assurance and not the product of power brokers in a closed-door session. With the efficacy of any potential mechanisms for transparency and popular participation cut off by this door, Mr. Lau and the Action Committee resorted to the only tool they had left: a personal appeal, via the private threat of a hunger strike, directed toward "whoever is sitting on top" -- the chief minister, the chairmen of the two state committees, and the developer, with whom the Action Committee had established at least some kind of relationship. But this was not how things should be, according to Mr. Lau. Civic consciousness meant extrapolating and expanding one's own immediate concerns onto a wider spatial territory and a broader time frame for a more general good. Mr. Lau encouraged his Action Committee to get beyond a language of personal emotion and the idea of inside connections and to think of participation in decisions that affected everyone's space in terms of both individual and group responsibilities and rights.

Symbols of Nation and of State

The crisis of the houses cracking might have come and gone from public attention more quickly, and been given less coverage by the press, if the event had not occurred in such a central and symbolic location: the modern Komtar re-development project, whose outdoor pavements at the base of its 65-story tower also eventually cracked, causing some people to feel uneasy and to avoid the area entirely. As it was, the crisis encouraged many people to reconsider whether such a radical break with the area's architectural past that Komtar represented had, in fact, been wise. Numerous press reports covering every aspect of the crisis not only covered the statements and actions all the parties involved, they reminded people of the social and natural history of the area and the city's development as well as other examples of development projects that had been plagued by engineering problems. Research into the affected area by residents, technical consultants, NGOs, and local historians -- all reported in the press -- identified natural as well as administrative factors as potential origins of the problem and fostered a popular discourse that encouraged people to think about urban space along broadly ecological lines that embraced both material and social dimensions.

Press reports in the first several months of the crisis had painted a picture of municipal uncertainty, inadequate planning controls, and procedural inefficiency, to which the state responded (not quickly enough, according to some residents) by forming the two new committees already mentioned -- the State Technical Advisory

Committee and the State Residents' Affairs Committee – and inviting representatives of the affected residents to sit on each. But by the time the "Prangin Mall Watch," with its own logo, became a regular feature in *The Star* daily newspaper, it was already becoming apparent that the problem concerned not only governance but was also rooted in the city's history and its natural ecology, and more specifically in the combination of a contemporary phenomenon with an historical fact. The contemporary factor was something that had become a daily concern: the growing number of private automobiles in the inner city and the need to find parking spaces for them. The historical fact was that Francis Light, in founding the city in 1786, had perhaps not chosen the most ideal location as far as soil conditions for modern building needs and techniques were concerned. As discussed in the next section, these two factors confronted each other in the Prangin Mall's plan to build a sub-basement car park, which was identified as the probable cause of the cracks. Press reports on every detail, statement, or bit of research by residents, government and corporate officials, NGOs, and local historians, encouraged people to make connections between domains that had not previously been popularly recognized as significantly linked. The crisis would thus provide an occasion for public re-acquaintance with the city's original natural setting and the continuing history of its development into an urban center. Along the way, two important symbols -- of state modernity and of national pride -- together with the social meaning of development itself, would be implicated

in the situation, which further explains the interest n the story taken by the public and the press.

One of the accoutrements of the steady rise of income levels in Malaysia since the 1980s has been an equally steady increase in private vehicle ownership since the launch of the Proton Saga, the national car, in 1985. Enticed by sticker prices lower than the previously available, locally assembled foreign cars, as well as favorable loan rates, many more Malaysians than ever before could now afford to purchase their own auto, and the Proton quickly became a national development success story, not without symbolic content. As a recent government almanac puts it, in a listing of "national symbols," the Proton Saga

> has a significance for Malaysians which goes beyond the mere production of a passenger car. It symbolizes the determination of the nation to shake off its traditional status as a producer of primary commodities and to emerge as a member of the community of industrialized nations (Information Malaysia Yearbook 1998:30).

By the late `90s, however, traffic congestion had become an ever-present reality in Penang. Many of the relatively quiet, pedestrian-friendly streets of the inner city, once filled with bicycle and trishaw traffic, had been transformed into busy thoroughfares along which traffic virtually never ceases. In 1970 there were less than 100,000 private vehicles in Penang. By 1995, with a total population of 1,197,850, the number was well over 700,000 (SERI 1999b:32-33). Car and motorcycle ownership in Penang was now increasing at an average of 9.5% and 7.2% respectively per year, with the percentage of increase in car ownership almost exactly mirroring the percentage of

annual increase (9.7% for 1995) of Penang's Gross Domestic Product (Penang Statistics 1999:5). A recent ten-year analysis of traffic on seven of Penang's major roads revealed that traffic volume on these thoroughfares had an annual growth rate of 8.05% (SERI 1999b:36). One of the main vortices of all this traffic is the massive Komtar redevelopment project, whose focal point is a cylindrical 65-story tower on a podium block – once the tallest structure in Southeast Asia -- around which cars now move constantly in a clockwise channel of one-way streets. The Prangin Mall was planned as the latest phase of this project, the first components of which were completed and opened in 1976. The houses that had cracked were arrayed in a rough circle directly across from and along several side streets adjoining these one-way streets, but they were perceptually and physically distanced from the complex by the swirling traffic and by long distances between traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. As one nearby resident simply put it, "I am terrified to cross the street there."

Nevertheless, Komtar accomplished nothing less than shifting the city center from the oldest part of the inner city area and re-defining the city to the state, the nation, and -- as state promotional literature often put it -- the world. The gist of this re-definition was a symbolic break with the past and a vision that looked more to an imagined future than anywhere else. In the first of what were to be a series of newspaper articles on the area's history during the cracking crisis, Penangites were reminded that the Komtar project was first proposed in 1962 "to bring Penang into the metropolis age and transform George Town into a futuristic and systematic city" (The

Star 1997n). In 1973, the Central Area Planning Unit, consisting of Municipal Council and state government officials, entrusted the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) to carry out the project. Appointed to plan and design the project was Architects Team 3, a firm headed by Lim Cheong Keat, younger brother to Lim Chong Eu who was then Penang State Chief Minister. A monument to high modernist planning ideals in the tradition of Le Corbusier, Lim Chong Keat's concept was not a "tower in a park" but rather a tower set in the midst of the traditional two and three-story old city fabric, consisting mostly of shop houses and terrace houses in Straits Chinese style. Lim was himself an aficionado of old buildings, an advocate for their preservation, and would later become a founder of Penang Heritage Trust. As the current newspaper story reported it, the project was designed to answer "the immediate and future needs of the people of Penang and the growing demand for civic, administrative, commercial and living accommodation." (The Star 1997n). According to the original plans, successive stages of the project, which covered approximately 11 hectares in the heart of George Town, would include 186,000 square meters of commercial space, 800 housing units, recreational facilities, a library, and primary schools and kindergartens. At the time, Lim had hoped that such facilities would relieve the development pressure on the rest of the old city for many years to come, and thus help preserve it.[13] The symbolic importance of the project, however, quickly superseded this preservation concept. On January 1, 1974, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the first phase, the namesake of the project, the second

Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Razaq, expressed a very different attitude toward the old inner city. Congratulating the state of Penang for initiating a project "which would be a source of pride for both the State and the country," he declared that the project "would change the face of the city, discarding the colonial heritage image in favour of one which reflects the identity of Malaysia and its multi-ethnic culture." He also expressed pleasure that the planning of the project was in accordance with the New Economic Policy,[14] and hoped that "this kind of comprehensive and integrated development can be emulated by other States" (both statement quoted in Penang Development Corporation n.d. [1990].

By Tun Razak's standards, the initial phases of the project were a success. When the 65-story tower opened in 1985 as the tallest structure in Southeast Asia, Penang had a symbol of the lead it was taking in the nation's modernist aspirations. From the start, the Penang Development Corporation had stressed that "Komtar was a Penang idea, executed through the coordination of local expertise in planning, construction and maintenance" and built with local materials (Penang Development Corporation n.d. [1990]:28-29). This local effort included participation by *bumiputera* (native) entrepreneurs whose development was fostered by favorable quotas in government and business under the New Economic Plan. Moreover the resulting new – and air-conditioned – city center was not visually associated with either the colonial past or any particular ethnic group. It opened up a new space of greater urban visibility for Malays in particular, and a new kind of urban experience in general.

Included in the complex were two department stores, supermarkets, a cinema, a wide range of retail outlets, a hawker food center, the central bus station, and an 11-story car park. It also featured a "one stop recreational centre for tourists and locals" on floors 58-60, consisting of restaurants, a duty free shop, a karaoke lounge and a viewing gallery; as well as a multi-purpose hall, the Dewan[15] Tunku Geodesic Dome, based on concepts by Buckminster Fuller who was an acquaintance of architect Lim Chong Keat. The bulk of the tower was occupied by offices of the "three tiers of Government" – the Penang Island Municipal Council (MPPP), and state and national government departments, and by 1990, 5,500 people, 1,800 of them civil servants, reported for work each day in the complex (Penang Development Corporation n.d. [1990]:33).

At the time of the completion of its first phases, Komtar was the largest urban re-development project in Malaysia, and it was not without controversy and later changes in plan. Delays in resettling the hundreds of displaced households and businesses from the area is popularly thought to have been a major factor in the 1990 electoral defeat of Lim Chong Eu, who had been Penang State Chief Minister for twenty-one years, the longest term in the state's history.[16] Although images of the tower are still featured on postcards, government reports, and t-shirts as emblematic of the state's modernity, by the late '90s the symbolic novelty of the tower and its shopping areas had long since waned and many in Penang took the complex for granted, preferring to patronize the more up-to-date, atrium-style shopping malls that

were springing up further away from the old downtown, where it was easier (and cheaper) to park. Some inner-city residents who remembered the area before the complex even felt that it should never have been built at all, or built somewhere else, reasoning that there was no need to fix or "redevelop" something that was not broken or underdeveloped in the first place. The Penang Development Corporation, however, had thought otherwise, and justified its selection of the site with the statements that a large portion of the land belonged to the Municipal Council and the state government, that it was "generally under-utilized," occupied by "many dilapidated shop-lots," and that the existing public facilities, namely a fire station and three schools, were "misplaced" in the area (Penang Development Corporation 1998:28). As discussed below, the plans for all of the new civic facilities to be incorporated into the project would eventually be eliminated in favor of exclusively commercial, and privatized development, in keeping with the policies of Malaysia's current prime minister (Mahathir 1984; Williamson 2002).

An urban planner in Penang told me that the initial plans for Komtar had been formulated in a more socialist-minded era, when debates over land use often included what social and civic amenities to include. Now, he felt, debates were more about facilitating the ability of the private sector to make money, which usually meant that large corporations enjoyed substantial state supports. It is important to underscore that the residents who banded together to form the Action Committee were social- but not socialist-minded. They were not opposed to anyone, even large corporations, making

money by investing in projects in the city, did not oppose the development of the new shopping mall per se, and they voiced no overt criticism of the changes in the original plan for Komtar's successive phases that privatization had made possible. Such sentiments were more likely to be heard from members of the opposition political party[17] who had a stronghold in Penang, or from relatively elite and educated activists involved in various NGOs. These organizations would occasionally express opposition to what they saw as an increasing trend toward commercialization in state and national development projects which, they felt, ended up serving the financial interests of a well-connected few at the expense of the public good. For these activists the most disappointing aspect of the recent phases of the Komtar project was that all of the civic facilities called for in the original plan – social housing, recreational facilities, a library, schools and kindergartens – had, by the late `90s, been completely replaced by no less than three shopping mall projects. This change was the product of a national mandate to privatize all large infrastructure and development projects, which, in turn, was facilitated by recent changes to the national Land Acquisition Act of 1960 (Act 486).

Changes to this act, which was already amended ten times in the three decades since its inception, were strongly condemned by the Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) when the Dewan Rakyat (Malaysian parliament) proposed additional changes in 1990. These changes, combined with the previous amendments, would have allowed the government and its agencies to acquire and re-sell land for "any

development purpose" whatsoever without being specific about its ultimate use, without any public hearings, and without the possibility of being challenged in a court of law.[18] In announcing the proposed amendments, the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Ghafar Baba, said that these changes were necessary because it was the government's policy to invite private sector participation in development projects:

> Currently, we have to be specific when we acquire land. For example, when we say we want a certain piece of land to build a school, we can only build a school. But with the amendments, we can carry out any development project that is deemed beneficial to the economic development of the country and for the well being of the people. . . .
>
> What we fear is that when we invite the private sector to participate in joint ventures on land acquired by the Government and its agencies, like the various State Economic Development Corporations, the people who own the land might question the legality of such acquisition.
>
> To avoid court actions, we have to seek the amendments to ensure that economic development for the benefit of the people is not jeopardized in any way"(quoted in New Sunday Times 1990; reprinted in Consumers Association of Penang 1991).

In this view, even private enterprise constitutes "economic development for the benefit of the people." Under the new amendments, the only matter that could be challenged was the amount of compensation paid to the owner, but this was based solely on market value, something which, as the Consumers' Association noted, does not take into consideration that a family may have lived or worked on a property for generations. In a report published in 1991 the Consumers' Association maintained that

> the law here fails to reflect any human emotion, value or sentiment. A piece of land may have more than just a monetary value attached to it. The law ought to recognize this (Consumers Association of Penang 1991:15).

Public inquiries should be held to hear objections from all interested parties, they argued, and "such objections should not be restricted to the inadequacy of compensation" but also include "the social, economic, cultural, ecological loss to the community caused by such acquisition" (Consumers Association of Penang 1991:20). The gist of their stance was that privatization, forced acquisitions, and the lack of accountability and public participation amounted to taking from the poor and giving to the rich:

> When land is compulsorily repossessed from small landowners and handed over to the private sector to "develop," it is the rich who will benefit (Consumers Association of Penang 1991:6).

The Consumers' Association was unsuccessful in its lobbying efforts, and the amendments it opposed in 1990 eventually passed. In the case of Komtar, the upshot of these moves meant that three shopping mall projects had now replaced the plans for civic facilities called for in the original plan.

This change was never a focus of concern by the members of the two residents' Action Committees that had formed and that were working to have houses in the area repaired, but it remained an issue for outside activists when they offered to help. A member of Penang Heritage Trust, who attended a meeting of the second committee to be formed (as discussed in the next section), expressed incredulity to me that the residents in attendance, who were passing around the developer's promotional booklet illustrated with artists' renderings of the new Prangin Mall, commented on

how "beautiful" the new complex would be, despite the fact that the project had replaced the originally planned civic amenities and was severely damaging their homes. Whereas the original plans for the Komtar complex may have aspired to create a modernist symbol of socially responsible urban re-development and pride in local expertise, these local critics maintained that these goals seemed to have been superseded by a de facto definition of development that was content to remain solely on the level of commercialism. Mr. Lau, however, did not share this criticism. For him, the problem was not the commercialism of development or the ways in which the new malls would change the character of the area. His main concerns were the protection of private property, popular participation, responsibility, and timely governmental response to problems:

> "I am not saying we should not co-operate. People want to contribute. They want to be part of the on-going development. You see how "*Malaysia boleh!*" [Malaysia can!][19] is echoed everywhere. People want that. But you are not talking about working with them. You are talking about some kind of magical authority – "We are the committee and we have the right. . ." We need a better way. I truly believe that people will co-operate. They want the same thing."

For Mr. Lau, development planning properly involved what he called a "laborious process of fine tuning" in which the people affected by a new project – those who already live nearby -- should be primary sources of information. Outside "experts" are of limited use, he asserted, because "experts are not responsible for the consequence." Long-term familiarity with a place could more easily be translated into long-term and responsible benefits for all than the expertise or efforts of outsiders. Local knowledge

and concerns should not be ignored and ends should not justify their dismissal. Any "over-riding logic," Mr. Lau declared, such as "development for the sake of all Penang," is suspect because it is often an excuse for those in power to do what they like:

> "There are so many experts you could have called – and each and every one of them would have given you a different opinion. . . . In the end it is those people in authority, who are voted in by the people, who have the final say. Why don't you get those people who are affected to join you in the decision? – Then they can't blame you. . . . Just like our cracked houses situation. If we say there are new cracks appearing you'd better take a look. You don't just assume that we are talking nonsense. That is a very dangerous attitude. If we say our livelihood is being affected you don't just turn around and say "Why worry? In time, after we do this, the whole place will be booming."

The issue was not just property damage but a perceived lack of regard for the voice of the people or respect for them as potential partners in development, together with what was taken as the irrelevance with which those in power were thought to regard local knowledge, history and values. But the people were not completely powerless -- they could and did succeed in making themselves heard in ways that could influence action. In the course of doing so attention would be drawn to an even earlier phase of the history of the city's development than the plans for Komtar and a definition of the local would be formulated that was spatially expansive and socially and ethnically inclusive. In effect, what Mr. Lau and the Action Committee were attempting to do was underscore the values associated with the continuity of long-term urban residential stability, rooted in particular places and a particular small-scale architectural configuration (as discussed in the previous chapters), and project them as

relevant to the future and to a changing urban fabric. This move was in keeping with the nation's forward and future looking developmentalist stance but it sought to counter the centralization of power in the hands of a few, for whom the values of temporal continuity and local participation could so easily be ignored.

From River to Canal to Ditch to Shopping Mall

The crisis of the houses cracking clarified that there were lessons to be learned from the past that might have prevented the problem if they had not been ignored. It also confirmed the downside of large development projects that were sidestepping valued and familiar ways of life and making a living with which the inner city had long been associated. Two distinct parts of town were affected by cracks, and the barrier of heavy traffic surrounding the entire Komtar project had only reinforced an existing division between these areas that was originally based on geography but had since become social and political. The crisis encouraged people to minimize these divisions and to think of their combined area as part of an even larger conceptual and territorial whole. The geographical feature that originally marked the differences between the two areas, now largely invisible but still embedded in local memory, was the Prangin River. Once the site of a very different kind of traffic – Chinese junks and sampans – it was progressively reduced in size as the city grew, becoming successively, the Prangin Canal and then the Prangin Ditch (or Creek), and finally, by the early 20th century, little more than a covered drain running underneath the road.

Lim Chong Keat, Komtar's original designer, who was well aware of the aquatic origins of the area, had arranged its site plan and structural masses accordingly. But as it turned out, the new Prangin Mall, a re-designed departure from the original plan, called for a greater built-up area on its site than Lim had originally specified and was being built exactly on top of a section of the original course of this river. The location of this largely unseen waterway that had been the original line between two different neighborhoods still marked the differences between two somewhat distinct urban populations. It also marked the dividing line between what had evolved into two different constituencies in the state assembly. As the crisis unfolded, this unseen bit of historical geography, which still affected the entire area's natural ecology, would figure in identifying the geological source of the problem and, given the magnitude of the crisis, the current sociopolitical differences between the two neighborhoods would fade from relevance.

The cracked houses were literally in the shadow of Komtar's modern tower but, in ways already discussed, both areas represented ways of life still rooted in the historical origins of the city. To the north and east of Komtar were a series of narrow roads just outside the original 18th century city plan but contiguous with it. This was an area of temples, mosques, and Chinese clan houses, but most of the buildings consisted of 19th and early 20th century shop houses.[20] Living and working in these shop houses was a mixed Indian-Muslim, Indian Hindu, and Malay, but predominantly Chinese population[21] operating a variety of small businesses, such as fabric, clothing,

crockery and furniture shops, tire and car repair establishments, coffin makers', undertakers', and *kong-teik* (Chinese ritual paper artifacts) craftsmen's shops, as well as several bookstores, art supply stores and the ubiquitous hawkers' food stalls and coffee shops. "Tanjung" (Malay for "cape" or "promontory"), is the popular local term for the entire old inner city and it is also the name of a particular constituency within it in the Dewan Rakyat (Malaysian National Parliament) – hence the name "Tanjung Area Crack-Affected Houses Representative Action Committee." Based on the membership of this group, Mr. Lau estimated that approximately 30 to 50% of the houses that had cracked in this area were owner-occupied. A common pattern was for the older generation, having lived and worked in this area for decades, to move out of the city center and either commute to work or leave the operation of the business to a younger married couple in the family who sometimes continued to occupy the living quarters upstairs.[22]

To the south of Komtar was a very different neighborhood, more strictly residential, consisting mostly of terrace houses,[23] many of them built in the 1920s-30s in the later "Straits Eclectic" style. This was the first section of the city that was planned as primarily residential, with an orderly grid of new streets, and it had come to be associated with a more working class Hokkien and *sinkeh*[24] population. Not primarily a shopping district and off the well-worn track of casual visitors to the old downtown, this was an area thought by many to be staunchly and traditionally Chinese as well as somewhat rough, where many people spoke only their own Chinese

dialect.[25] Taking the lead from the Tanjung area Action Committee, residents in this area formed their own action group when their houses began to crack somewhat later than those in the first area. This group called themselves the "Pengkalan Kota Cracked Houses Prevention Committee," (with "Pengkalan Kota," ("Town Jetty") referring to the name of their own constituency, this time in the state assembly).[26] The chairman of this group did not speak Malay or English (the two languages used most often by the government bureaucracy), so Mr. Lau and his group worked together with them to facilitate their communication with government officials. Mr. Lau inferred that it might have been preferable to consolidate their efforts into a single Action Committee, but he said that state officials had encouraged them to keep the two groups separate, so he did not press the matter.[27] Mr. Lau estimated that only 10 to 15% of the members of this second group were owner-occupants. Most were tenants living in single-family, rent-controlled, Chinese-style terrace houses.

When the press reported on the problems residents in these areas were facing because of the cracks, what emerged was a picture of a threat to inner-city living and working arrangements with which many in Penang could identify: a large number of residents had lived in the same location for most of their lives; many placed great value on the familiarity and convenience of their surroundings; they were concerned about the continued viability of their businesses; and most generally preferred to live at or near their place of work. A garment wholesaler whose pre-war building needed to be propped up by 30 steel beams said his business had dropped by about 15% since

the cracks appeared. "Customers would stop and stare at the cracks and the supporting beams but refuse to come in," he said. (Kwok 1997b). Other businesses reported drops in revenue as high as 50 to 80%, and some were forced to relocate or close down entirely (Kwok 1997a). A noodle manufacturer, who now ran his business in the unaffected back portion of his house to prevent the plaster dust from settling on the noodles, was photographed shaking hands with his neighbor through a large crack in their common wall. "This is certainly not my idea of maintaining close relations with my neighbor," he said (Kwok1997a). A drinks seller whose house was tilting to one side and whose front door could no longer be shut said he had no choice but to stay put. "I have lived here all my life and have nowhere to go," he said, "Property is so expensive in Penang and unaffordable for people like me." (The Star 1997r). He added that he now slept near the door to stand guard with his dogs every night. Like many long-term residents, some of whom had multiple jobs, the caretaker of an association building who lived in the premises with his wife and three children who helped him prepare and sell drinks at a stall outside it said that if he had to move he would prefer another place nearby "where it will be easier for us, since we will have to come back daily" (Lim et. al. 1997). Another resident had more sentimental reasons for not wanting to move, saying "I was born in this house and have become so used to this place. Of course I'm worried about the idea of moving" (Lim et. al. 1997).

In other examples, a 60-year-old woman who rented a room from the Penang Heng Woh Goldsmiths Association, where Mr. Lau's group held their meetings, said it

would be difficult to find alternative housing in the area for the same price. "I am familiar with this place," she said, "and other landlords may not allow the sort of freedom I have here" (Lim et. al. 1997). Other residents, who were long-term tenants protected by rent control, generally feared that if they moved out, even temporarily, the owners of their houses might not allow them to return (Chong 1997). Safety was a recurring concern, with many regularly expressing how the authorities had reacted too slowly, especially since lives were at stake. Had the response been immediate, they claimed, the crisis might have been minimal and contained. "They should have taken our earlier complaints more seriously," said one resident, "When cracks were reported in only seven houses, the matter was treated lightly. We were forced to go through numerous channels before the authorities finally responded" (Lim et. al 1997).

When the houses surrounding the new phase of the Komtar project began to crack, residents quickly suspected that the problem was water. The increasing value of land in what was now called the "Komtar Golden Triangle," combined with an increasing volume of vehicular traffic in the area, meant that the Prangin Mall was planned to include additional car parking spaces in a basement and a sub-basement in the main structure. As explained above, sheet piles were driven to a depth of 15 meters around the perimeter of the site, but when the enclosed earth was excavated in November 1996 the site quickly flooded and had to be continually pumped. This pumping was eventually officially identified as being responsible for a drop in the ground water table of the surrounding area, which, in turn, led to differential

settlement of the sandy soil, causing foundations to settle and buildings to crack. But before this official clarification was reached at the cost of a RM1.6 million fee to a technical consultant, the picture of municipal uncertainty continued to unfold in the press: residents complained, the first Action Committee was formed, police reports were filed, and, despite the developer's attempts to raise the water level by digging "re-charge wells" in the area into which water was pumped, the problem continued. A number of residents reiterated that if they had been consulted earlier on, many of the problems could have been avoided. The chairman of the Pengkalan Kota committee, 68-year old Keay Ah Yeow, put it simply. "I've stayed here all my life and nothing like this has happened before," he told *The Star* and added that the relevant authorities should have understood the background of the area before carrying out development plans. "All this (area) is swampy ground and proper studies should have been conducted," he said (The Star 1997h).

Mr. Keay was referring to an ecological history of the area dating back to the founding of the city in 1786 that was still embedded in the speech of every speaker of Hokkien in the form of popular, "unofficial" place names.[28] Following Mr. Keay's remarks, newspaper reporters got to work researching the natural history of the area and a series of newspaper articles appeared that reminded English speakers of what should have already been obvious to speakers of Hokkien – that the entire Komtar "Golden Triangle" area was once a riverine mangrove swamp surrounded by marshy farmland. For example, the Hokkien name for Jalan Dr. Lim Chwee Leong (formerly

Prangin Road), the location of the controversial mall, was *Khang Ngo Khee* ("Riverside"), because the Prangin River once flowed the length of it. Carnarvon Street, at the mid-point of this road, was still called "*Lam Chan Ah*" ("Poor Quality Fields") because it was once a swampy rice field. Mr. Keay's part of town was once called "*Kuay Khang Ah*" or "Across the River," and the colonial names given to the seven parallel streets on this side of the original river were never used by local Hokkien speakers, who still referred to them as "*Thau Tiau Lor,*" "*Jee Tiau Lor*", (" 'First Road' over the river," " 'Second Road' over the river"), etc. In a Malay example, "Jalan Sungai Ujong," the street where Mr. Lau lived and where his Action Committee met, translates as "End of The River Road."

In addition to the linguistic evidence, local historians were called upon by the press to provide further historical data about the area's aquatic past.[29] One article, quoting two publications by planner and urban historian Goh Ban Lee,[30] even went so far as to state that Francis Light, in choosing the site for George Town 1786, had given little thought to the suitability of the land for urban development. Goh wrote:

> Although the choice of site was clearly limited – since the island of about 118 sq. miles was very hilly and long stretches of the coast were swamp land – alternative sites could have been chosen as the embryo of the settlement (The Star 1997t).[31]

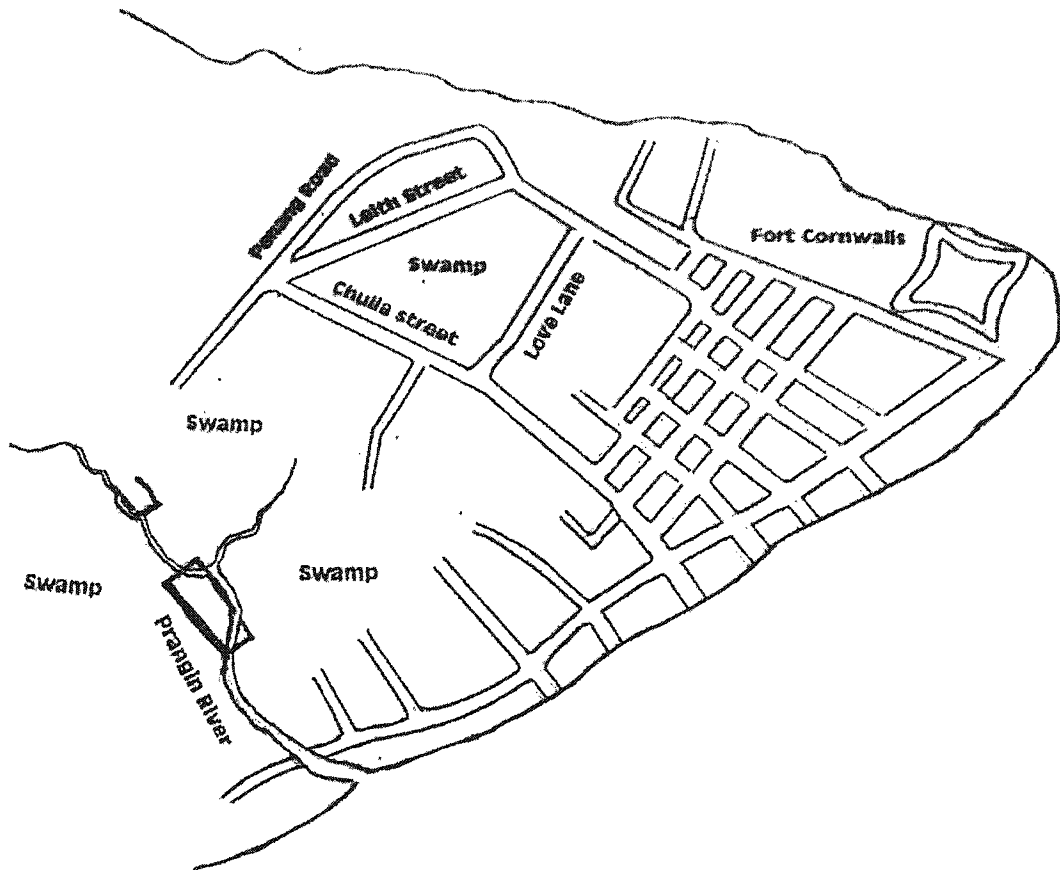
"Swampy and ill-drained," was how he described the early city, and he outlined how inadequate planning had resulted in miserable living conditions in George Town in the late 1790s (Goh n.d.(a) cited in The Star 1997t).

The increasing attenuation over the years of the Prangin River into a canal and to a creek and then to an underground ditch had been part of the original urban development solution, but as these articles reminded residents, traces of this water course remained in both the soil and the speech of many of the city's inhabitants. The vanished river was also a basis for the division of George Town into four districts by the British Governor of Penang in 1805 (City Council of George Town 1966, cited in The Star 1997t) – a division which was still maintained as the dividing line between the two political constituencies that had experienced the cracks.

The lessons of memory and history, however, are not always easily learned, as the following section shows. It was only later, when the technical consultant's final report was published in June 1997, with an 1803 map provided by Penang Heritage Trust printed on an overlay showing the location of the current project, that the Prangin Mall was found to be sited directly over what was originally the main course of this river (see Figure 41) (Kumpulan IKRAM Sdn. Bhd.1997).[32] The report also conclusively proved that cracks to the surrounding buildings were caused by the project, which was what the residents of the area had maintained all along, but which was initially denied by both the Penang Municipal Council and the developer. We now turn to a series of events in the first few months of the crisis that helped to clarify for the Tanjung Area Crack-Affected Houses Representative Action Committee the stances they would take toward the state, the developer, toward various NGOs, and toward the political parties who eventually became involved. Their experience of

Figure 41

Outline of 1803 Map of George Town
Showing The Location of The Prangin Mall over The Site of The Prangin River



Source: Kumpulan IKRAM Sdn. Bhd. 1997

these events would, in turn, help shape the Action Committee's formulation of an ecological understanding of urban space, their proposal for a piece of local legislation that would recognize this understanding, and an idea for an international movement that would advocate what amounted to a place-based civic identity not confined to any particular national or regional territory and articulated as distinct from the identity of citizenship.

A Widening Sphere of Involvement

Victor Turner observed that formal social structures, such as those of legal or religious institutions, only become visible through the continuous flow of human behavior, seen in such an event as a social drama, which "energizes them, heats them to the point of visibility" (Turner 1974:37). In the social drama of the cracked houses crisis, catapulted into the realm of the public sphere by the press and heated by demonstrations, various aspects of the framework of what Chandhoke (1998) has called the "developmentalist" state were laid bare, and the significance of this exposure was not lost to the various parties and social actors involved. Though certainly not the first event to raise such questions, the crisis did clarify, for many, that certain social processes were being "sacrificed to the idea of development," that politics had become "subordinated to economics" and that, at least to some extent, "politics and political norms were not considered to be the product of debates and discussions in society" (Chandhoke 1998:31-32) but were matters of state hegemony,

operating in complicity with corporate interests. The developmentalist stance of the state may have been widely accepted by the public as well meaning, but in practice it was publicly non-transparent. Part of the problem was that the form and style of governance responsible for the ultimate disposition of urban space was perhaps not formally structured enough. In such a political culture, the way things actually got done was judged by many to leave too much leeway for what was perceived to be the informal "cronyism" of closed-door arrangements between power brokers. Above all perhaps, what the cracked houses crisis made clear was that private enterprise was all too easily confused with public interest, and that the state did not always appear to be acting responsibly in protecting the latter from the former or in asserting a more general public good. Local knowledge and needs were often passed over, it seemed, in the rush to profit and develop under the assumption that everyone would eventually benefit, but within the forward looking goal of development advocated by the state the long-term material, social and quality-of-life consequences of what was newly wrought often appeared to have been less than carefully considered.

The crisis encouraged people to think more broadly and inclusively, both spatially and temporally. The idea that space was shared among a range of people, interests and forces and that its management should thus take into consideration diversity and difference became the motifs of a renewed public interest in urban space as a focus for popular concern and the organizational rallying point for social action directed toward change. Residents' immediate calls for help, combined with their

symbolically prominent location alongside the state's first major symbol of "modernity," encouraged a number of NGOs, members of the state assembly, political parties, and Komtar's original designer to get involved. Mr. Lau and the Action Committee welcomed help from whatever quarter it came from, but as the crisis dragged on and outside interest waned, they became deeply critical of the politicians and organizations who had come out to support them only when their visibility was high and then disappeared when things quieted down. "People use us for their own stances," he told me. When the chips were down, he would come to realize that it was up to the people themselves who lived in the area and who were directly affected to do something for themselves. Though their initial goals were immediate relief during the course of events their focus would quickly become wider in scope and embrace a more common good than their own self-interest.

In the first months of the crisis the Action Committee's primary goal was to appeal directly to the chief minister of Penang for a resolution of the problem of the cracks, and they were disappointed that he initially seemed reluctant to meet with them, despite a letter and daily phone calls to his office. When officers of the Municipal Council, including its president, did eventually tour the area and took photographs, their reaction was doubt that the problems were really due to the construction of the Prangin Mall, as the residents alleged (Utusan Konsumer 1997:10). The assumption by the government here was that what the developer was doing could

not be anything but good. Mr. Lau reported that the developer had also not taken the perspectives or knowledge of residents very seriously:

> "We met the developer. In spite of the glaring evidence, he said the cracks could be due to other factors than the Prangin Mall project. But out of 'humanitarian reasons' he will help mend the cracks. But more cracks have appeared, patched-up surface cracks have opened and become wider. The credibility gap of the developer has become as wide as the latest cracks that have appeared" (Utusan Konsumer 1997:11).

For Mr. Lau's Action Committee, such "humanitarian reasons" were not good enough, despite the personal nature of their own appeals for compassion. They wanted legal enforcement. On December 13, 1996, Mr. Lau escorted the legal advisor of the Consumers' Association of Penang, the state assemblyman for the area, and four engineers sent by the developers on a tour of 47 of the cracked houses. On December 24 the Consumer's Association wrote their own letter to the chief minister, informing him of the problem and they also argued that to leave the issue to the residents and the developer would be abdicating the Council's responsibilities to the public (Utusan Konsumer 1997:10). Finally, on January 31, 1997, under increasing pressure from the Action Committee and from the Consumers' Association, who both reported the appearance of new cracks, the Penang Municipal Council issued a stop work order to Idris Hydraulic Properties and Penas Construction Sdn Bhd., the developer and the contractor of the Prangin Mall. The reason for the stop work order, however, again expressed a reluctance on the part of state authorities to hold the developer liable for repairs: the order did not refer to the damage done to the surrounding houses or to the

plight of residents but to the failure of the companies to submit a geo-technical report as requested by the Council two weeks earlier. The next day the Council engaged a private consulting company, at what was reportedly a cost of RM1.6 million, to investigate the causes of the cracks.[33]

The stop work order opened a floodgate of public reaction and debate about the interfaces between planning accountability, professional expertise, humanitarian concerns, as well the area's recent history of development and its aquatic origins. The gist of many of the criticisms was a lack of transparency and accountability in the planning and approval processes, inadequate or un-enforced building codes, and, more generally, the privatization of what should have been kept public. One of the first to respond was Lim Chong Keat, the head of the original planning and design team for the Komtar project, who expressed concern about the relationship of the mall project to the original plan. "The public need to be informed of the latest plans," he said in a newspaper interview, "especially if they have changed radically from the original urban design and planning proposals for the five phases as published in 1973." The current changes in plan had not been published. The capacity of the traffic system around Komtar had already been worked out, he maintained, and any structures larger and bulkier than the original plan for a four-story podium structure would impose "additional loading, not only on soil conditions but also on the urban scale and traffic conditions." (Both quotes, The Star 1997a)[34] He also urged the Municipal Council to publish a report on the consequences of the planning changes (The Star 1997b). "You

don't put car parks in the wrong places because you will jam up the system," he said, and he also noted that the entire Komtar complex was originally planned with only one small basement because "the area was historically a ditch, and when you build on a ditch, you have to be careful" (The Star 1997j). Deflecting responsibility away from himself, he asserted that he and his design team, but perhaps not the team that had succeeded him or the current local authorities, had thoroughly researched the natural and urban history of the changes made to the river in area.

Meanwhile, the Action Committee organized a joint demonstration with the Consumers' Association of Penang, Penang Heritage Trust, and the local branch of the political party who had a minority of representatives in the state government -- the Malaysian Chinese Association.[35] The assembled residents and various officers of these organizations told the press that they welcomed the stop work order but they also urged the state and the Municipal Council to scrap the plan for the underground car park. A stronger stance taken by some of the NGO demonstrators included the recommendation that the entire mall project be scrapped and the excavation immediately be filled in and resurfaced. As previously mentioned, Turner notes that in a social drama "stress is dominantly laid upon loyalty and obligation" (Turner 1974:35). With few other tools or sources of power at their disposal, all the demonstrators could do was express their loyalty to the state and hope its representatives would act out of a sense of obligation. The demonstrators unfurled on the street two professionally printed banners that read, in Malay, Mandarin, and

English: "We are all one family. Do you want to see our homes sink?" (photograph accompanying Vinesh 1997c). The first sentence ("*Kita semua satu keluarga*") exactly replicated a line made famous by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim, during the previous general election in 1995. In choosing this phrase, the demonstrators were, in effect, countering the state in its own paternalistic terms and asking that it take its own words seriously. This interpretation is confirmed in the Consumer Association's coverage of the crisis in their newspaper, in the caption under a photograph of the demonstrators holding this banner, which read:

> FAMILY APPEAL: Still etched in the minds of the residents living in the vicinity of the Prangin Mall project are the famous words of [the] Deputy Prime Minister during the last General Elections – "We are a family." In their hour of need, they now turn to "the family" – especially the powers that be – to help ensure that their houses do not sink and they will be safe with a roof under their heads (Utusan Konsumer 1997).

This tactic was similar to the one taken by construction workers during the building of Brasilia, who named their squatter village after the wife of Brazil's prime minister, in the hopes that their houses would not be destroyed and they would continue to be able to live in the city they helped to build (cf. Holston 1989). With no structure for popular participation or legal protection enforceable or in place, an emotional appeal to what the demonstrators assumed should be felt as an obligation to the connections of family was just about all the power they had, in addition to expressing their concerns publicly through the press.

At a jointly held press conference, each group participating in the demonstration had their say. Mr. Lau affirmed that houses were still sinking despite the stop work order and the recharge wells installed by the developer that were pumping water into to the ground in an attempt to stabilize the water table. The Consumers' Association's legal adviser Meenakshi Raman stated that underground water migration, in an area with a .5km radius around the project, had caused major soil movement and serious structural damage to as many as 100 of the pre-war buildings in the area which had 1,500 to 2,000 residents. Penang Heritage Trust's secretary Khoo Salma Nasution defended local vernacular design expertise and explained that the foundations of the affected 19th-century buildings were likely constructed on piles of *bakau* (mangrove) wood that would continue to be sound and stable as long as they remained immersed in water but would deteriorate rapidly if dried out (Vinesh 1997c).[36]

The response of the chief minister of Penang was reported in the press immediately after coverage of the demonstration, but what ensued only underscored architect Lim Chong Keat's call for transparency and public accountability in the planning process. The chief minister maintained that the state's seriousness in protecting the people's interests was reflected in the stop work order and the commissioning of a technical consultant to report on the problem, but he did admit that these measures might not be enough as "quick action needs to be taken to rectify the problem" (Vinesh 1997a). The next day he announced that the state government

might set up an inquiry panel to investigate the causes of the problem but he added that the project could not be canceled because, if it were, the developer might not be willing to take mitigation measures (The Star 1997d) -- another statement expressing the impunity with which developers were allowed to operate and the reluctance of the state to hold them legally liable. Meanwhile, a debate ensued in the press between the Municipal Council and Prangin Mall's architect as to who was really responsible for planning a basement car park in the first place. The architect told *The Star* that there were no proposals for basement parking in the first plan for the mall, and that additional parking bays were added at the request of the Council to replace those lost in a garage that had previously existed on the site. He then stated that the developer had decided on his own to provide "almost double" the number of extra spaces requested – approximately 600 – as a "gesture of good will," and that the location agreed upon by the developer and the Council, without the support of any professional expertise, was in a two-level basement (The Star 1997c). The next day, an unnamed "senior officer" of the Municipal Council denied this scenario and insisted that the basement car park was not made at its request but was in the mall's original approved plan, which, however, had not been made public. In any case, critics felt that "good will" was not the basis on which any planning decisions should have been made and the professionalism of all parties involved was called into question.

At this point, one of the national opposition political parties, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) got involved. After touring the area with residents, Malaysian

parliamentary opposition leader and DAP secretary-general, Lim Kit Siang called on the state to declare the entire area a disaster zone and to itself direct remedial measures (The Star 1997e). Asking state officials to have an immediate dialogue with residents (The Star 1997f) he questioned why the Council had not acted earlier in issuing a stop work order and asked it to address "whether and how the Council has ensured the developers would assume full liability" (The Star 1997g). He said that residents were entitled to know who was responsible for this "man-made disaster" and categorically stated that they "should not become the victims of development or the government's indifference and negligence" (The Star 1997k).

Perhaps in response to the prominence that these criticisms and statements received in the press, on February 12, Mr. Lau and five members of his Action Committee finally met with the chief minister of Penang, at which time they reiterated their strong opposition to basement works in the project because they felt that this was clearly the cause of the problem. Reassured that their expressions of loyalty to the state and to state authorities had not been misplaced, Mr. Lau stated in the press that the committee was satisfied with the chief minister's assurance that "no stones will be left unturned" on the issue and that "he will ensure that our area would be absolutely safe for the people before allowing the project to go on." (Vinesh 1997b). Two days later *The Sun* reported that no new cracks had appeared since the installation of what was now a total of 15 re-charge wells to pump water back underground. The situation appeared to be stabilizing, the water table was reported to be back to normal levels,

and the developer sent a report to the Municipal Council that "the worst was over." Within a few more days, however, the *New Straits Times* reported that 37 houses had developed fresh cracks. Representatives of the Action Committee then met again with the chief minister, this time together with representatives of the developer and the geo-technical experts, and it was announced afterward that the developer had finally been directed to pay transport costs and subsidize the rentals of those residents who had been forced to move out of their homes by the worsening conditions. The chief minister himself then toured the area and advised residents not to panic. He also asked them not to take a passive attitude toward the problem but to help the authorities whenever possible, especially by filling out a questionnaire regarding the extent of the damages (New Straits Times 1997).[37] This explicit request for civic participation was perhaps made in response to a sentiment I often heard in Penang and in Malaysia in other contexts – that people sometimes expect the government to do too much for them, or have become too passive in assuming that their own individual actions would likely have little influence or effect on patterns of trends of governance that seemed unstoppable and out of everyone's hands except those in power.

By now, the number of police reports filed had risen to 300 and the developer had sent out six teams totaling 100 workers to inspect and repair the cracks. In what some called a response that was too little too late, five service centers were set up to handle residents' complaints. Two of these were staffed by the two different residents' groups, one was run by the state assemblyman's office, one was set up by

the developer, and there was now a state information and co-ordination center in the Komtar tower. Residents were also warned not to make false reports in an effort to receive funds for unnecessary compensation or repairs and reminded of the serious repercussions of such attempts.[38]

Despite finally seeing some action, Mr. Lau complained in the press that residents' concerns were still not being taken seriously and that the authorities were not taking a long enough view of the situation. The teams of contractors that were sent out were only repairing superficial cracks and were still not looking into their main cause. In an example of how the past was devalued and its current relevance ignored, Mr. Lau said that "the contractors [still] deny responsibility for the sinking and blame it on the faulty structural design of our houses" (New Straits Times 1997). (It was at this point that the press began to interview local historians about the aquatic origins of the area, as discussed in the previous section.) Others maintained that the repair teams should be looking for ways to correct structural damage and ensure long-term safety rather than just propping up the most severely damaged buildings with steel beams. The crisis was thus exposing not only a top-down planning process and certain patterns in the practice of governance but also how residents were deeply attached to the places where they had lived for so long and that they wanted to remain there well into the future. Emotionally tinged stories about the value residents placed on residential continuity in same house or location continued to be reported in the press and, again, what was sometimes portrayed as being at stake was the continuity of

family connections. The prospect of moving out, despite subsidies from the developer, was doubly painful now because it was the season of Chinese New Year. This is a time when many households spruce up, renovate or re-paint their houses prior to a traditional reunion dinner, typically held in the original family homestead on the first day of the festivities. Mrs. Fong, a 56 year-old housewife who lived near Mr. Lau on the same street, said it was a "painful" decision to move out and spend Chinese New Year in a rented apartment:

> "We had no choice but to move out from the house where we had stayed, worked and operated our car repair business for the past 60 years. . . . Although the front portion of the wall on the upper floor was newly repaired by the developer, fresh cracks appeared by the side two days later. . . . I fear for our safety, especially for my grandson and granddaughter although the developer had put up 18 steel beams to prop up the house" (The Star 1997i).

The family was now shuttling back and forth between the old and new premises and was paying out an additional RM500 per month because the developer was subsidizing only half the cost of the new rent.

As Mr. Lau realized, there were many things to be taken into account in organizing to stand up for the houses and the place where he and other residents had lived in for so long. Human emotion was certainly one of them but so were responsibility and legality. As already mentioned, the course of events during which Mr. Lau and the Action Committee formulated what I am calling a place-based form of social action encouraged a diachronic, territorially expansive, holistic and socially inclusive view of urban residential space. One of the events that contributed to this

view was a second stop-work order, this time at another of Komtar's three new shopping mall projects. This project was called Metrojaya and it was located 100 meters from the Prangin Mall project on the same street, at its intersection with another major artery. Work on this project had begun two years earlier, in 1995, and soon afterward a row of adjacent buildings on Penang Road had experienced water seepage, blocked septic tanks, jammed doors, cracks, and the pushing up of ground floors when cement was pumped into the foundation of the project site. *The Star* now announced that "current problems related to the Prangin Mall project might not have arisen if the Penang Municipal Council had taken note of early warning signs" arising from this project (The Star 1997o) and revealed an earlier pattern of residents reports going unheeded, as in the following statement by one of those affected:

> "We made more than 10 reports to the city architect, the council's health department and its hotline over a one-year period. If they had listened to us, they could have avoided the problems with Prangin Mall" (The Star 1997o).

In the same story, this man was also quoted as saying that "we are a little hurt" that the authorities were only responding to their situation now – a rather sheepish statement given the seriousness of the problem.

A few days after the new stop work order on this other project, newspaper readers were reminded of additional lessons that could, or should have been learned from a period of the city's history of development even more recent than the enclosure of the Prangin River. Stories appeared that recounted a 1980 development debacle in which the 16-story Northam Court, which was to have been Penang's first high-rise

luxury apartment block, cracked during construction, appeared to be sinking at a rate of 1.25 centimeters daily, and was found to be tilting 75 to 87 centimeters off the vertical before finally being demolished just prior to its completion. Dubbed the "Leaning Tower of Penang," this project had resulted in the declaration of a "danger zone" with a radius of 90 meters, from which at least 374 residents were evacuated at a cost of almost RM400,000. In a move that again expressed a lack of confidence in local expertise, a soil expert and two demolition experts had been flown in from London and the probable cause was determined to be an underground stream running through the project site. In this case questions had also been raised about the ability of the Municipal Council to adequately supervise construction and total losses had amounted to RM9.6 million (The Star 1997q; 1997s).

Mr. Lau told me that he was appalled by reports that residents near the Metrojaya project had been "suffering in silence" for so long (The Star 1997p) and he invited them to join his group. This invitation also provided an occasion for the activities of the Action Committee to reach beyond the issue of cracks and their repair. Businesses around the Metrojaya project had been severely affected because, for years on end, the temporary hoarding around the construction site had blocked pedestrians from walking between Komtar's existing shopping complex and their own small business premises. Upon hearing these shopkeepers' complaints about this barrier, the Action Committee then successfully channeled their grievance to the state and got the developer to build a connecting wooden walkway in front of the construction site. The

nasi kandar[39] shop there, which Mr. Lau said had been operating at loss and was just about to close permanently, immediately improved its business when the walkway was installed and was able to remain open. Mr. Lau described as "pathetic" the attitude of helplessness that some of the residents in this area had expressed regarding the effect that the lack of such a walkway had had on their businesses. They had "given up," he said, because no one had taken notice of their plight until their businesses began to close. "To me, that's not right," he said, "It's just not right." As Mr. Lau put it, "If you care you care – you don't just care about some aspect that you happen to be focusing on."[40] In his view, speaking up and taking a broad, inclusive, and holistic or ecological approach to problems arising in a particular place was a component of what should be everyone's moral responsibility. If the state would not act responsibly on its own it was up to the people to make a stand. As the next section shows, he also saw such a stance as a way to encourage people to think in terms of rights and not just emotions.

From Co-operation to Legislation

An apparent solution to the cause of the problems created by the Prangin Mall was now forthcoming. Armed with the approval of a temporary lifting of the stop work order, the developer announced that RM6 million would be spent to drive an additional 2,000 tons of sheet piles to a double depth of 30 meters along the perimeter of the excavation site. It was thought that this would prevent further water seepage

into the site since the new depth would reach a non-permeable layer of clay beneath the sandy soil. Technology would solve the problem and the specific technology to be used was the Japanese *Giken* "silent piler," imported at great cost from a distant construction site and much touted in the press, which was designed to minimize vibration and noise pollution in urban areas. On March 11, as witnessed by the main contractor, the technical consultant's senior manager, a state assemblyman, a representative of the Municipal Council, and the press, a Japanese consultant drove the first pile, which measured a vibration that was reported to be considerably less than that caused by the passing traffic (Lim Ai Lee 1997). Within ten days time, however, fresh cracks appeared on 42 houses and old ones had widened throughout the area.

At this point, both residents' groups were at the end of their patience. On March 23, at a joint meeting of the Tanjung Area Crack-Affected Houses Representative Action Committee and the Pengkalan Kota Cracked Houses Prevention Committee, which was also attended by representatives of the Consumers Association of Penang, Penang Heritage Trust, the Municipal Council, and several state assemblymen, three petitions to the chief minister were prepared and signed by over 100 residents, who had already hired their own independent consultant. Among the proposals included in the petitions were that written assurances should be obtained from both the state and the developer that the cracked houses would be repaired to their residents' satisfaction according to the recommendations of the state's technical consultant, and that no further basement excavation works be carried out in the

Tanjung area until the state formulated a comprehensive set of by-laws to prevent "de-watering" of the underground water table (The Star 1997u).[41] Following a story in *The Star* approximately three weeks later reporting that the residents had gotten no response from the state except an admonition to "be patient" (The Star 1997v), further press coverage was minimal.[42]

With the Japanese piling system still at work and no word forthcoming on their petitions, the Action Committee decided to take even technical matters into their own hands. The state's technical consultant was now monitoring approximately 300 cracks in 190 of the affected houses (Kumpulan IKRAM Sdn., Bhd. 1997: i.) but the group wanted greater coverage and their own objective assessment as leverage for working with the state. The chief minister had promised the group that if more cracks appeared after the deeper frame of sheet piling was completed, work would immediately stop a second time. Taking a cue from the state technical consultant's use of "tell-tale glasses," which would crack when secured to a wall if there was further subsistence, the exhaust pipe repairman, Mr. Lau, and an engineer friend came up with the idea of affixing rulers on the walls of every affected house near the cracks. These rulers would then be photographed at periodic intervals with a camera attached to a metal device (designed and welded by the repairman) that would keep the distance between camera and wall fixed so that changes in the width of the cracks could be measured. The Action Committee installed over a thousand rulers in area houses.

When the new round of piling works were completed and excavation continued, residents anxiously checked their rulers. There was no movement for one month, and the site – now an enormous deep pit -- was finally excavated fully. But then, as Mr. Lau put it,

> "to our very, very terrified situation, we observed that the rulers started to move. Actually, in every house, the cracks started to widen and there were new cracks appearing."

The Action Committee held an emergency meeting. Knowing that, under pressure from the press, the chief minister would have to keep his word and stop work immediately, the group then made an extraordinary decision that showed they were not opposed to the mall project per se, were sincere about the value of co-operation, and did not like to see anyone lose money. They voted not to inform the press and to ask that the developer privately be allowed to "make a run for it" and complete the concrete foundation as quickly as possible before the site again filled with water. Mr. Lau explained the situation as follows: The entire project was like pushing a pail into a pool of water. Whereas the sheet-pile framework was not watertight, concrete might be. The consultant had hoped that sediment from water seeping into the site would get trapped between the sheet piles and thus complete a watertight seal. The observations of the residents, however, proved otherwise. They noticed that with only the sheet piles in place the water level inside the excavation fluctuated like a tide, washing sediment both in and out. After the previous stop work order the water level inside the pit had risen to 17 feet. If work were stopped again on what was now a new, deeper

excavation, it was highly unlikely that the authorities would act fast enough – or even be able – to pump enough water back into the area to replenish the water table to its original level of one meter below ground level. The water pressure on the sheet piles at such a depth would likely cause them to collapse and the site would no longer be useful to anyone. Millions of ringgit would be lost and no one would be better off.

Mr. Lau had wanted legal regulations that would protect area houses into the future but he also knew the importance of being realistic and pragmatic. He understood that what needed to be done in a particular place and time was not always something that should be externally rule bound. This perspective entailed asking the Municipal Council, on the behalf of the developer, to relax a ruling for which other residents in a different part of Penang – those living near the concrete works – had successfully lobbied. Distressed by the constant noise and dust generated by the plant at all hours of the day during the height of a building boom, these residents had gotten the Council to agree to set a 6 p.m. limit to the passage of cement mixers in and out of the plant. Mr. Lau laughed at the irony of both siding with the developer in this case and acting contrary to another area's organizational victory, but the proposal was accepted and the concrete foundation was finally completed, not exactly on schedule but only ten days later than the two and a half weeks that had been projected. The onset of the Asian economic crisis, however, which began soon thereafter, would eventually mean another two and a half years' delay in the completion of both the Prangin Mall project and all repairs to the surrounding houses.[43]

During this time, with the particular characteristics of the urban ecology of the area now clearly understood by all concerned, the Action Committee again specified what it was they wanted legally. Their primary concern was the future security of their own buildings and the promulgation of building codes to prevent similar occurrences from happening again here or elsewhere. "It's not only that we have suffered," Mr. Lau said, "but we don't want others to suffer a similar situation." Topping the list was timely repair of their premises and a written guarantee that if their houses continued to crack in the same manner or in the same locations up to six months after the issuance of the project's certificate of occupancy, the developer would agree to the additional repairs. A regular modus operandi was now in place whereby they pressed their position: the Action Committee would give the Municipal Council and the state government every opportunity to respond to their requests before notifying the press. For example, when, despite repeated requests, the state was slow in releasing repair funds from the developer's RM2.3 million performance bond pending settlement of the RM1.6 million fee to be paid to the state's technical consultant from this fund, the residents staged a "silent protest" in front of one of the cracked houses. This time, without the help and participation of any of Penang's NGOs or political parties, residents simply held up six placards on each of which was written a large Chinese character: "*qing bu yao zai tuo le*" ("Please don't delay anymore!").[44] Whether due to this public protest and the ensuing press reports or not,

the funds were soon released and repairs continued. Even in protest, demands continued to be politely framed as requests.

The Action Committee now sent regular representatives to meetings of the two committees set up by the state to deal with the issue: the State Technical Advisory Committee and the State Residents' Affairs Committee. Also attending meetings of both committees were representatives of the Municipal Council's legal section whom the Action Committee also invited to some of their regular residents' meetings. It was at these sessions that the residents clarified what they felt should be included in a new by-law that would regulate the maintenance of basements in "mud based" areas such as their own. Informed by the legal representatives that an existing code mandating a soil and safety inspection of structures in highland areas once every ten years could be enforced to include the lowland areas in town, the residents responded that this existing law was irrelevant to their situation because their houses had cracked within a matter of months after the first excavation.

After approximately a year of repeatedly pressing for a completely new by-law, Mr. Lau explained the situation to me:

> "[The Prangin Mall basement] is some 24 feet deep. The water table, remember, is just about a meter below, so it's 23 feet of water, so to speak. And below that you are pushing a pail into 24 feet and [suppose] you have a crack there – even a small hole, it's going to jet out like a fountain, right? The water pressure is tremendous. And all you have to do is put a pump there and keep pumping. And we wouldn't know a thing. And our houses would slowly settle depending on how many cracks and how many pumps you have. It can happen ten years away from now due to an earthquake somewhere else, or

> shabby work, or whatever. No one would know. . . . Who are we to go in and check where does the water come from? It's a private-owned place."

Respect for private property had always been a concern of the Action Committee, along with a timetable for formal legal protection that would project and guarantee the security of their own houses and property into the future. This was now combined with a broadly ecological awareness of how people, places and things were all interconnected and that there were limits to what should be kept private in the interests of a more common public good. Mr. Lau continued:

> "If the council doesn't have a ruling as such, then we are in for another big shock some other time. And it's not fair. To us it's not fair to have gone through all this and suffered enough. . . . So we are pressing the government to have a law illegalizing such de-watering in houses with basements. That means we are pushing for some kind of regulation. . . whereby owners of buildings with basements in mud based areas are required by local rules to submit information whenever cracks appear. And if they do [discover them], to find a way to seal it as quickly as possible. If they don't, if they pump water out, then some kind of punitive steps can be taken against them. But unfortunately on this point it was some one year ago since we tried to push this and until now there is nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. So we are rather disappointed. We don't want the whole thing to repeat itself."

Local experience should count for something, he reasoned, and the lessons that area residents had painfully learned could, and should, be extended outward in space and forward in time. Mr. Lau felt that such a by-law would even be relevant to other, former "Commonwealth[45] countries, where we understand that there is no such ruling either," because there are "a lot of areas that are having such a problem." He was quick to point out, however, that he and his committee were not being reactionary toward technology or the new. Even "underground, undersea tunnels" he said, can be

successfully constructed if properly designed and maintained with new technologies. Technology, however, brought with it certain responsibilities. It should be recognized that the mall's double-level basement in this particular location required special maintenance procedures that also entailed special responsibilities:

> "We are not saying that we don't have confidence, but it's definitely a different kind of structure [requiring] a different kind of management of the structure once built. It's very much more costly. . . . You know, it suits us fine -- if you want to do it, by all means – but be responsible."

The net effect of such a by-law, he understood, would be to discourage developers from even considering basements for future projects in former wetlands, but it would also ensure the long-term safety of the residents' own houses given that the Prangin Mall's deep basement was now a fait accompli. In this sense, the effort to lobby for legislation was not a completely altruistic stance and the rationale that people in other places would also benefit was an additional way to press for and justify a defense of their own self-interest.

With the project stopped again and few new cracks appearing, the Action Committee found that some of their members whose houses were already repaired had drifted off and no longer attended regular meetings, which were now held monthly. At the meeting I attended on April 4, 1999, held at the Penang Heng Woh Goldsmiths' Association building, only 15 people were present. This was considerably less than the 40 to 50 that had regularly attended weekly, and sometimes daily meetings during the height of the crisis. Everyone sat around a long conference table behind the front

screen of the building's entrance while several Goldsmiths' Association members played mah-jongg and drank beer at the back. Mr. Lau sat at the head of the table. The camera device was exchanged, each member was asked in turn to report on any recent crack activity and a number of other issues were discussed.

Several members said it was important for the group to stick together, even though the height of the crisis had passed, and the secretary said that as long as the group was still operating perhaps they should do something else to help the residents of the area, such as a blood pressure testing program for the elderly. As Mr. Lau had said, "If you care you care – you don't just care about some aspect that you happen to be focusing on." Others countered that if the group had to finance this project themselves with their own contributions, they might lose additional members. A discussion then ensued about whether the group should ally themselves with a political party, especially since no outside group was currently supporting them. A party wing could sponsor the blood pressure program and they could get it going right away. Mr. Lau then cautioned the group to consider any political affiliation very carefully. The general public might not support them if they were allied to a particular camp, he said, and if they did join a specific party each member would have to make sure that he or she could "stomach it" and would not leave the group – that was the priority. With a shared sense of place and responsibility being the organizing principle on which the membership of their own group and the issues its addressed were premised, Mr. Lau's view was that this principle should be considered more basic than affiliation with any

particular party or established NGO whose goals were usually more specific. He recommended that they go their own way and continue to do things for themselves apart from any state apparatus.[46] He heard everyone out on the topic, however, and the group resolved to discuss the matter again at a later meeting. A recent letter sent to the chief minister reporting on new crack activity was also discussed. In it, the group had stated that they would hold a press conference in one month's time. This deadline was now approaching and the group voted to postpone the press conference until after an upcoming meeting of the state's technical committee – in order to let the government "have another go at it" first. A motion passed resolving to request, at the next state technical committee meeting, that the legal advisor to the Municipal Council be given six months to present something in black and white – at least a proposal – regarding the proposed de-watering by-law.

At a noodle shop across the street after the meeting Mr. Lau further explained to me their position regarding this proposed legislation:

> "So we are going to put some kind of pressure or time frame on the matter instead of just sitting back and we wait, wait, wait. And they say, "We need more time." Ok. "We need more time." Ok. There's another meeting, another meeting. Six months down the line we will ask this question: "You know, six months ago. . ." Or even one year later we will have some reference to say, "You asked for time, we projected six more months in spite of the two and a half years already gone. Now what is going on?" [We will] make some reference to a time frame and make some plea for some kind of consideration. That is planning ahead. So we resolved to table this."

Mr. Lau laughed when he told me the group must hold some sort of record[47] for longevity by now – they had been meeting for over two years. But he was proud of

the fact that "all sorts" of people had come together in the Action Committee -- Hokkien, Cantonese, and Indian – and that they had visited the imam and other officials of the local mosque and that they "support us in all that we do." He looked forward to a time when a law would obviate the need for any more pleas. This law would not impinge on the right of a property owner to build on private property, but it would ensure that the owner remained responsible in the long run to a greater public good for the result. Such a law would be their bid to contribute to at least a modicum of change in the practice of governance and in how urban space was produced and managed, based on their own local place-based experience.

Toward an International Neighbors' Day

Flushed with success at their ability to at least be heard at the highest level of the state government, the group had been harboring even bigger ambitions for about a year, despite not being officially registered with the national government as an association, which limited the range of organizing they could do.[48] What they had in mind was certainly not something with which the prime minister's office could quarrel. In May 1998 reports that ethnic Chinese women had been raped during riots in Jakarta generated an outpouring of response from around the world (Human Rights Watch 1998). Indonesian-Chinese families fleeing the violence in Java and Sumatra were filling George Town's hotels and many sought permanent residence in Malaysia -- or at least a place for their children in Penang's schools. Distressed by pictures of

rape victims that they saw posted on one of many Internet websites that appeared in the midst of the chaos,[49] the Action Committee met and decided that there was something they could do. Denouncing the cross-ethnic rapes as a "declaration of war against humanity," and affirming the efficacy of their own cross-ethnic community organization, Mr. Lau said the group had learned something from their own experience about the importance of responsibility and action:

> "We found out first hand that if we don't do anything, no one is going to do anything. That's why, given the Indonesian rape situation, and the gang rapes of the defenseless, we feel that it is important for us, as citizens, to do something ourselves instead of asking, oh, what should the government do, or even asking the government to do something. WE should do something. So we'll start the ball rolling. We will celebrate a "Neighbors' Day". . . . To us, [the rapes] are a declaration of war towards humanity as we know it. And we are making a stance. We declare that this is the way we want to live. We want to have a Neighbors' Day celebration and throughout the year we want one another to see that whoever lives around you is important and is part of your environment. It is not enough to just think about taking care of the water around you, or whatever, but also [taking care of] the people who live around you."

In this statement Mr. Lau was consciously making a connection between people and the contiguity of space or place: "Whoever lives around you is important and is part of your environment," he said.

The subtext, however, is that the importance of people in one's environment is not always recognized -- people should not rely on governments to safeguard the interests of people, who should act on their own to resolve conflict. This stance is characteristic of a definition of "urban social movements" as "organizations standing outside the formal party system which bring people together to defend or challenge the

provision of urban public services and to protect the local environment" (Lowe 1986:3). But the local environment in this case meant something quite particular. The local environment in which people lived – both in George Town and in Indonesia (as elsewhere) -- were deeply marked by multiple identities and differences. Conflicts between people identifying or identified differently had led to conflict in an environment in which everyone should have a responsible part to play. It was this conflict that Mr. Lau and the Action Committee attempted to head off or assuage by emphasizing that space at a range of territorial levels was truly shared, and that it was on this basis that people could organize and act apart from the structure, the action, or the inaction, of state governments. As discussed further below, they felt that the way to acknowledge such emphasis was to advocate, through celebration, the recognition of what was, in effect, an additional pan-ethnic identity – that of "neighbor" – that would cut across the ethnic categories often defined by governments, operate in tandem with but be more fundamental than the identity of "citizen," and ideally underlie or transcend structures of local governance, national identities, and boundaries between nations. The word "neighbor" -- in English -- was chosen precisely because it was not only "prominent in public spaces, but, more important, it. . . [was] preeminent as the language of all Malaysians as its ownership cannot be claimed by any one ethnic group" (Mandal 1998:80, 2001:160).

A free flow of communication across potential boundaries of both material and social structures was key to this conception of "neighbor," and it was formulated in

reaction to the lack of transparency on the part of the state in both creating and dealing with the cracking houses crisis. Better communication, with a focus on the broad effects of territorial contiguity, could better facilitate resolutions of conflicts at a range of levels. Mr. Lau reasoned that, due to the current Asian financial crisis or the particular actions of a developer, or for whatever reason, someone living near you might have certain needs, be having an emergency, or be doing something ultimately harmful that you may not know about. He felt that such problems have a way of compounding themselves into situations that could affect you and everyone else, so it was important to communicate regularly and publicly reinforce the value of people communicating and working together by holding a celebration that proclaimed this solidarity.

Perhaps in response to the original visual impetus for the idea – photos on the Internet of the devastation of the riots in Indonesia -- Mr. Lau's explanation of the concept included a description of the logo the group had come up with to publicize the concept and the celebration: a circle surrounded by six other circles, all the same color, that he said "anyone could draw." This graphic schema represented the importance, at a broader and deeper level than just the local, of what might be called the commonality of a shared physical and social space:

> "This means we are affecting one another. If your circle is black it affects everyone else. . . . . Whoever is in the middle – think about it – you are either affecting the others or not affecting them. If what you are doing is harsh to your neighbor then you are spreading some black color to the rest. So if, one

> day, there is a fight, you ask yourself: What have we been doing all these years?. . . . You should share your color, so to speak."

Mr. Lau felt that if everyone recognized this dynamic of contiguous influence, "the whole world would turn color." This color would be that of a worldwide community of neighbors and "not the color of a certain minority group's choice." Recall the remark by another informant, discussed in the previous chapter, that "in heaven everything is all one color. . . . There are no Malays, Chinese, and Indians – only one color." Mr. Lau's conception of a space in which people with diverse identities would be morally united or at least linked in mutual influence was perhaps just as ideal but decidedly this-worldly in that the differences between people were still retained. Each circle in the logo represented the autonomy of an individual or a specific group and the ability of each to act on one's own. Each separate unit had its own identity, its own color (based on behavior), with each separate unit having a mutually reciprocal influence on all the rest within a wider shared domain.

In many ways this spatialized conception of "neighbor" is similar to Turner's conception of what he calls the anti-structural bonds of "communitas" which he alternately defines as "a bond uniting people over and above their formal bonds" (Turner 1974:46) and as "a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities'" (Turner 1969:132). For Turner,

> the bonds of communitas are anti-structural in that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, nonrational (though not *ir*rational), I-Thou or Essential We relationships, in Martin Buber's sense. Structure is all that holds people apart, defines their differences, and constrains their actions (Turner 1974:46-47).

Mr. Lau and the Action Committee were reacting specifically against that component of the structure of state governance that was keeping people from communicating directly with each other regarding a problem that had arisen in a space shared among diverse people and interests. They had found in this space – in the idea that it was shared and in the concept that the people who lived near to each other who were part of it (and were "neighbors") -- a unifying principle and the potential for a kind of communitas in Turner's terms. As discussed further in the following section, however, which deals with specifically ritual aspects, this conception was different from Turner's in that it retained the value and significance of certain social differences between people and made a case for solidarity not solely based on common humanity. It retained a conception of the power of rational choice to identify and act one way or another.

In opposing communitas to structure, Turner states that "structure tends to be pragmatic and this-worldly; while communitas is often speculative and generates imagery and philosophical ideas" (Turner 1969:133). Both poles were operative in Mr. Lau's highly pragmatic rationalism and in his speculative philosophical imagery about what it is to be human, about the power to identify and to choose, and about the social influence of spatial contiguity. In a further elaboration of his concept of neighbor and the need for a Neighbors' Day, he spoke quite passionately:

> "As a psychologist I understand one thing very, very definitely. That is, if you go to a place where you have monkeys, it is not the monkey who imitates the

> behavior of humans, it's the reverse. It is WE who imitate the monkeys if we are among them. Because we have to find our own direction. The monkey doesn't have to. He doesn't have to decide what to do. We have to decide what to do. So if you are among dogs. . . . then people act like dogs. There are gang fights. They become fierce when they are attacked. That is behavior that is copied from examples – examples of the other animals they are with. So we have to set our own target and this is declaring a war against those who declare war against humanity. We have to set our own stand. And that's what we are going to do. . . . Are you identifying with them [the bullies] or identifying with us to co-operatively seek to build our humanity? We adhere to shared values that are good for everyone – and we go on from there. We have a lot of give and take to do, but still, that is the stand we are going to make. . . . Mutual willing – to me that is civilization."

Such mutual willing, as expressed in the concept of neighbor, was relevant to the formulation of needed external structures – such as the proposed de-watering by-law – but Mr. Lau also saw it as more broadly applicable to problems and places beyond one's own immediate interests or concerns. If the principle of place-based neighborliness as expressed by his group in Penang could be spread – as a good example -- to neighboring countries and nearby regions currently experiencing civil and economic strife, then, as neighbors, people in general "might feel more humane towards one another," he said. He felt that the concept was even applicable to international financial fund managers, whose dealings may have depressed the region's economy and thereby contributed to the Indonesian riots: "If they feel they are our neighbors," Mr. Lau said, "then they might not pull the funds away so quickly and so drastically. They might leave some leeway for people to breathe." The idea was not merely a speculative reflection on an ideal society but meant to be the basis of social action toward change.

In speaking of specifically ritual processes, Turner noted that along with the "direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities, there tends to go a model of society as a homogeneous, unstructured communitas, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species" (Turner 1969:132). Though the model of society at work in Mr. Lau's view is not unstructured in that it retains a sense of the differences between people and between places, the spatial imagination at work in such an imagined social movement was equally global and ambitious. Without pressing the point too far, its sense of a territorially imagined community (Anderson 1983) [as a kind of moral exemplar extending well beyond particular national territories seemed to have more in common with Anderson's outline of an "older imagining" of a spatialized social order than "the modern conception," as Anderson explains in the following distinction between monarchy and modernity:

> Kingship organizes everything around a high center. Its legitimacy derives from divinity, not from populations, who, after all, are subjects, not citizens. In the modern conception, state sovereignty is fully, flatly, evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory. But in the older imagining, where states are defined by centers, borders were porous and indistinct, and sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another (Anderson 1983:25-26).

Though Mr., Lau and the Action Committee did clearly see themselves as citizens who did not want to be subject to the often imperious decisions of unseen state mechanisms, and they were imagining a social order at a different level than that of the state, what they had in mind did see power and influence as extending indefinitely outward from centers. These centers were individual actors, and the spaces they

created were marked, not by divinity, but by the influence and actions of the diverse people who lived there. This conception was articulated as something that could exist as parallel to, but in tandem with, the nation state, like the civil society that Chandhoke (1998) identified as yet to be created or fully realized in many post-colonial contexts outside the West. As the following section shows, this conception was formulated in an endeavor to create a sphere for responsible social action that would reference a civic identity to be affirmed at a different level of organization than that of ethnicity or nationalism but that would draw on concepts and values that had been popularly articulated in both of these domains and publicly enacted in their rituals.

Identity and Celebration

The group thus planned to hold their own Neighbors' Day celebration in the hopes that the idea would spread. Once they were officially registered as an association, they planned to ask the Malaysian government for an official day to celebrate. They also hoped eventually to petition the United Nations for international recognition along the lines of International Labor Day on May 1. Mr. Lau envisioned the event as something like Chinese New Year – a time for reinforcing family solidarity – and such state organized public events as the Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival,[50] (in which everyone, not just Chinese, took part) all rolled into one. Most festivals and public holidays in Malaysia are occasions for the public re-assertion of

specific ethnic and/or religious identities, such as Thaipusam and Deepavali (Hindu), Hari Raya Adilfitri (the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan), the Hungry Ghosts and Nine Emperor Gods festivals (Taoist), the feasts of St. Anne (Chinese and Tamil Catholic) and of San Pedro (Portuguese-Eurasian Catholic), Wesak Day (the Buddha's birthday), and the Loy Krathong festival (Thai Buddhist) (cf. Lee 1986; Leong 1992). Most of these festivals involve public processions and other outdoor events. The day that the Action Committee chose for initial celebration of Neighbors' Day, however, was August 31 – Malaysia's National Day – a time when, under the umbrella of the secularizing, multicultural pageantry of nationalism and the celebration of post-colonial independence, representatives of many different groups come together in the year's largest parade, usually held in Kuala Lumpur but occasionally in Penang. "We have so many cultures," Mr. Lau said, "so many different ways of celebrating something, maybe we can all use one day – like National Day, or National Week, for that matter – to make it a grand celebration instead of each separately." He also said it would not be right to not celebrate National Day, "So we might have two cakes[51] -- one with a flag on it or something for National Day and the other cake for Neighbors' Day. So we will have both." The celebration would thus be autonomous from, but draw on the ethnic, religious and national rituals that expressed and enacted different kinds of identities and solidarities that the idea of neighbor did not oppose or seek to replace.

The Action Committee's vision of Neighbors' Day thus called for a celebration that would be – like National Day -- secular and culturally plural, but with the added dimension of a potential regional, international, and even global relevance growing out of its local origins. In effect, the concept called for the recognition and reinforcement of a new identity – that of neighbor – that would transcend but not supersede existing ethnic, religious, and national loyalties. The primary goal of this concept was conflict resolution and prevention – a better way to live -- to be achieved through a process that was additive ("two cakes") rather than revisionist of either the national rhetoric of "harmony" and co-operation between races or of any existing cultural form. The underlying organizational principle is the lateral extension in space of positive influence – a moral ecology whose bottom line was rooted in the idea that space is truly shared even while being marked by diversity and difference. For the Action Committee, in their initial formulation, this territory was defined as their own urban residential space, though which they planned an annual procession.

There are several historical cultural factors and contemporary public discourses that need to be discussed in order to arrive at a fuller interpretation of this concept of "neighbor," the spatial order on which it devolves, and the pinning of this concept to a "day" to "celebrate." One likely source for the formulation was the idea of the kampung discussed in Chapter 2, in which "everyone looking our for everyone else" within the shared residential space of the village was held out as a lasting cultural value in danger of being lost or in need of protection or maintenance. An ideology of

"harmony" between diverse, ethnically-defined social groups, explicitly articulated as a goal of national policy, however, is a more likely source, and it was this national ideology that Mr. Lau directly referenced in his choice of the day to celebrate.

In one sense, the idea of celebrating a Neighbors' Day can be considered as a creative re-invention and extension of this popularly disseminated ideology of harmony already at work in the celebration of National Day and in the tropes of a nationalist rhetoric that saw itself as an exemplar of progress to the rest of the region and the developing world. But the Action Committee's plan for a Neighbor's Day, and the initial selection of National Day on which to celebrate it, go beyond the simple choice of the most obvious secular and multicultural event as a model. The festivities of National Day themselves can be considered as attempts to appropriate a number of long-standing cultural processes that have vitally contributed to social and religious identity formation throughout Southeast Asia – specifically the observance of a ritual calendar whose high points are marked by public festivities involving changes in the use of space that often include the closing of streets for public processions and performances, and ritual feasting. These celebrations are especially frequent and multifarious in urban areas with culturally multiple populations, where each group has a particular day or time of year during which its own specific identity is publicly expressed within a space marked by greater diversity. Such events contribute substantially to one's experience of any city in Malaysia, but most particularly in Penang whose non-Muslim population is widely thought by Malaysians to be the most

observant of, and ardent about the celebration of particular religious and ethnic traditions than the people of any other part of the country. Any attempt to assert an additional civic identity – such as citizen (by the state) or neighbor (by the Action Committee) would thus wisely make use of the socially cohesive potential inherent in the ritual process of publicly celebrating certain things at certain times.[52] Following a presentation of what I believe to be a precursor in Malaysian nationalist rhetoric to the Action Committee's vision of "neighbor," I briefly outline a contemporary version of celebratory ritual feasting, and then go on to discuss the global aspirations of the identity of "neighbor" and spatial order on which it is predicated.

A strategic social goal of the Malaysian government, promulgated in the aftermath of riots in which Malays and Chinese clashed in May 1969,[53] has been to inculcate and valorize a shared value of "harmony" between "races" ("*bangsa*" in Malay) as a necessary constituent of the nation's progress. Despite Malaysian social scientists' objection to the continued use of the word "race" or "*bangsa*" as a remnant of the racial categories whose definitions originated in the British colonial period (cf. Shamsul 1998; 2001), the word continued to be used by both the government and the media when referring to ethnic or cultural groups (such as "*bangsa Cina*" and "*bangsa India*" -- "Chinese" and "Indian"). In the 1990s, a new phrase was coined and promoted in nationalist discourse: "*bangsa Malaysia*" ("Malaysian race"). This term was designed as a "new" identifier, still retaining the primordial connotations of race, for the Malaysian citizen whose primary loyalty would be not to the culture of one's

ethnic origin but to the nation state. The goal of a *bangsa Malaysia* was first enunciated by Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1991 as one of a series of challenges facing the nation in achieving "Vision 2020" – becoming a "fully developed," industrialized nation by the year 2020:

> The first of these is the challenge of establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made up of one 'Bangsa Malaysia' with political loyalty and dedication to the nation (Mahathir 1991:2-3).

The phrase became a buzzword in the April 1995 general elections and especially during that year's National Day celebration, which had the theme "*Jatidiri Penggerak Wawasan*" ("Our Self Identity – The Vision Mover").[54] At the time, Dr. Mahathir clarified the concept in a special issue of *The Star*, which contained a number of features on the concept of "*bangsa Malaysia*" as well as supportive comments from government officials and ordinary people. For Mahathir

> Bangsa Malaysia means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak Bahasa Malaysia and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal of Bangsa Malaysia, the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion (quoted in Loh Kok Wah n.d.:9).

Conscious that diversity and difference were enduring social realities that needed to be brought under the single umbrella of national unity, he nevertheless further elaborated that, in the future, there would be no nation on earth (with the possible exceptions of Japan and Korea) whose citizens would be of a single ethnic group, and that it was becoming increasingly clear that "while a citizen of a nation may associate himself

with the country, he would not be readily prepared to give up his culture, religion or language." (quoted in Loh Kok Wah n.d.:9). A local political scientist based in Penang, Francis Loh Kok Wah, cites this qualifier, and the following additional statement by Mahathir, as an example of the liberalization, by the 1990s of Malaysia's language, culture and education policies (which at times had attempted to favor everything Malay) and the acceptance of diversity within national unity. As Mahathir had put it:

> Previously, we tried to have a single entity but it caused a lot of tension and suspicions among the people because they thought the Government was trying to create a hybrid. There was fear among the people that they may have to give up their own cultures, values and religions. This could not work, and we believe that the Bangsa Malaysia is the answer (quoted in Loh Kok Wah n.d.:9)

In this view, identity itself is seen as a tool of social change and this national identity would be asserted in addition to other, existing identities. It is this conception of bangsa Malaysia, I believe, that provided a model for Mr. Lau's assertion of "neighbor" as a civic identity that would be somewhat different than that of "citizen." Compare Mahathir's statements to those of Mr. Lau on the subject of ethnicity, race, and religion:

> "Everyone should work together but if you say you should not worry about race and ethnic groups you are talking about changing their lifestyle. And all to what? That's an empty space. That wouldn't happen. You still have to take into account what their religion is . . . and their physical facilities. . . whatever it is they have to cope. You can't say it doesn't matter. Oh it matters -- it's their livelihood. Without that they don't know how to think, how to live. Like William James. . . [who] has put it in a very easy to understand manner, to my mind: People have filters, right? They see things through their filters.

> If they have a yellow filter they tend to see things [with] a tinge of yellow. Red or brown for that matter. But if you take all their filters away they experience death. They can't live with that. . . . Even if that person has mistakenly chosen a cow to believe in, that becomes his filter. If, all of a sudden, you take it away he experiences death. So he's not going to be too co-operative. If you slowly help him to change then his yellow filter slowly fades and he doesn't see everything as yellow and eventually he would see the same thing as you do. So, you know, coercion is like forcing him to change. It might not be easy to arrange. You will have people fighting with you. All for nothing."

Like the goal of *bangsa Malaysia*, the Action Committee's concept of "neighbor" would thus pertain to a civic identity to be affirmed at a different level of organization than ethnicity or cultural group. For Mr. Lau, life without race, ethnicity and religion is an impossibility – an "empty space." Assertion of the "new" pan-ethnic identity of "neighbor" would not replace existing beliefs or identities but rather channel perception toward the creation of a new co-operative reality to be created across individuals and groups. This reality would, and should, be part and parcel of progressive development, and it was intimately tied to a concept of shared space, "physical facilities," and "whatever it is" that people "have to cope."

The idea that identities can be additive, are multiple, and that they can be strategically activated at certain times and places is widely discussed in the literature on ethnicity in Malaysia. Claiming a particular identity can mean staking a moral claim in certain situations, and there are often many options available to social actors. A number of scholars have commented on the multiple identities available to members of different ethnic groups in Malaysia and throughout Southeast Asia, a phenomenon

that is particularly prevalent in transnational and multiethnic urban contexts (see, for example, Wang 1988:1-21). Depending upon the social context at hand, an individual can choose from a repertory of possible identities in order to claim a shared identity with an unfamiliar individual or group – often for the strategic purpose of personal gain, such as in job interviews or requests for assistance. These identities may be based on religion, dialect, clan, or craft, but they may also be rooted in places distant from one's current urban location – the country, district, village or even sub-village of one's own or one's ancestors' origin.

For Chinese immigrants to Malaysia, many of these identities had historically been reinforced by a plethora of voluntary associations that provided needed social services for new arrivals in the city: housing, jobs, loans, and social support. As immigration waned and members of different cultural groups stabilized as permanent residents into the third and fourth generations, many of these original moral functions of identity were reinvented. Aid in kind distributed solely to one's own kind of immigrant was replaced by more general charitable activities involving donations of cash or rice to a wider range of beneficiaries, and many association headquarters became more like recreational social clubs than social service centers.[55] Their primary function as foci for specific cultural identities, however, continued. They also remain as sites for the devotional worship of specific patron deities, and of ancestors.[56] For active members, some of whom may spend time at the association's premises on a regular, if not daily basis, the association also facilitates the development of potential

social and business connections. For less active members, many of whom may have moved away from the immediate vicinity of the group's headquarters, these functions are still available through their attendance at special seasonal celebrations frequently sponsored by the associations that mark either significant days on the Chinese ritual calendar, the birthdays of deities, or anniversaries of the association itself. These events often involve special forms of worship, theatrical performances, and sometimes public processions, and they are usually capped by large catered banquets that are widely attended and always reported in the press. For those whose involvement with the association is minimal at best, attendance at these dinners remains a primary obligation of membership, [57] and for an upwardly mobile newly emerging middle class, many of whom may have moved to the suburbs, such events are convenient ways to keep in touch with one's "roots" in the old inner city.

During these dinners, the charitable contributions and activities of the membership are commended in a series of speeches, the funds or food are distributed to the recipients (such as hospitals or homes for the elderly, or scholarships to college students), and gifts are presented to any attending politicians, who further commend the good work of the association. The specific cultural identity represented by the association is thus publicly validated; and the centrifugal socioeconomic pressures that had dispersed the original cultural group -- educational, class, and professional mobility, the flight to the suburbs, marriages between subgroups -- are momentarily turned aside during the feast [58] and under a general umbrella of charitable giving.

This centripetal return to a center, however, with its concomitant re-affirmation of a group identity and a temporary social cohesion during the period of celebration, is of a different order than a community organization based on a sense of permanently shared space embracing everyone living or working in a particular place. In its plan for a Neighbors' Day celebration, the Action Committee sought to reinforce both an identity and a social cohesion -- a sense of neighborliness -- that would not be temporary but be permanently rooted in an immediate physical and social urban environment that was shared. An annual celebration would be an important event in this regard, but "throughout the year we want one another to see that whoever lives around you is important and is part of your environment," Mr. Lau had said. Unlike the temporary, centripetal cohesion achieved in other associations' celebrations, the public celebration of the "good work" of being neighbors would hopefully radiate outward from this center (as graphically depicted in the celebration's logo) and, by example, inspire people in neighborhoods elsewhere to similarly to take care of their own, with "own" defined as anyone and everyone living nearby. The movement could then cross national boundaries and achieve regional and even global relevance in a manner akin to the Malaysian government's self-proclaimed goal of establishing itself as a leader among developing nations as far as social harmony is concerned. Mr. Lau envisioned Neighbors' Day as Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival "all rolled into one" -- the public spectacle of crowds carrying illuminated lanterns through the city's major streets (now sponsored as a multi-ethnic event in

Penang by the state government), combined with the more private re-affirmation of family solidarity and the holding of open houses for neighbors during New Year celebrations.[59]

In its extrapolation of the value of family solidarity onto a civic realm, the conception of a Neighbors' Day can be considered a perfect expression, on a local community level and within the parameters of overseas Chinese culture, of the Malaysian national concern that a "caring society," and with it, a spirit of co-operation, be fostered along with material and economic development. This concern was number seven among the "strategic challenges" facing Malaysia as outlined by the prime minister in his promulgation of "Vision 2020" in 1991 (the goal of a *bangsa Malaysia* was the first):

> The seventh challenge is the challenge of establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system (Mahathir 1991:3-4).

The celebration of Neighbors' Day, as they envisioned it, would thus be activating and enacting, in local terms perhaps more concrete than citizenship, this all-too-easily empty social and civic rhetoric officially promulgated by the nation state. Unlike the term "*bangsa Malaysia*," however, which never quite caught on[60] the phrase "caring society" became a watchword in public consciousness.[61] In outlining plans for a Neighbors' Day celebration, Mr. Lau and committee were taking up the challenge enunciated by the head of state and doing something about it on their own.

Conclusion

In the introduction to a recent volume of essays entitled "Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms" Robert Hefner asserts that "culture and social relations are *intrinsic* to politics and the economy, not free-standing social spheres" (Hefner 1998:5). This chapter has presented an ethnographic illustration of a number of ways in which both local and national cultural values, and the social and spatial relations in which they are embedded, were intrinsic to the character of a community's political action and reaction when the construction of what might be called an international symbol of capital development – a new shopping mall – led to a neighborhood crisis and a social drama. In the course of coming to terms with the nature of this crisis -- why and how it had happened and who or what was responsible – area residents not only reacted against some of the ways in which the state currently did business, they worked both with and against the state's own culture and social relations and endeavored to change at least a small part of its practice by proposing a new piece of legislation. In coming together and organizing themselves into an "Action Committee" to seek re-dress for the specific problem of damage to their homes, residents came to harbor a greater ambition: the extension of their local organizational success into a broader domain, both spatially and temporally, in a way that can be considered a nascent social movement, or at least the proposal for one. The social drama that ensued when their houses began to crack encouraged residents to think of

the place in which they lived in broadly ecological terms: their own area was the product of the interconnection of multiple agents, actors, and social, economic and natural histories and forces. Extending this understanding onto a broader canvas, they proposed an International Neighbors' Day in the belief that their own local experience of place, and the organizational ideas that came out of it, would be relevant in resolving or forestalling conflicts and crises elsewhere. Their organization and proposed movement were thus an example of what I am calling new forms of "place-based" social action. Place provided the impetus for action and it was also an explicit object of concern.

Residents found in their own residential space -- and in the realization that it was a truly shared place of diversity and difference -- a broadly applicable organizing principle and focus. For perhaps the first time in the old inner city of George Town, a residents'organization, with long-term goals and whose membership was open to anyone living in a particular place, was formulated to address a range of issues arising in the particular place where people lived. There was a state policy encouraging the formation of residents' organizations in new high-rise housing projects, and there had been other residents associations, ethnically inclusive but temporary, that had formed in Penang for specific purposes such as fighting evictions or seeking compensation, but this one was different. The scope of its concern quickly broadened beyond the immediate self-interest of repairs to embrace an agenda that was fundamentally moral – "a better way to live," as Mr. Lau had said. In standing up for their own particular

place and in seeking to assure that the trajectory of "development" everywhere would be participatory and humane, Mr. Lau and the Action Committee were seeking a recognition of rights and of the real and potential value of their own contributions as players, not only in the production of urban space, but in the on-going creation of a civil society in what Chandhoke (1998) has called the post-colonial "developmentalist" state.

The term "moral ecology" in the title of this chapter was consciously chosen to reference James Scott's (1976) discussion of a "moral economy," but the terms of assertion and resistance in this case are different. Whereas the subsistence laboring peasants in Scott's analysis resisted, on both moral and pragmatic grounds, the capitalist concept of the maximalization of profit, the urban Action Committee discussed here accepted wholeheartedly the capitalist interests represented by the shopping mall as well as the state's complicity in those interests, arguing that "people will co-operate; they want the same thing." This acceptance of co-operation as a value had perhaps been fostered by national policy, whose espousal of "harmony" between groups as a prerequisite to the nation's progress was widely disseminated in many domains and by the media. What members of the Action Committee objected to, also on pragmatic and moral grounds, was the way in which the state had allowed the capitalist interests of the developer to be physically expressed in the urban environment (in the mall's actual construction) without sufficient safeguards for both the property and well being of the people living and working nearby, and with

apparent disregard for the contribution their knowledge and concerns could have made to the project. These failures amounted to what they felt was a denial of the value -- and the morality -- of co-operation, and the viability of their own contributions to the on-going production of space.

In appealing personally to the chief minister of Penang to alleviate their plight (and in going to the press only as a last resort), the action committee relied on the same kinds of personalistic ties that Hefner (1998) and others (Hamilton 1998; Mackie 1998; Li 1998) say are intrinsic to the cultural character of the currently on-going development of capitalism throughout Southeast Asia – and especially the business practices of the overseas Chinese in this region Hefner neatly sums up this distinct cultural practice:

> Multimillion dollar deals that in the United States are struck only after scrutiny by a small army of lawyers are, among Chinese capitalists, settled with a handshake. Capital that in London is secured from international banks may in Bangkok and Taipei be mobilized through an informal network of trade partners. For those scholars who, following Max Weber, were convinced that the prerequisite for modern capitalism is a well-mannered legal system and impersonal bureaucracy, business arrangements of this sort may be dismissed as "premodern" organizations "in transition" to modern ones. But such a conclusion now seems unduly restrictive, indeed ethnocentric (Hefner 1998:29).

Practices such as these, which are also prevalent on the level of state involvement in development projects, are the target of much criticism – from both local activists and commentators in the West – and these critiques are often based on what has been negatively defined as the prevalence of a "crony capitalism" favoring only the

networks of those in positions of power in the state bureaucracy. Although the Action Committee was uncomfortable with the "closed door" municipal decision-making processes that were associated with this dynamic and the ways in which these can be uninformed or impinge on the public good, cronyism itself was not what the committee felt it was up against. Rather, in attempting to resolve the immediate crisis, in their efforts to prevent it from happening again by proposing legislation, and in their plans for a celebration of Neighbors' Day, they were attempting to sort out the difference, in a positive moral sense, between private interests and the public good, between what should properly pertain to the domain of "impersonal bureaucracy" and what should remain personal, and the differences between a language of human rights and a language of human emotion in expressing one's position and needs.

Mr. Lau and the Action Committee felt that the developer's initial offer to repair the worst cracks for "humanitarian" reasons was misplaced: mitigation and a timetable for it should be a legally binding contract not a matter of personal whim or magnanimity. Likewise the pumping of water from the mall's basement should be regulated by an impersonal external structure such as a by-law because, "who are we to go in and check. . . It's a private-owned place." But the impersonal only went so far. The Action Committee respected the personal ties they had established with state officials by airing their grievances in the press only as a last resort. They actively co-operated with the developer in avoiding another stop-work order by requesting that the concrete foundation be poured quickly – a move which necessitated a request that an

existing regulation, limiting the movement of trucks in and out of the concrete works, be relaxed. Without taking it as a directive, the committee thus agreed with the chief minister's statement that the people should not take a passive attitude toward the crisis but help the authorities to come up with solutions. This stance and the valorization of personal networks of trust were extrapolated into the Action Committee's ambition to celebrate a Neighbors' Day, which was seen as a possible solution to other, transnational and cross-ethnic problems as the Asian financial crisis and rape of ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia. If the international financial fund managers "feel they are our neighbors," Mr. Lau had reasoned, "then they might not pull the funds away so quickly and so drastically. They might leave some leeway for people to breathe." Although Neighbors' Day was meant to be a grassroots movement, the Action Committee also sought national and international validation for the idea, and the concept can be seen as a reflection of a combination of the goals of certain Chinese celebrations and Malaysian National Day, as well as a concrete enactment of the prime minister's call to develop a "caring society" along with economic and material development. The shared experience of place was key to this formulation.

As already discussed, Penang is well known throughout the region as a center for nationally and transnationally active NGOs, and the early history of George Town saw the proliferation of a variety of social organizations designed to serve various newly immigrant (and in many cases newly urbanized) groups. These organizations included kinship networks, dialect-group associations, chambers of commerce, and

mutual aid organizations that "absorbed immigrants into a multipurpose social network and provided them with access to housing, employment, and for the well-heeled, business contacts and capital" (Hefner 1998:21). The period of mass migration to the Malay peninsula, fostered by the colonial capitalists' need for labor, coincided with a British colonial regime that was paternalistic in tone but nevertheless separated from everyday governance in its policy of indirect rule. Ethnic leaders and associations were largely left to govern their own. For many immigrants, the structure of networks provided by these voluntary organizations was just about all the governance they knew. Though "the many brotherhoods and social and economic associations established in the region in the early decades of mass immigration contributed to the creation of a mutually supportive civic culture" (Mackie 1998:138), these did not constitute an integrated civil society in the sense that Chandhoke (1998) says is the current challenge in post-colonial contexts because these brotherhoods and associations were ethnically, linguistically, and culturally specific. Most of these groups mutually supported only their own kind of people or those within a limited range of difference (cf. Yen 1986) -- hence the characterization of politics and society in Penang and Malaysia, well into the post-colonial period, as "plural," (Embong 2001; Freedman 1960; Hefner 2001b; Nagata 1975; Shamsul 2001); as "fragmented," (Kahn and Loh Kok Wah 1992); as a "mosaic," (Nagata 1979) or as a "caldron of ethnicity" (Nash 1989).

For the Chinese who had come to George Town early in its history the structure of this group-specific form of governance was different in many respects from the strict vertical hierarchy of both the native Malay society and that of late Imperial China. In the multi-ethnic urban setting of Penang identity itself was a tool of social action and for Chinese in such overseas settings "wealth has always been linked with philanthropy as a means to win community esteem in highly mobile and relatively egalitarian, competitive societies (Mackie 1998:138-39). Overseas Chinese society was thus marked by a network of strong lateral and reciprocal relationships (*quanxi*) based on trust (*xinyong*), with fewer vertical links in the form of patron-client relationships (cf. Hamilton 1998).[62] This is what the Action Committee's logo for the concept of Neighbors' Day was all about: a network of lateral and reciprocal relationships between individuals and groups identifying as "neighbors" was framed within a common shared space in which anyone who lived there could take part. As we have seen, when immigration ceased, the philanthropic activities of group-specific associations were replaced by more generalized cross-group charitable giving by members who were becoming middle class and who were not needy immigrants just starting out. But the moral agenda of these associations – to help those in need – continued. Without expecting much from the powers that be in the state hierarchy, these organizations continued to provide networks for the expression of civic responsibility, mostly in the form of donations of cash and rice and the creation of scholarships. The Action Committee discussed here took this moral stance several

steps further. They created a new form of voluntary organization based on a group defined not any more specifically than that of "neighbor" -- a network of residents living near each other in a particular place who would share information and work together whenever a crisis threatened their immediate environment. In their plans for an International Neighbors' Day they aspired to extend this lateral structure even further afield as a way to mitigate potential crises elsewhere -- a move that was perhaps inspired by the Malaysian government's self professed ambition to be a model center for inter-ethnic "harmony" and co-operation, human resource development, and the export of technology to the rest of the developing world.

The Action Committee was not a business group, but Mr. Lau had said they "mean business" and it could be argued that the approach they took toward their task replicated the culture of Southeast Asian Chinese business arrangements as described by Hefner:

> Chinese capitalism is first and foremost a *network* capitalism. It is built from the ground up, not on the basis of legal contracts and the supervisory authority of the state but on particularlistic relationships of trust. One can hardly think of a more decisive counterexample to Max Weber's faith that the spread of capitalism would everywhere mean the demise of personalistic ties in favor of a faceless bureaucratic machine (Hefner 1998:12).

Johan Saravanamuttu, a Malaysian political scientist based in Penang, has argued that informal ties between the Malaysian government and the business sector are very strong, with the government largely abrogating its regulatory potential in the interest of becoming partners with business in development. Conversely, he notes, the links

between government and civil society are very weak, with few established avenues for popular expression and even fewer vertical connections between the public and public policy (Saravanamuttu 1998). These themes will be returned to in the following chapter, but in the case presented here, the action committee achieved a genuine, if limited, success in reaching vertically. Their appeals to the chief minister, with the help of the press, were eventually at least heard. But their greater challenge proved to be the extension and transformation of such a "particularistic relationship" into a network that would have included some kind of power as well as voice – specifically a recognition that they had rights and that they could co-operatively make a positive, moral, and long-term contribution to the way in which a particular capitalist development project in their neighborhood was carried out. In this effort they were less successful. As of April 2002, most of the houses had finally been repaired, but only after years of waiting,[63] and the de-watering by-law was apparently lost in committee. The Action Committee still met occasionally and they had been having their own Neighbors' Day celebrations but not on the grand scale of a parade and with international recognition such as Mr. Lau had envisioned. The group's most recent event was a farewell party for an elderly single woman who, after decades of working in Penang as a maid and nanny, was returning to China rather than pay what she felt was an exorbitant rent for her house after the end of rent control. Mr. Lau told me that she had sent money to her nieces and nephews in her home village in China for many years and now it was her turn to be taken care of by them.

[1] For accounts of earlier cases of residential communities in Penang organizing temporary associations specifically for the purpose of resisting eviction or seeking compensation for displacement see Chan, Chin and Loh 1983 and Goh 2002.
[2] NGO activists often attributed municipal neglect to a lack of enforcement of existing regulations, and inefficiency to the over-bureaucratization of the state government whom they felt responded to crises by forming committees rather than committing to any real action. The following joke about Indonesia in this regard was told to me by an Indonesian academic but it was received with laughter by the Malaysian NGO activists who were present and who had often commented about the same problem in Malaysia: American, Japanese and Indonesian passengers were traveling in a airplane that had engine trouble and was about to crash. What should they do? The Americans got together and said, "Let's repair the engine." The Japanese got together and said, "Let's abandon the plane and parachute down." The Indonesians got together and said, "Let's form a committee."
[3] The George Town Council, the body responsible for municipal governance (usually dominated by an opposition Chinese party), was locally elected (following a British model) until 1966, when it was suspended on charges of corruption and inefficiency by the Malay dominated and Alliance (the ruling national coalition) dominated Penang State Assembly. These charges appear to have been unsubstantiated. In 1971 all local elections in Penang were formally abolished. The George Town Council was later replaced by the Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang (MPPP – the Penang Island Municipal Council) which is appointed by the Penang State Executive Council and whose jurisdiction includes the entire island – not just the city of George Town. See Tennant 1970. The president of the Penang Island Municipal Council assumes a role similar to that of "mayor" in ceremonial functions and at such events as international conferences of mayors.
[4] One such organization, however, had somewhat more longevity and its membership was open to anyone affected by the impending end of rent control (as of January 1, 2000). Calling themselves SOS (Save Ourselves), whose English name can be considered a mark of ethnic non-exclusivity, (cf. Mandal 2001: 160), this group was formed in 1999 to represent the interests of tenants in all of Penang's more that 8,000 rent controlled units and it continued to lobby for compensation as of 2002 (SOS (Save Ourselves) 2001).
[5] The complex was named after the second Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Abdul Razak bin Hussein, who presided over the grand opening of the first phases in 1976.
[6] Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang – the Penang Island Municipal Council -- consists of 24 members appointed by the Penang State Executive Council. An analogous body governs Seberang Prai, the strip of land on the mainland that is part of the state of Penang.

[7] This publication is the official monthly of the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP).
[8] Although the original idea for this committee came from the state assemblyman, it was not an official state committee and, as explained below, the assemblyman's eventual involvement in it was minimal.
[9] As part of my research, I would sometimes accompany a journalist friend on some of his assignments. My account in this chapter is based on several interviews with Mr. Lau, to whom I explained my purpose; attendance at one of the Action Committee's meetings; numerous newspaper stories; and a number of other documents and publications. Newspapers in Malaysia are privately owned but most are thought to be biased toward a specific political party. Of the three major English language newspapers in Malaysia (in descending order of numbers of readers) *The Star* is thought to be especially sympathetic to the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the *New Straits Times* to the United Malays National Party (UMNO) and *The Sun* is independent. For a general discussion of media policy and politics in Malaysia see Heuvel and Dennis 1993.
[10] RM (Malaysian Ringgit) is the currency of Malaysia. RM1 was valued at approximately US$0.40 before the Asian financial crisis began in 1997, and approximately US$0.25 afterward – a devaluation of approximately 40%.
[11] Publishers and newspapers must re-apply annually for permission to publish from the national government and even test runs of printing presses require permits. In 1987 the newspaper The Star was temporarily closed down because of its outspoken criticism of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mohamed Mahathir (Heuvel and Dennis 1993:153).
[12] These matters included the rationale for the amount of the repair bond asked of the developers, details of its payment and disbursal, the state's current reluctance to release these funds, a timeframe for repairs, and guarantees of satisfactory completion of repairs regardless of the developer's possible bankruptcy.
[13] Lim Chong Keat, personal communication. See also Lim 1996.
[14] The national New Economic Policy, which was formulated in the aftermath of Malay riots against Chinese in 1969, established favorable quotas for Malays in public housing, licensing, education in public universities, and government jobs.
[15] "*Dewan*" is Malay for "hall."
[16] By the late 1990s, the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) was still reporting on progress in its resettlement program for those affected by the project, many of whom had moved to high-rise flats newly built by the PDC in the Macallum Street Ghaut and Sungei Pinang areas. By the end of 1996, of the total of 629 families affected by the first stages of the project, 533 had been resettled, as well as 238 of the 274 displaced commercial tenants, leaving 96 families, 34 commercial tenants, and 2 temples still awaiting re-settlement. (Penang Development Corporation 1996:51-52).

In 1998, work was underway to build 303 additional residential units (priced between RM18,000 and RM 70,000) and seven shop lots at Sungai Pinang for those still displaced and for new evictions for successive phases of the project, including the Prangin Mall (Penang Development Corporation 1998:49).

[17] The Democratic Action Party (DAP) was one of several opposition political parties in Malaysia and was quite active in Penang.

[18] Section 3 (1) of the original Land Acquisition Act of 1960 (Act 486) stated that any land could be acquired by a state of Malaysia if it was needed:

(a) for any public purpose;
(b) by any person or corporation undertaking a work which in the opinion of the State Authority is of public utility; or
(c) for the purpose of mining or residential, agricultural, commercial or industrial purposes.

By 1998, this section had been successfully amended to read as follows:

(a) for any public purpose;
(b) by any person or corporation for any purpose which in the opinion of the State Authority is beneficial to the economic development of Malaysia or any part thereof or to the public generally or any class of the public; or
(c) for the purpose of mining or for residential, agricultural, commercial, industrial or recreational purposes or any combination of such purposes.

"Public utility" in the original part (b) had been specifically re-defined as "any purpose" deemed "beneficial to the economic development of Malaysia" -- a change which effectively eliminated the provision of public use as a criterion for acquisition (Government of Malaysia 1998).

[19] "*Malaysia boleh!*" ("Malaysia can!"), usually printed with an exclamation point, is a national rallying cry designed to encourage confidence in development through local effort. It appears on billboards, advertisements, and announcements of development projects, and is also the title of a song that is sometimes played at the Prime Minister's rallies.

[20] A shop house is most commonly a two-story structure with an internal staircase to living quarters upstairs and a shop front with shutters or gates that completely open the ground floor level to the street. See Kohl 1984.

[21] The area is part of a larger territory represented as Kampung Kolam in the Penang State Assembly. Penang State Government statistics listed its total population in 1999 as 21,100, consisting of 8.33% Malay (1,758), 86.03% Chinese (18,152), 5.50% Indian (1,160), and 0.14% Others (30).

[22] Alternatively, the upstairs living quarters are often used as workers' quarters or for the warehousing of stock.

[23] The façade of a terrace house usually consists of a large double door, flanked by two windows, above which there are additional ventilation openings. Like shop houses,

most terrace houses were initially intended for residential use but some contain businesses on the ground floor.

[24] *Sinkeh* is the Chinese term for "new immigrant." Although immigration from China ceased with the Aliens Ordinance of 1933, distinctions are still made between the "Straits Chinese" – descendants of the first waves of immigrants who assimilated Malay and British influences (resulting in the creole "Baba-Nonya" language and culture) – and the descendants of later immigrants who largely retained their original Chinese languages and tend to be educated in Chinese language schools.

[25] Several informants living in older part of town told me that this was an area notorious for gangsters and criminal activities. Two educated young women whose families had already moved outside the city center felt that the likelihood of finding a suitable husband from this part of town was laughable.

[26] The total population of the Pengkalan Kota constituency in 1999 was 22,215: 0.78% Malay (175), 95.48% Chinese (21,211), 3.66% Indian (812), and 0.08% Others (17). Source: Penang State Government statistics.

[27] State reasoning in keeping the two groups separate may have been that the belief that residents' concerns could most effectively be filtered through the offices of the two state assemblymen for the areas concerned, or it may have been a reflection of the standard practice of developers to individuate negotiation for compensation as much as possible in order to prevent communal organization.

[28] The names given to streets by British colonial administrators (often the names of former administrators themselves) were only partially accepted by Penang's Hokkien, Tamil, and Malay speakers, who preferred to use their own names based on natural features, prominent buildings or objects, the ethnicity of residents or types of businesses found in a particular place. A long street with a single colonial name might have several local names indicating a more precise location. These names often persisted despite the disappearance of the original visual or social feature. See Goh n.d. (b):10-13; and Meeran n.d..:13-15.

[29] Penang Museum curator Khoo Boo Chia referred to a series of British colonial paintings of old Penang that had been exhibited and published by Lim Chong Keat, the original architect and planner of Komtar. (Lim 1986). In a watercolor by Captain Charles Henry Cazalet entitled "Malay Huts, MacPherson Bridge," dated 1856, the area is depicted as a typical coastal *kampung* (village) with a Chinese junk beside a bridge spanning the new Prangin Canal which had drained the swampy area and made possible the expansion of the town. Penang Heritage Trust secretary Khoo Salma Nasution also mentioned paintings which depicted the Prangin River, and noted that the name was "later adapted to Prangin Creek, Prangin Canal and Prangin Ditch, as the area was progressively reclaimed." (Both references The Star 1997l.

[30] Malaysian academics and holders of PhDs are regularly interviewed in or quoted by the press, and some write regular newspaper columns.

[31] The articles by Goh mentioned in the story are Goh n.d.(b) and Goh n.d. (a) from which the current quote is taken. In the latter, Goh contrasts the choice of the site for Adelaide (Australia) by Francis's son William as being made only "after careful thought and serious study, while George Town was sited without any such consideration." (Goh n.d.(a):32. George Town and Adelaide were formally "twinned" in 1973 by Lim Chong Eu, then Penang's chief minister, and Don A. Dunstan, then Premier of South Australia, whose wife was from Penang.

[32] The report also made several interesting historical observations. Based on the team's soil studies and the pattern of cracks in the area south of the original river, it speculated that there may have been another tributary of the river that was not shown on any old maps.

[33] The commission investigate and produce a report was given to Kumpulan IKRAM Sdn. Bhd., the recently privatized version of the previous Institut Kerja Raya Malaysia (IKRAM) – the Malaysian Public Works Institute. Mr. Lau later expressed dismay that reportedly RM1.6 million of the RM2.3 million performance bond eventually required to be posted by the developer went to pay for this report. (See "Financial tussle delays repair work," *The Star*, July 6, 1998.

[34] The Prangin Mall was planned as a nine-story structure with two basement levels.

[35] The Consumers' Association of Penang and Penang Heritage Trust are independent NGOs. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is one of the political parties comprising the Barisan Nasional, the national ruling coalition but it was not the ruling party of the Penang State Government.

[36] The technical consultant's final report revealed that *bakau* wood was not used in all cases. Investigating the foundations of an old house on Lebuh Tek Soon which was already abandoned as part of the future Phase 5 of the Komtar development, the shallow foundations of this house were not found to be *bakau* wood but rather two layers of granite blocks laid in pairs below a wooden plank as a base for the brickwork. According to the report, this finding may indicate either variation in foundation building techniques or originally dryer land in this particular location. (Kumpulan IKRAM Sdn., Bhd, 1997: 39-40, and Figure 7.2).

[37] Local criticism of the degree of civic consciousness in Malaysia often includes the sentiment that people expect the government to do too much for them, or have become too passive.

[38] Despite the state's invitation of active civic participation at this point, it was also not beyond reminding the public of its strong-arm capabilities. The state assemblyman for Mr. Lau's area – the same man who had asked the residents to organize themselves – was the official who now warned people against making false police reports and he reminded them that it was a serious offence. "Experts can differentiate fresh cracks from the old ones," he said, "so residents who are not affected should not try to cash in on the situation" (The Star 1997m). In the same press report a police spokesman

added that those who lodged false reports would be charged under Section 420 of the Penal Code for cheating, and, "if convicted, they can be jailed not more than 10 years, whipped, and liable to a fine."(Over 300 Police reports).

[39] *Nasi kandar* is South Indian Muslim cuisine, primarily curries, popular among all ethnic groups in Penang. "*Nasi*" is the Malay word for rice. "*Kandar*" refers to the pole slung across the shoulders with which itinerant hawkers once carried their products door to door.

[40] A year or so after the walkway was put up, the Action Committee again negotiated with the developer to re-paint the walkway before it fell apart.

[41] Another request stated in the petition was that the "light pressure grouting" method of pumping concrete underneath an existing foundation, which Action Committee members determined to be the best method in consultation with their own technical consultants, be used to stabilize their houses, since the state and its technical consultant had not yet made a recommendation in this regard.

[42] The remainder of this section is based largely on personal interviews in 1998 and 1999.

[43] Work only resumed on the project on September 1, 1999, after the developers secured an additional RM25 million loan from Arab Malaysian Finance for the RM200 million project. Some 500 shop lots were to be offered for sale, ranging in price between RM295,000 (for 300 square feet) to RM1 million. Developers in Malaysia regularly sell units before the completion of construction. Delays in taking possession by these buyers resulted in the formation of a "Prangin Mall Project Buyers Committee" whose task force met with the developer, the contractor and the chief minister's political secretary. When steel work began, one buyer said, "It looks like Hollywood to us." Prangin Mall finally opened in November 2000, with its first promotion "Wheels@ Prangin" featuring the latest models of consumer autos by Mercedes Benz, Toyota, Honda and Volvo. (The Star 1999a; 1999b; 2000).

[44] I am grateful to Leo Hsu for this translation. This event was reported in Tunku Shahariah 1998.

[45] The Federation of Malaya left the British Commonwealth with independence in 1957, but much current Malaysian law is still based on British models. Malaysia continues to participate in certain events that include former commonwealth countries, such as the Commonwealth Games, which were held, with much fanfare, in Kuala Lumpur in 1998. Many Malaysian NGOs apply for funding from current commonwealth members.

[46] Recall that this feature is what Lowe (1986:3) has identified as a defining characteristic of "urban social movements."

[47] As discussed further in the next chapter, popular media in Malaysia and publications such as the *Malaysian Book of Records* keep tabs on Malaysians' record-breaking achievements in a manner similar to *The Guiness Book of World Records*. Listings

range from the tallest building in the world (The Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur), to the biggest dragon sculpture, and the longest buffet table.

[48] The Societies Act of 1966 requires that all associations register with the federal government, submit an annual audit of accounts, and not engage in activities beyond the scope of their submitted description.

[49] The Human Rights Watch report cites an *Asian Wall Street Journal* story of August 20, 1998 that states that some of these photographs were not of rape victims from the May riots in Indonesia but were taken from earlier reports on East Timor and even from pornographic websites. The Action Committee did not know of this report and accepted them as genuine. Mr. Lau's perception was that the photographs may have been taken and posted on the Internet by the perpetrators of the rapes themselves, something he found doubly repugnant.

[50] As celebrated in Penang, the traditional Chinese Mid-Autumn Lantern festival now consists of a state-organized and corporate-sponsored parade and competition of illuminated floats created by various groups and associations, school children in uniform, marching bands, and cultural performances by the Penang Development Corporation's dance troupe held inside the old colonial fort.

[51] Sweets of various kinds are standard celebratory fare, but large decorated cakes of the kind Mr. Lau had in mind have only become popular relatively recently, with European or American influence, as has the use of such cakes to celebrate a birthday or anniversary. See Watson 1997. In Penang, birthday cakes with icing are now standard offerings presented to Taoist deities or *shen*, on their birthdays.

[52]There have been other attempts to foster commonality through the framing of temporality. In 1998, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM) organized an international conference in Penang on lunar calendar practices entitled "A Common Heritage in Islamic, Chinese, Hindu and Other Civilizations." The conference attempted to outline some kind of common ground – and perhaps even develop a standard calendar – that would encompass the lunar calendars of various traditions. This move was seen as a potential counter to what was perceived as the global hegemony of the solar Christian Gregorian calendar as well as the cultural imperialism of Greenwich Mean Time.

[53] Thought to have been sparked by the election of a Chinese majority in the Malaysian parliament, Malays rioted and attacked ethnic Chinese in several cities resulting in extensive property damage and a number of casualties. Now known as "May 1969," the event is considered a watershed in recent Malaysian political and social history (comber 1983).

[54] Each Malaysian National Day in recent years has had a catchphrase or slogan as the theme for that year's celebration.

[55] Some Chinese district associations, for example, organize trips to China that include visits to members' villages of ancestral origin. Others provide recreational facilities, such as mah-jongg and ping-pong tables, for members' use.
[56] Chinese associations for practitioners of professions that have patron deities continue to worship these deities on altars in the association's headquarters. Clan and district associations maintain altars for wooden plaques inscribed with the names of the deceased. After a period of worship in the family home of the deceased, these plaques are brought to the association headquarters where they are assured of receiving a common daily offering of joss sticks without further involvement by the family.
[57] Other obligations include making a donation, and participating in special activities, often worship, at the association's premises during the period of celebration, which may last several days. Membership in multiple associations, a common occurrence, means that an individual would have many such dinners to attend in the course of a year. Some members attend only the dinner, which is usually held at the association's premises, under a canopy on the street outside of it, or in a large banquet hall.
[58] Feasting as a ritual symbolic of solidarity is ubiquitous among all culture groups in Malaysia.
[59] On the first day of Chinese New Year family members who may have dispersed to pursue careers, marriages or education away from home are expected to return "home" for a reunion dinner to re-affirm family solidarity. Malays do likewise on Hari Raya Adilfitri, the day that marks the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, and for Hindus a similar occasion is Deepavali or the Festival of Lights. All three groups also have open houses for friends and sometimes neighbors at these times.
[60] Loh Kok Wah (n.d.) observes that the concept of "*bangsa Malaysia*" was embraced most wholeheartedly by the non-Malay members of the Barisan Nasional (the ruling coalition), and less so by Malay politicians and intellectuals, which perhaps explains its falling out of use by the late `90s. Tengku Razaleigh Hamza, the leader of Semangat 46, a now-defunct political party, felt the idea was "dangerous" and threatened to put Malay culture and language "in the backseat." (quoted in Loh Kok Wah n.d.:10).
[61] In the 1990s "caring society" was the subject of a national symposium and the name given to a new office complex in Penang built by the state government– the "Pusat Masyarakat Penyayang Pulau Pinang" ("The Penang Island Caring Society Center") -- designed to provide space for the activities of a number of NGOs. It was also a phrase frequently used in the press, and became the slogan for a campaign to solicit donations for the relief of the victims of a famine in North Korea during 1997-98. In collecting donations of rice to be sent to North Korea, Malaysian devotees of Sai Baba (a popular Hindu guru with an international following) distributed labels for bags of rice to donors who were encouraged to write on them personal notes to the recipients. At the

top of the label, within a figure of a heart, was a Malaysian flag and the phrase "Family to Family."

[62] Hamilton defines *quanxi* as

> a term conventionally reserved for certain sets of ties that are bound by norms of reciprocity (*huibao*) or by what is more commonly called in Chinese human emotion (*renqing* or *ganqing*). Very close familial ties, such as those between parents and children or husbands and wives, are not based on reciprocity but rather on duty and obedience, with the subordinate in the hierarchical relationship obligated to obey the superior (Hamilton 1998:57).

[63] The committee's call for timely repairs with a legal guarantee went unheeded. Although work had recommenced on the hunger striker's house and others, as of September 24, 1999, 23 buildings housing approximately 50 families still had not been repaired. Mr. Lau told *The Star* that these 50 families had "sacrificed their turn" for repairs in order to allow other houses that were more badly affected to be repaired first. "So the developers must honour their promise to these families who had to put up with the cracks for one and a half years after they had forgone their turn to have their homes repaired then," he said. (quoted in Tunku Shahariah 1999).

Chapter 5

The Moral Ecology of the City: The Sustainable Penang Initiative

Introduction

The previous chapter detailed the ways in which a local population came together as a community in the face of a crisis, mobilized a common response, and, in the process of organizing themselves, created a new rallying point for both social consciousness and civic responsibility: urban space itself. Their understanding of this space was deeply ecological and inclusive. For perhaps the first time in Penang, territorial proximity (of residence or business) was the sole criterion for membership in an organization whose goals grew to encompass more than just a one-time solution to a specific crisis. Any problem that might arise within this place, be it physical or social, was fair game for their concern and their problem-solving efforts. Operating out of a sense that the space of the city is truly shared and that everyone and everything within it is a part of a larger whole, they sought to encourage a sense of responsibility of each to all, foster respect for local histories and knowledge, differences and diversity, and put to good use the mistakes of the past by advocating legislated changes in building codes and policies. Taking a deeply moral stance, they further sought to extrapolate their fair degree of success and show to the city as a whole, the region, and even the world, the relevance of their own sense of place by

planning a "Neighbors' Day" celebration which they hoped would one day receive international recognition.

The current chapter concerns a very similar series of processes, operative in a very different venue, that likewise move back and forth between local and global senses of place: The Sustainable Penang Initiative. This was a "think-tank" launched in November 1997 by Penang's Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI) as its showcase project. As the official bearer of statistical information to the state for the purpose of development planning,[1] SERI was specifically charged to produce Penang's second strategic development plan (The Penang Strategic Plan 2), which would pick up where the previous plan had left off and would cover the years 2001-2010.[2] It was not, however, an official state agency but an independent body.[3] SERI's ultimate goal was to develop a new type of measurement and format for the statistics it presented to the state. This information, which would be "holistic" and not exclusively economic in nature, would be generated by invited panels of "concerned individuals" in a process that SERI's director hoped would provide a permanent mechanism for public participation in state planning policy. The overall goal was "sustainable development" – something that had already been mentioned in the state's first strategic plan but which now seemed especially urgent. "Sustainable development" is perhaps best defined by the following, taken from SERI's mission statement and printed in an informational flyer:

> . . . the fundamental purpose of development is the betterment of the quality of life for all through adherence to the principles of sustainable development which seek an optimal balance between economic growth, social progress, cultural enhancement and environmental conservation. It recognizes that well-conceived and directed development has to be based on informed choices and that governance in a knowledge-based society must of necessity rest on a firm foundation of facts and figures.

With funding from the state government, a Canadian foundation and a United Nations agency, The Sustainable Penang Initiative consisted of a series of five round-tables, culminating in follow-up reports and a "People's Report Card" presented to Penang's chief minister at a public celebration. Five topics were selected for the round-table discussion over the course of a year: "Ecological Sustainability," "Social Justice," "Economic Productivity," "Cultural Vibrancy," and "Popular Participation." I attended all sessions (except for the first working session) as a participant. The immediate goal of each two-day discussion was to produce a "vision statement" outlining as Anwar Fazal, SERI's director put it, "the kind of Penang that we want" regarding each theme. Presentations, discussions, question and answer sessions, and published papers circulated during these sessions, along with the Initiative's final report, constitute the data used for this chapter.

The program was ambitious. Participants were asked to ascertain whether the development of Penang was moving toward greater sustainability, away from it, or stagnating vis a vis each theme considered. Although the ostensible mandate of the Initiative was merely to recommend policies and strategies to the state, Fazal saw the process as considerably more pro-active. The participants were convened, he said, to

"look at issues, develop indicators, and with [these] indicators develop some kind of initiatives." He said that a report could have been generated by engaging an outside, often foreign, consultancy firm, paying them "millions of dollars," and asking for a plan – a standard state procedure that was criticized more than once during the meetings. "But "if you want to make any kind of transformational change," Fazal asserted, "one of the important things is to. . . involve all the stakeholders that are going to be impacted by these issues." As discussed in the sections below, this involved a holistic approach that involved not only, as Fazal put it, attention to "all areas of human endeavor" but a definition of stakeholders – and resources -- that encompassed the entire world. "So we devised an unusual process," he said, "Instead of taking the consultancy and research approach. . . we will start to draw on the full community – the community in Penang, the community in Malaysia, the global community." He also hoped that, from the example set in Penang "a hundred, a thousand initiatives will arise out of this particular process" -- a statement perhaps expresses greater faith in the ability of the people to act than in the ability of the state to initiate positive change on its own.

The global scope of this ambition – of people acting locally but thinking globally – is similar to Action Committee's plans, discussed in the previous chapter, to initiate a "Neighbors' Day" that would have international relevance. Here, however, there was an important difference. Staffed largely by Penang's English-speaking educated elite, many of whom were well connected to transnational NGOs, SERI had

the resources to ensure that information and the lessons of experience could flow in both directions – from global to local, and back again. Fazal himself was likely chosen by state officials to head up SERI and the Sustainable Penang Initiate because he had long been active in a number of NGOs with local, national and regional reach, was an outspoken advocate of the people, a good organizer and an inspirational public speaker. The idea of the Initiative was to draw on examples from a variety of different projects from around the world, reformulate them according to Penang's unique experience, and send them back into the world. This concept was reflected in the structure of the meetings themselves. Each working session would be preceded by an international speaker, a national speaker, and a Penang speaker (in that order), all of whom had had some experience with the general issue at hand.[4] Roundtable discussions among "concerned individuals" with various or no NGO or activist affiliations would then identify what a facilitator called "burning issues," suggest appropriate indicators that would measure or express the particular direction that they felt Penang was taking in that regard, and suggest possible solutions to be achieved through community action as well as policy recommendations.

At the heart of the process was a reformulation of the type of information upon which previous development policies had been based. Fazal expressed the hope that

> "as a result of all this. . . several things will develop: we will be much better at visioning the kind of Penang that we want. . . . We'll also become much better in our data bases, in our information, [and] in our knowledge."

As will be seen in the following sections, the scope of this information and knowledge was deeply ecological, and the approach toward collecting it was rooted in international movements to preserve natural environments that had expanded their concerns in recent years to encompass the economic, social, cultural, legal, and political dimensions of an increasingly urbanizing world. Penang was discussed in the meetings as a greater metropolitan urban center whose ecological "footprint" was much larger than the city limits and whose cultural relevance was much greater than local. In addition to being broadly spatial, there was also a diachronic dimension to the approach and what was perceived of as Penang's leadership in taking it up. "Then" and "now" were continually assessed relative to each other, with "then" referring to both a valued past and an imagined future. Unlike the members of the Action Committee previously discussed who did not specifically frame the value of their old pre-war houses in terms of history or historic preservation, the continued maintenance of Penang's social and material heritage was consciously articulated here as a concern among the Initiative's rather elite group of participants.

Fazal noted proudly that Penang would be leading the region in assessing development in this way because "it certainly has not been done anywhere in Asia." It was "new" and "exciting," he said, but it was a challenge, and he compared the process to someone in a single-seater plane who is trying to convert it into a jumbo jet while in flight. But he was also optimistic and declared that

> "the Initiative would build something that will not only be of significance to Penang but we are hoping to make links with all the other states [so] that this idea will be part of the mindset of other states in Malaysia and, through ESCAP [the United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific], and hopefully also through a network of groups, [and] a lot of work . . . these kinds of ideas [will be] discussed and exchanged with many many people all over the world."

The jury is still out on the extent to which the Initiative has had any influence either within or beyond Penang, but, as of 1999, reports or publications about the project have appeared in eleven foreign and fourteen Malaysian venues (SERI 1999a:121-123). The Initiative was perhaps most successful in creating new linkages between existing NGOs in Penang, representatives from which formed the bulk of the roundtables' participants. These groups were encouraged to collaborate on projects spanning their individual interests and think of ranges of issues as multi-dimensional and interconnected. Class and language divisions were less easily bridged – an issue that was recognized by participants at the very first meeting. The latter question was partially resolved by scheduling additional sessions in Malay and Mandarin, but whether or not many of the issues raised were specific only to middle-class or elite concerns was continuously debated. However, as the organizers fully realized, soliciting the perspectives of a predominantly English-speaking and what remained a rather elite and educated group of participants was a definite limitation.

In a sense, much of the Initiative had to do with the implications of what a newly emerging middle class had achieved or desired – and whether these were sustainable. Noting that "the state of Penang has maintained an admirable 12%

growth rate for the last few years," the flyer announcing the Initiative began by stating:

> We know the people of Penang have worked hard for this prosperity, but now it's time to pause for a moment and think seriously about where we are heading.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, economic prosperity was viewed by the Initiative's participants as merely one dimension of "development" that was also not without negative consequences in other domains. Above all, what most participants felt could be relevant to people outside the state was the energies of its people and the distinctiveness of Penang as a place. Personal loyalty to, and a sense of affiliation with Penang as a greater metropolitan region (and a state of Malaysia) was something that spanned class and language groups. Perceived threats to this distinctiveness, and to the quality of life with which it is linked, is the specific subject of the next section.

A Sense of Place

In the course of presentations and roundtable discussions held during the course of a year, a number of key topics emerged as "burning issues" among the participants in the Initiative, such as housing affordability, cultural continuity, the availability of recreational facilities, and sustainable transport. A major recurring concern, however, discussed at every session, was the issue of haphazard development – and the links between this phenomenon and issues of governance. What was at stake was nothing less than a sense of the distinctiveness of Penang as a place. Khoo

Salma Nasution, the coordinator and driving force of the Initiative, whose family was long and well established in Penang and who was a passionate advocate for heritage preservation as well as an officer of Penang Heritage Trust, asked the assembly:

> "What makes Penang special? What makes Penang look like Penang? Feel like Penang? Taste like Penang and smell like Penang? Those who love Penang have remembered the good things – the coffee shops and the hawkers, cycling to school, *boria* and *bangsawan*,[5] *chap goh meh*,[6] Padang Kota, Gurney Drive, Penang Hill.[7] But there are also, less lovable things, which make Penang an increasingly unliveable place."

The sense of place that she felt was being undermined involved all the senses. It was about food and festivals, songs and performances, historic and natural sites, as well as easy movement throughout the city.

As an example of the latter, Khoo mentioned the intense traffic now surging throughout the city. "We don't need to motorize to modernize," she said, adding "I hope all of you came [here] by bus" – something that few participants in the discussion were likely to have done. The current course of development, she felt, was compromising the ability of the city's inhabitants to maintain valued traditions and ways of life. In Khoo's view, the "environment" was not just natural, but also cultural, and inseparable from a sense of history, identity, and spirituality. She continued:

> "Haphazard development not only destroys our cultural heritage and ravages the environment, it undermines our sense of place, who we are, and how people perceive us. Our environment shapes us and so can habitat kill the human spirit."

Globalization was another threat, but as Khoo reminded the audience, this was not a new phenomenon in Penang and had actually contributed to its identity as a place:

> "As the leading tourism destination in Malaysia today Penang is open to many foreign influences, but globalization in Penang began a long time ago. The history of Penang is the history of many waves of migration of many peoples. Penang is positioned in the middle of three great civilizations and three great centers of population: China, India and Indonesia. Naturally, Penangites think that Penang is the center of the world."

As Fazal had also emphasized, it was this sense of cultural awareness, rooted in the past and set within a broader spatial context, that had the potential to turn Penang's contemporary resolve in facing the future into something that could be globally, as well as locally relevant.

Khoo explained that the lessons to be learned from Penang's past included a long experience with both multi-culturalism and globalization. The current form of globalization, however, presented a new challenge because it involved the mass marketing of homogenized forms of precisely such things as food and entertainment – two of the domains that had long contributed to the distinction of Penang as a place. Khoo questioned whether globalization in this new form was continuing to enrich Penang:

> "Is the fabric of our society evolving into a rich tapestry of cultures and historic communities? Or are we just becoming a rootless *rojak*[8] unable to resist the seductions of synthetic, globalized, mass McCulture? Do we prefer McNuggets to *nasi lemak*?[9] Are we excited by local cultural performances? Or do we often stay at home and watch television?"

Informed by her preparation of reading packets for participants about the social concerns articulated in an international environmental movement and by the selection of academic and activist speakers to introduce each session, in Khoo's view two of the threats to Penang's sense of itself as a place – haphazard development and a new form of globalization – were tied to the unleashing of uncontrolled market forces. "As a community we should feel strong enough to monitor some of the more alarming trends in our society," she affirmed. Controlling haphazard development was a matter of political will on the part of both people and politicians, she noted, and advocated, as a first step toward change, the creation of a Municipal Council that would be elected rather than appointed. But she also noted with a certain irony that the potentially bulldozing effects of market forces were aided and abetted by a long-standing cultural trait of Penang's originally immigrant communities: a penchant for enterprise, thrift, and making money. The problem was thus not defined by any simple opposition between "us" and "them," or "insider" versus "outsider." Everyone was, or should be considered complicit, she felt, in the direction in which Penang was heading.

The logic here was that Penang's history of multiculturalism, which had long been a way of life, might well succumb to new, intensified forms of profiteering, with little regard for the consequences. What was required now was a certain moral check. In the absence of enforceable architectural preservation laws, Penang's historic urban communities were being threatened by the impending end of rent controls (as of January 1, 2000) on the city's numerous pre-war premises, and this, Khoo felt, would

result in an uncontrolled property market and the likely displacement of many long-standing residents. Affirming her own stance as an activist for heritage preservation, Khoo proposed that the built environment of the city – specifically the old inner city – become the touchstone for the continued relevance of a multicultural society. What was at stake was not just the distinctiveness of Penang as a place, and its place in the world, but the kind of culture that would be left for future generations. Khoo declaimed:

> "As we face the year 2000, as the clock strikes midnight and rent control is repealed, George Town can become a world heritage city[10] or it can be doomed to become a concrete jungle amidst piles of uncleared rubble. We beseech the historical landowners to cast off their tradition of proverbial stinginess – those for whom ten cents is as big as a bullock-cart wheel. That's also Penang culture. We ask the old rich and the nouveaux riche, the Chinese *kongsis* [associations] and the religious endowment boards[11] to come together and magnanimously embrace a vision of revitalizing the heart of old Penang. Each of us will contribute whatever we can. Writers can write. Artists can devote their talents. Rich wives can donate their husbands' money – or vice versa. Landowners can give up just a bit of their plot ratio.[12] [All] in return for a historic Penang we can all be a part of and pass on to the next generation."

In this view, and in a conception similar to that formulated by Mr. Lau and his Action Committee, urban territory itself is seen as a potential unifier of multiple cultural groups and the outlook was long-term: it was the responsibility of later generations of those who had first come to the city and done well for themselves to now take the lead in thinking about, and shaping the future.

Khoo reminded the participants of what had made Penang so special in the not-so-distant past and what still largely remained – and this involved not just the

architectural heritage that Penang Heritage Trust sought to preserve but an entire sense of place. She quoted colorful passages from a number of historical sources to "give some impressions and flavors of the winds of history that have blown through Penang" and to indicate that the aesthetics of place – both built and natural – together with the inhabitants' multiple cultures and a fair amount of civic pride, had long been important in Penang. She quoted several 19th-century commentators who wrote with delight about such things as Penang's "elegant and hospitable" mansions, gardens of clove and nutmeg trees full of spotted deer, and its fine drinking water "conveyed through iron pipes" long before Singapore and Malacca ever had such facilities. The image she evoked was of a place both aesthetically harmonious and urbane, and she cited an early commentator who observed that the town contained "a large number of peoples of many nationalities," with "Latin being the tongue in common use." Today, however, Penang was quickly becoming known for other things. She told the gathering that the prime minister of Malaysia had chided Penang by calling it "*darul sampah*" ("land of rubbish"), and she reminded them of his most recent stinging remark about being able to read the brand name of the underwear hanging out to dry on the terraces of Penang's high-rise flats. Khoo admitted that the prime minister was also full of "praises for Penang's electronics industry and the speed at which we are embracing information technology." But at the same time, she said, "he warned us that we should take great care to make sure that *nasi kandar*[13] still tastes the same in the year 2020." Giving this statement about aesthetics both a social and a spatial spin,

she said, "I take this to mean that we should make sure that the Indian-Muslim community around the Kapitan Kling Mosque survives the rent control repeal. Otherwise we will end up with motorized tea shakers."[14] In other words, that which was aesthetically valued should not be pushed aside in the name of technology, commercialism, or development. People and the aesthetics of places and things, such as favorite foods and the people who prepared them in particular locations, were all interconnected and mutually dependent.

A certain sense of harmony between people and place and history lay at the heart of Khoo's moral stance – and the harmony that had long been maintained in this relationship was now in danger. A current emphasis on a harmony that could yet be achieved or maintained was seen as a counter to the potential loss of aesthetic values and certain qualities of life. Prosperity had bred complacency and profiteering was squeezing out other values and dimensions of human experience. This was having an effect the ability of Penang to sustain itself culturally. Khoo laid part of the blame on some of the richest families in Penang, who seemed quite willing to sell off their ancestral homesteads – with what she saw as disastrous affects on cultural reproduction. As an example she mentioned a house on Penang Road that was once the family home of what many regarded as the wealthiest family in Penang. This family had recently sold it, and now only its façade remained as the entrance to a new high-rise building which had become a Honda showroom. "As a result, look what is happening to the next generation," she said, "Most of them have emigrated because

they don't feel that they belong to Penang, you see. The children of these people live in Australia, in England. . . everywhere else in the world and not here."

In this view, changes in the built environment due to what was perceived of as greed not only impacted negatively upon cultural reproduction, they also reinforced Penang's "brain drain" -- the problem of upper class children being educated abroad and not wanting to return, for a variety of reasons. The assumption here was that the continuity of retaining the family home – a site of great symbolic importance in Chinese culture -- could stem the tide of undesirable trends in both the aesthetics of the urban fabric and in the culture of the city itself. "And as for high-rise buildings," Khoo continued,

> "I think that if we ask these developers to pay the full environmental and social costs of what they are building, they wouldn't be able to build all those things . . . . They can only do it because they are not paying for the infrastructure, they are not paying for the pollution. . . the problems of water subsistence, and the cracks. . . all the problems that have been caused."

As a local economist put it at another session, this dynamic of development was the result of a "national-level policy of privatizing profits and socializing costs." Given such trends and the changes that were occurring in both the physical and social environment, what legacy was now being passed on to the next generation? Khoo summed up her concerns about the future in her definition of culture and of cultural vibrancy, the theme of that day's session:

> "Culture is the way we live our lives. Our core cultural values are transmitted from one generation to the next. Each generation remembers and forgets, gains and loses, preserves and innovates upon this inheritance. A culturally

> vibrant society is not soulless, sterile, homogenized and reconstituted, artistically impoverished or mentally colonized. A culturally vibrant society fosters breadth of expression and depth of spirituality. It perpetuates a strong sense of community and a healthy relationship to land and nature. A culturally vibrant society is a treasure house of language and knowledge, dress and food, trades and lifestyles, customs and world-views, energized by memory and sustained by diversity."

Cultural vibrancy could not be discussed without also talking about change, Khoo said. While accepting generational change as both inevitable and potentially creative, Khoo warned that many things seemed to be headed in the wrong direction. "For our community to be sustainable," she said, "we must get the better of change -- we must be able to draw upon our own cultural energies and cultural resources to ensure the long-term well being of our environment, our society, our economy, our culture, our community."

Responses to the Initiative's "international" and "national" level speakers were occasionally lukewarm, but the discussion generated by Khoo's presentation, as with most of the speakers from Penang, was enthusiastic and provided a rare public venue in which to vent issues and emotions. One man reiterated many of Khoo's themes, and confirmed that urban aesthetics and a sense of history were not exclusively elite concerns. Noting that he was "not an architect or a developer or anything – just a plain, simple, working man," he presented his own summary:

> "I have lived in Penang for, well, more than 60 years. I've seen the city progress from the old town to a city. . . The way I see it -- the overview of the whole thing -- is that because our people here consist of a majority of migrants, the biggest, most important thing [is that]. . . we are here to make money. This is why we basically came to Penang. We are here to make money."

He gave an example:

> "If someone goes and tells a guy who has a very old dilapidated house that it is worth half a million and says [to him], "look, I'll buy it over" -- because he knows that he can get the politicians, the council people, to approve a 20 story building [and] he's going to make millions. So what do we do? If I were the guy I would sell the property too."

For this man, however, there were limits to how far this sentiment should be allowed to proceed, and his condemnation was based on both aesthetics and history:

> "I feel that people are very greedy. . . They don't care about how the city looks. They don't care about anything at all. All they want to do is make money. They can even demolish very historic old mansions and the Metropole Hotel and put something else up and. . . rebuild the façade.[15] This is a mockery of the old town. It is a mockery."

"So who do you blame?" he asked. His own answer was clear:

> "The politicians. The city fathers. They are not able to control this aspect of the livelihood of the people who want to make immediate bucks. They do not have the will to do that. And too late for us to find out eventually that we have been sold out."

I heard similar sentiments expressed by many other people throughout Penang, from trishaw drivers to millionaires, and even by civil servants working in state development departments. Like the Action Committee, for whom the projection of protection for their houses into the future was very much a concern, people everywhere were worried about the long-term consequences of current development projects and these concerns were sometimes framed in terms of architecture and quality of construction. A woman who worked for the Penang Development Corporation, a co-sponsor of much new construction, told me that she was concerned

about the quality of materials and structure, and the durability of the high rise in which she had bought a unit. She told me that "developers just take the money and then leave – but I have to live with the consequences for the rest of my life." In many ways it seemed that long-term responsibility to both the past and the future was being brushed aside in a current emphasis on making money quickly.

The man who contributed the above comments at this session of the Initiative concluded by saying that, given the way that "everyone can see how developers buy over politicians and planners. . . maybe we should have a general election every year instead of [every] five years because, within one year, if we notice that they are not doing the right thing, we can sack them, pull them out the next year." These comments were greeted with enthusiastic applause. Most participants agreed that the political process needed to be more democratic and participatory, but the specific action planned by Initiative organizers was less drastic but equally timely: a new way to measure "development" that would not be exclusively economic. This approach would be broadly spatial and deeply ecological, as well as diachronic. Drawing on the experience of similar projects elsewhere, especially in North America, teams of volunteers would formulate "indicators" whose measurement over time would assess the sustainability of recent trends in a variety of domains (environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political) and specify certain connections between them. These measurements would hopefully not only influence public policy and planning but also modify popular behavior through an increased awareness of the reverberating

consequences of irresponsibility once the interconnections among a broad range of domains and phenomena were considered.

Measurement and Morality

"In our society, measurements about things are given great weight." These are the words with which Anwar Fazal, SERI's director, launched the discussion during the initial meeting of the Sustainable Penang Initiative in November 1997.[16] In lieu of a prayer, with which most Muslims would begin a meeting, Fazal's first statement had been a faith-inclusive evocation of the significance of the word "peace" – but not, as he said, as the contrary of war but rather a "larger peace" which he defined as "the peace within ourselves, the peace that we have with other people, and the peace that we have with the environment." Opening up a discussion of the concepts of measurement and size, and the power that perceptions of measurement wield in one's way of looking at the world, would be the agenda of that morning's session, as a way of introducing the concept of "community indicators."

The idea that measurement is important is certainly something that would resonate with most Malaysians since it is a trope that figures prominently in both local and national discourses. Announcements of the annual figures for Malaysia's Gross National Product, together with periodic semi-annual projections of future growth rates are occasions for official pronouncements by both state and national political parties and officials, and these numbers are avidly discussed in the press and in coffee

shops. Recent achievements and rankings of the "biggest," "tallest" or "longest" are also regularly referenced by the media, by events promoters, and by politicians as touchstones of both regional and national pride. Measurable achievements are duly recorded and annually published in the *Malaysian Book of Records*, a local version of the popular Guinness series, which includes such items as economic rankings and growth statistics, the dimensions of recently built structures, sports records, and other measurements that are just plain fun.[17] A popular mania for record-breaking large dimensions occasionally reached absurd proportions, however, and the emptiness of one particular "achievement" was referenced by several speakers at Initiative sessions. *Teh tarik* (literally "pulled tea") is a favorite drink that is thought to be best when prepared by professional Indian-Muslim hawkers who mix very hot tea with condensed milk and pour the mixture back and forth between a small pitcher and a glass, often from an arm's-length distance and with great bravado, producing a froth similar to that of cappuccino. In a bid for inclusion in the record book, a resort hotel in Penang had sought fame and recognition by pouring the "world's longest" *teh tarik* from an upper story window. This event was mentioned several times throughout the sessions as an example of the apparent triumph of form over substance in many recent achievements, and it was precisely this sentiment that Fazal was introducing. Size and number can influence perception, he said, but perception is not always what it seems, and what is actually measured or perceived may not be what is most significant. "If one looks at all societies," he continued, "this weight [of measurement] is immense

and influences perceptions of what is going on, of what is right, and what is wrong." Measurements and perceptions of measurements are thus both implicated in morality and many of the discussions throughout the Initiative's sessions were about what values should be guiding both local and national development achievements.

Fazal's point was that measurements may be perceptions, but perceptions powerfully contribute to a course of action or belief with real consequences in the world. Given the state of the world today, new kinds of measurements, of different kinds of things, may now be necessary. The point is to go deeper, he said, beyond form to "essence," in order to measure things that could beneficially change perception, and with it, create a ground for the possibility of positive social, economic, and environmental change that would contribute to the sustainability of "our planet." "One of the realities of the world is that we have a lot of information," Fazal continued, but "we have slightly less knowledge. . . . and much much less wisdom." According to Fazal, the environment is not just a stage for human action but part of the very essence of humanity, and the power for positive substantive change lay within each individual. As an illustration of both points, launched into a story from the 13th century Sufi philosopher Rumi, whom he felt "more and more people should read" both "in this country and everywhere." People know about Plato and Socrates, he said, but they do not talk enough about Rumi, who was "one of the greatest philosophers, teachers, poets." As Fazal narrated it, Rumi once told a story:

> "It was about a special envoy that was sent by his emperor to seek out a very special tree. The emperor had heard that there was a tree that was the tree of life. And so this envoy went and he traveled all over the world looking for that tree. And this was a tree with many, many branches here in the world and it was the substance of life.
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> The person searched and never, never could find it. And one day he met a wise old man whom he asked for desperate help because the emperor had said, if you don't come back with that tree there will be only one action we will take: you will not survive. And this wise man told him: 'You could not find the tree because you had eyes that don't see, you have ears that don't hear, and you have a heart that does not feel. This is why you did not find the tree.'
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> Then the envoy was confused. The wise man said: 'You know where the tree is. The tree is in you. It is inside - the tree of knowledge. It is very high and very large and very widespreading. But because you did not think in those kinds of terms you were looking outside. . . . This tree. . . appears in all kinds of forms. Sometimes it appears as the sun. Sometimes it appears as a flower. Sometimes it appears as just air. It has many different manifestations.'"

In paraphrasing Rumi, Fazal was advocating that another part of the world be heard from, with a somewhat different metaphysics than that of the West and the Platonic forms of Socrates. He summed up Rumi's message by saying that if you "only search for form" you do not find anything – "you have to look for the essence." This essence was the "tree of life" which had "many, many branches" throughout the world but it was also conflated with the "tree of knowledge" which was specifically located "inside" the individual. The fact that it was "inside" and not outside – "substance" and not just "form" -- did not preclude it from having perceptible dimensions such as "high," "large" and "wide spreading" and appearing in/as the natural world. The key to survival – and to the endeavor at hand -- was recognizing that knowledge, humanity

and the environment are not just linked, they are inseparable. This recognition was also a key to action.

In telling this story, Fazal was also poetically introducing his vision of the mandate that, as the director of the Socio-economic & Environmental Research Institute he had received from the Penang state government, and the subsequent expression of this mandate in the establishment of The Sustainable Penang Initiative. Like the emperor's envoy, SERI was also charged with a mission: it was the official bearer of statistical knowledge to the state and was specifically commissioned to produce Penang's second strategic development plan. SERI thus saw its mission as the generation of measurements that would be relevant to the achievement of sustainable development -- a goal now perceived of as urgent.

By the end of the 1990s, three decades of continual industrial growth had made Penang one of the success stories of economic development in Malaysia, and even in the entire developing world, but this success was not without social and environmental costs. In 1970, there were 31 factories in Penang and manufacturing accounted for 13% of the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 1995, there were 706 factories and manufacturing accounted for 56% of the economy (Leong 1996:69). In the five-year period (1992-97) immediately preceding the Asian economic crisis, Penang had enjoyed an annual economic growth rate of 12% -- three points higher than the national average of 9%. But what were the consequences? The first meeting of the Sustainable Penang Initiative was held immediately after the onset of the "Asian

Economic Crisis,"[18] but its primary topic of concern was not the current crisis but a series of rapid changes, with multiple dimensions, that had resulted from decades of economic growth. As a later report on the Initiative put it, the participants felt that "if the prevalent rate of growth and change persisted without sufficient sensitivity to its possible effects on socio-cultural relations, the social fabric and the environment, the social costs that had to be borne would be phenomenal" (Chan, Leong, Tan and Teng 1999:1).

Job mobility and the increasing concentration of economic opportunities in new industrial areas meant the break-up of extended families living together under one roof and consequent concern over the continued transmission of traditional cultural values to younger generations. Rising household incomes together with the cramped spaces of new high-rise flats from which youth sought escape from parental supervision were thought to have directly or indirectly contributed to a number of "social ills," such as *lepak* (idleness) among young men and *bohsia* (sexual promiscuity) among young women. Human interference with the natural environment had also resulted in a series of "man-made disasters" detrimental to a specifically natural ecology. Factories discharging waste into the Juru River from the Perai Industrial Estate, built on land reclaimed from riverine mangroves, had polluted the sea nearby to such an extent that the fishing industry in the area had effectively ceased. The growth of what had quickly become Penang's second largest industry – tourism -- was simultaneously marked by what appeared to be a now-permanent

decline in the quality of sea water around the island: Sediment from excavations for new sea-side tourist venues, together with the discharge of sewage from an ever-increasing number of beach resorts directly into the sea, meant that Penang's once-clear waters, still fondly remembered by many, were now perpetually murky and contained levels of *e coli* bacteria unhealthy for bathing. The developers' assumptions that these sediments and wastes would eventually be swept out to sea had not proven to be the case, and, according to one local report, reflected a lack of understanding or concern about the underwater typography of Penang's coastline (Leong 1996:71). For Fazal all the problems and changes associated with development were linked, and could only be understood as part of a broader picture, with multiple dimensions. In effect, what he was saying was that the people of Penang had the moral cultural capital, not only to measure and assess where Penang was heading, but also to do something about it. In his view, neither assessment nor action was the sole prerogative of the state. Key to both processes -- and to the work of the Initiative – would be a type of measurement known as a "community indicator."

In introducing this concept to the assembled participants at the first meeting, Fazal asked that the people of Penang now build something more substantial than external form. In outlining the goals of the Initiative, he spoke for all of its organizers and announced that

> "for us, no action begins without some kind of holistic approach. . . . We need to look systematically at so many areas of our life and start building -- start

> building indicators that we can use, that we can build, to try and make certain kinds of changes."

He declared that the Initiative was to address "all areas of human endeavor" which he presented, in a rhetorical mnemonic, as "five Es that we feel are very, very central in every community":

> "The first E -- the very fundamental one -- is Ecology: the physical space in which we live and we get along. The second E is Economics - the whole question of trying to organize productive products and other things that we need in order to sustain ourselves. The third is Equity -- the whole system of justice in our society and the way in which we treat each other. The fourth -- a very important one. . . . [is] Ethos -- the core values inhabiting us that make for the way we think, and the way ethos operates and manifests itself in cultural values and so on. The core thinking that we have that is our basic attitude, our basic value system. And the fifth is Empowerment -- the way in which people can feel that they are in charge, feel that they can think change, they can participate, they can do things."

In short, thinking about the environment was a way to think about a host of other issues as well. The five "E's" marked the five themes to be discussed in roundtables over the course of a year – "Ecological Sustainability," "Social Justice," Economic Productivity," "Cultural Vibrancy," and "Popular Participation."

The progression of the Initiative's activities was as follows: The immediate goal of each two-day discussion was to produce a "vision statement" outlining, as Fazal put it, "the kind of Penang that we want" regarding the topic in question. Another, more open-ended goal was to develop a series of indicators that would measure and assess the directions in which Penang was currently heading relative to the achievement of these visions. These indicators would add substance to three basic

questions: Was the development of Penang moving toward greater sustainability, away from it, or was it stagnating vis a vis each concern? The year-long series of roundtables would culminate in the production of a "Penang People's Report Card" (SERI 1999a) that would be presented to the chief minister of Penang at a public event called the "People's Forum." This report would summarize the current state of development in Penang and the direction in which the participants felt it was heading in what was hoped would be an open-ended process and an annual publication. Included in the publication would be an explanation of each indicator and the vision statements arrived at by consensus for each of the five areas of concern.

Although the ostensible mandate of the Sustainable Penang Initiative was merely to recommend policies and strategies to the state, Fazal saw the process as considerably more pro-active. The participants, he said, were convened to "look at issues, develop indicators, and with [these] indicators develop some kind of initiatives," whether or not the state chose to act on the Initiative's specific recommendations. The overall goal was sustainable development and, with it, a better quality of life. Sustainable development had already been expressed as a concern of the state in an earlier version of its "strategic development plan, but what distinguishes the Sustainable Penang Initiative is that it was not going to leave the definition and measurement of what constitutes a better quality of life to either the planners or the government. The hope was that the Initiative would foster a groundswell of popular input into both the planning process and government policy, something which the

Penang state government was apparently welcoming. But it was also hoped that the process would foster the development of new citizen-based initiatives that would begin acting on their own with or without government support. Fazal hoped that "a hundred, a thousand initiatives will arise out of this particular process" whose relevance would not be restricted to Penang. Penang would be leading the region in assessing development in this way because "it certainly has not been done anywhere in Asia," he noted proudly and assessment was merely a prelude to action. The kind of measurements that were involved would be so compelling that they would foster avoidance of the three syndromes that he said work to prevent action: "Paralysis Through Analysis," which he said is often suffered by academics; the "NATO Syndrome (No Action Talk Only)," which afflicts politicians; and "Hopelessness through Helplessness," which he said is often felt by many members of the public who feel they are powerless to make a difference.

Throughout these opening remarks, Fazal repeatedly emphasized the importance of linkages as the means to "build" a local movement toward sustainable development that would have worldwide implications. Links between international agencies and local initiatives, networks of existing voluntary associations, a certain identification of humanity with the environment, and connections between the five areas of human endeavor -- all of these were seen to contribute to a new way of assessing the human content of economic growth and development and guiding its progression. The basic idea was to take the structural model of a natural ecosystem

and transpose it, not merely onto the realm of the social, but onto the social, the economic, and the materially environmental and to consider all three together as a complete mutually interacting whole. The concept thus constituted, not just a "model of" the way the world really works, but also a "model for" the organization of a global network of local community initiatives that would function as gadflies to states everywhere. The result would hopefully be the creation of civil societies truly committed to fostering a more sustainable, just, and humane development trajectory than was presently the case.

In this schema the unifying concept of a natural ecosystem is replaced by a concept of space that includes human content and, with it, a sense of morality -- what I am calling a "moral ecology." Although the concept of a "moral ecology" would aptly describe models of and for society that the cultures of many small-scale societies have found in culturally specific conceptions of the natural world, the innovation here is that the move to symbolically conflate the environmental and the social was made by an urban middle class and was specifically directed toward the space of a city that was now considered as a greater metropolitan region linked in many ways to other such regions. The outlook was thus broadly spatial as well as diachronic, with "development" seen as a continuous vector manifesting itself in a space that was defined as simultaneously natural or material and human -- the world itself. In a 1992 paper for the People-Centered Development Forum, Fazal had outlined some of the goals of his work for the International Organization of Consumers' Unions. Among

other objectives, this organization sought to "help people think of regional and global space as their space [and] encourage them to see how their problems relate to, and derive from, the global context" – a stance that Mr. Lau and the Action Committee had already formulated on their own. He also stated that, in terms of methodological organization, "groups that work at the community level must be linked to those that specialize in broader political spaces." Both sentiments were now being realized in the Sustainable Penang Initiative. Drawing on the support and experience of an international network of community action groups for inspiration and guidance in its assessment of local problems, the Initiative would then return its account of local experience back into the network as a possible resource for further national, regional, and transnational problem solving. In short, the Initiative would be "thinking globally and acting locally."[19]

The key to this process was holistic thinking that involved an understanding of linkages between a variety of domains: philosophic and phenomenological links between society and the natural world; a sharing of information and experience transnationally between local community action groups; and a local partnership between citizens groups, business and government. The identification of linkages was also a significant component of the basic work of the Initiative -- the formulation of "community indicators" based largely on a recognition that space is created and shared by a multiplicity of both social actors and of natural, ecological processes.

Community Indicators and International Precedents: Linking Child Poverty and Seattle's Salmon

The Sustainable Penang Initiative was not the world's first community indicators project and its organizers knew where to look for inspiration. As the Initiative's announcement flyer noted, the use of community indicators to promote sustainable development first achieved international prominence in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio Summit's recommendation of the process in its Agenda 21. The following year, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP) began to formulate ideas for indicator projects at regional and national levels and to co-ordinate these efforts with the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) in order to produce a list of universally acceptable indicators of sustainable development. Portions of the resulting list of 134 suggested indicators were distributed to participants in the Sustainable Penang Initiative's first roundtable as examples, and they were explained to the assembly by a UN-ESCAP official, whose agency had also given a small grant to the Penang Initiative. But the participants found much greater, and more concrete inspiration in the specifics of an earlier community indicators project that had actually been implemented -- Sustainable Seattle.

Although not the first project of its kind, Sustainable Seattle, which was initiated in 1991, had achieved international prominence as a model for community action toward sustainability, largely through the efforts of one of its founders Alan

AtKisson, who was now a project director and senior member of Redefining Progress, a San Francisco-based organization that works to promote such community indicators movements world wide.[20] AtKisson had been brought to Penang to speak in a public venue and he was one of the first international speakers at the launch of the Initiative. When Sustainable Seattle was initiated, he said in one of his presentations, Seattle was very much in a position which Penang is in today: it had been regarded for many years as one of the most livable cities in the United States, but rapid growth had led to such problems as overbuilding, traffic congestion and pollution, and many residents were becoming increasingly concerned about the long term effects of these developments. The gist of the project was to involve the community in new kinds of measurements that would reflect their concerns. Standard measures of economic growth, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), he said, were very good at measuring flows of money, but very bad in measuring well being. Asking the assembled participants how they had gotten to the meeting and ascertaining that virtually 100% had come by private vehicles, he noted that they were certainly contributing to the nation's GDP by their choice of transportation but not to sustainability. "If you really wanted to contribute to the Malaysian economy," he said, "you would have gotten into a really bad accident." The resultant expenditures on car repair or replacement, and perhaps even legal and medical services, would all have contributed to a higher GDP. The GDP may measure dollar flows but it does not measure costs, he said. "If you ran a business measuring only the intake of money and not costs you would not be in

business very long," he added. He proposed, instead, a "new indicator of progress for nations" -- the "Genuine Progress Index (GPI)" or "Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare" as he called it, which would use GDP data but subtract for such things as crime, environmental breakdown, and other social costs.[21] Sustainability is "an ideal toward which we strive" he said, based on the idea of having a balance between economic, social, and environmental spheres within certain physical limits. He admitted that "we can never exactly get there," but his experience in Seattle was that "we [can] understand sustainability by measuring it." Specifically, this meant understanding the links between phenomena and measuring whether certain trends are moving toward or further away from sustainability. The way to do this, he said, was to "get people together who don't usually talk to each other" -- such as business and environmental people -- to formulate "community indicators."

AtKisson described such indicators of sustainability as "systemic, holistic, realistic." They are about "the way systems work" and the ways in which "one thing affects another thing." Indicators of sustainability are "ubiquitous and natural," he said, but they "reflect a particular culture, a particular worldview, a particular set of values." Using them is a way to monitor change through time, similar to the way in which a mother diagnoses a sick child by regularly monitoring certain vital signs. An indicator is a "small window into a larger complicated system" and is inherently subjective because it is "always based on what you care about." As an example, AtKisson mentioned one of the most memorable indicators formulated by Sustainable

Seattle and it also immediately caught the imagination of the audience – the number of wild salmon in streams around Seattle. Had this number declined in recent years? Salmon was an important indicator because it was an economic resource for the region, fishing was a popular recreational activity that also attracted tourists, it was a sign of biological diversity, and it was important to the cultural heritage of Native Americans. Salmon was something that people in Seattle cared about and it would thus have a diagnostic significance more local than the GDP. Moreover, a dearth of wild salmon could also be linked to other social phenomena such as child poverty. As AtKisson explained in a handout distributed at the session:

> Poor children are more likely to enter lives of crime, creating unsafe streets, causing people to drive more often rather than walking or biking (or move to the suburbs), leading to increased non-point source pollution in local streams, killing salmon.

The assembled participants of the Penang Initiative immediately came up with a Penang equivalent: the swarms of black crows that were now a familiar sight in George Town and throughout the island. These large birds, who feed on edible waste in urban areas, had largely displaced most of the smaller, more colorful species that were still fondly remembered as thriving in the city, especially in the many large trees that had once lined most avenues but were now fast disappearing due to road widening. Their proliferation was an indicator of, among other things, poor waste management and a decrease in biodiversity. Quantifying the numbers of crows over time would lend weight to the problem and serve to promote the phenomenon as a

concern. This was the first "community indicator" to be formulated by the Initiative, and the enthusiasm with which the assembly took it up also expressed a not-so-veiled criticism of Penang's Municipal Councils, which had recently privatized solid waste collection with infamously inefficient results.

In the aftermath of this first meeting of the Initiative, an existing voluntary association immediately took up the challenge of providing the data. The local branch of the Bird Conservation Council of the Malaysian Nature Society promptly organized a series of crow counts manned by teams of experienced bird watchers and other volunteers who had had no previous experience with environmental activism. They found a total of approximately 10,000 crows in Penang, with the greatest concentrations along the most heavily urbanized east coast of Penang Island where the human population was also the most concentrated: the inner city, the new industrial area of Bayan Baru, and the areas of high-rise, low-income housing (SERI 1999a: 38-39). The formulation of this first community indicator, the links between domains that it expressed, and the successful collection of data for it through local initiative, was quickly taken up as an example of what Penang could do, and showcased by Dr. Toh Kin Woon, Penang State Minister for Education, Information and Economic Planning, at a talk he gave the following year at a conference organized by the Canadian NGO that had partially funded the Penang Initiative.[22] The Penang People's Report later noted that although there was no previous crow count that could be used to indicate a

trend over time, a serious problem had been graphically demonstrated that was affecting the lives of future generations:

> Unless waste is adequately managed, Penang will experience worsening environmental health problems. Our children are growing up in a dirty Penang. Some urban children have hardly ever seen any other birds besides crows (SERI 1999a:39).

This report also asked readers to do something by joining the crow count, initiating community waste monitoring projects and anti-litter campaigns at schools, making sure that all edible waste is properly disposed of, and urging the Municipal Councils of Penang to monitor spillage from disposal sites. A community indicator was thus not merely a way to measure a problem; it was also a spur to action. As Fazal had expressed it in his opening remarks, the ideal progression of the process was to take an example from an international source, reformulate it in a local context utilizing local resources, and send it back to an international community of activists as an additional example with broader relevance to an overall goal of global sustainability.

In articulating the concept of a "community indicator," AtKisson had stressed that the goals of sustainability are distinctly different from those of environmentalism. Environmentalism, he said, "is about creating boundaries, and saying no" -- as in "No, you can not cut this tree." Sustainability is about "what you can say yes to" -- what he called solutions, answers, and new possibilities. This approach was well suited to what various participants in a number of the Initiative's meetings felt was an inherent optimism shared by most Malaysians, who generally believe that the future will be

even better than the past, despite current problems. This optimism was also well suited to the interests of the two most powerful players in the shaping of contemporary Penang – the state and the business sector – both of whom had a vested interest in positive projections of the future of Penang's economic development. Foregrounding potentially positive outcomes over presently negative phenomena also contributed to the creation of an open atmosphere at the roundtables wherein the participants could freely criticize both state and business sectors without being seen as mere opponents of either. This stance was also remarkably similar to the one formulated by Mr. Lau and the Action Committee, who sought positive long-term solutions to current problems and ways to maintain a supportive environment for both people and business. In his own summation, Anwar Fazal stated that the very act of working toward inclusive community indicators, of "getting people to have a larger mindset" and to "be aware of how some little things aggregate into bigger problems" is already "a major paradigm shift – getting people to think holistically is itself of tremendous value." In the end, forty indicators, covering the five areas of concern, were formulated by the participants. These were presented as the People's Report Card in an order and with a terminology that themselves indicate a certain optimism: "Good News" was listed first, followed by "Mixed News," "Challenges (i.e. negative trends), and "Question Mark" (a trend not yet determined).

In listening to the presentation of a similar initiative in Seattle, the Penang participants had immediately come up with some local equivalents, however in the

question and answer session that followed this first session several participants raised some serious questions about the entire process. The first criticism concerned the extent and scale of the ecological system or territory to be monitored, and the second questioned the sincerity of the state in seeking an informed basis on which to act. Both concerned the identity of Penang as a place and the lessons that had already been learned from past experience. One man rose to ask how, given so many disparities between different interests in Penang which is itself one of the smallest states in Malaysia, could any indicator possibly cover both Penang as well as a larger territory? The inference here was that Penang was an entity unto itself, which was how many people preferred to think of it – as a special place, with its own identity and issues, that was somewhat separate from the rest of Malaysia and the central national government. Wouldn't it be easier, this man asked, to concentrate only on local issues? AtKisson relied that every boundary is an artificial and arbitrary distinction, but in Seattle they had decided that global indicators were too complex and thus chose to monitor only an area somewhat larger than the city itself. A U.N. official in the audience then affirmed that the national, and national level policy and political practice were equally as important as the local and that he thought there should be at least a few indicators that link Penang to both national and global issues because, as he said, things like the accident at Chernobyl (which was the product of a national policy) affect everyone. He stated that local "state of the environment" reports, like those prepared in some Japanese cities every year, are really "of global relevance" and that they help residents

to elect governments that represent the interests of the environment. These statements were expressing a criticism that AtKisson's presentation was perhaps too politically non-specific, and they underscored a theme that was returned to again and again throughout the meetings of the Penang Initiative – the problem of governance and the relationship between the nation, the state of Penang, and the power or constraints with which people had the ability to act as citizens and participate in the creation of a civil society. In a follow-up remark, the president of the Malaysian Nature society, got up and cautioned against using Japan or Korea as good examples in this regard, stating that they were not sustainable because they are using too many of the world's resources and made use of the environmental carrying capacity of other countries. He recommended striking a balance between local, national and regional outlooks in formulating indicators of sustainability.

A second objection from the floor focused on what was perceived to be the standard practice of the Penang State government to turn to outsiders, and especially foreign nationals, for advice on environmental matters and then stonewalling the result. The former government official who brought up this issue remarked that the "paralysis through analysis" caution was very apt in this regard "because our government has a tendency, whenever there is a problem, to get an international consultancy in to do a study." What was "frightening," he said, was not just the number of such studies, but that after they are completed "they are hidden away." "They are supposed to be accessible," he complained, but the government usually

"discourages the public from having access to them," and there is "often a problem in following up." He wanted to know if Sustainable Seattle had had any problems with the government and the political bureaucracy in obtaining and making use of data. AtKisson replied in the affirmative. "Indicator projects," he said, "like other kinds of assessment projects, can be politically sensitive. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, this is the case."

In further comments that can be interpreted as instances of local pride coming up against foreign expertise, several audience members remarked that the concept of sustainability was nothing new in Penang. The president of the Penang Organic Farm Centre, who had been distributing literature on organic farming and sustainable urban ecology at the meeting, asked if the community indicators movement was "inventing a new language for something that has been happening for a long time." He said that re-cycling was already going on in the region long before there was a word for it and that lifestyles in Penang were much more sustainable in the past than they are now. "Are we just dressing up something that has already been done?" he asked. Again, the government was seen as the stumbling block of any popular initiative. Referring to his own group's difficulties in obtaining suitable land for their co-operative farming project, he said "we can do all the work and then the big element will thwart it. . . . Their power is strong." A woman then rose to declare that she thought "the U.N. modus operandi is actually trying to reinvent the wheel" because the third world, she said, already has long experience with sustainable lifestyles: "My mother in law, for

instance, keeps every scrap of Glad Wrap I throw out right now," she said. "We don't need to teach people like that sustainable development," she insisted. "Let's look at what's [been] happening around here," she continued, "which is *genuine* sustainable lifestyles." Her assertion of authenticity here was again tied to a very strong sense of a local and regional identity that made Penang different from other places in the world. She admitted, however, that things were changing, and that she, and others in the room, perhaps exemplified the change:

> "If I might say so, a lot of us in this hall do not live sustainable lifestyles. [We should] look into ourselves and find the strength to say no to all this throwing and garbage and so on. I remember when I went to Wellesley [college in Massachusetts] the first impression I had was, 'what the heck, this cafeteria throws out half the food,' you know? I think if we really look into ourselves and look into how our parents used to live, there are a lot of indicators there you could learn from. And let's not make this GPI [Genuine Progress Index] a fad but a way of life, ok?"

These comments express a critical stance, not so much toward the idea of inviting advice from outside the community, as toward what might be called the empty novelty of the sloganism inherent in many of the proposals put forth by both state and international agencies as solutions to problems concurrent with rapid economic growth. Programs with catchy titles would be initiated with great fanfare, studies would be commissioned, and, very often the outcome of the process, if it was ever really implemented, would remain unknown. These initial reactions also underscored that, for the people assembled, the problem was not just the unaccountability of the state government, but who or what could inspire positive substantive change and the

difficulty, in the current forward looking economic "developmentalist" climate, of maintaining ties to what people considered responsible moral action in the past.

In another comment, a professor at Penang's university got up to remark that he did not think the people in the room represented all of Penang. Was the Initiative planning to involve "all strata of society?" he asked, because, if it did, "we would get a totally different set of indicators." He mentioned a conference at the university to which "we invited trishaw drivers – and we got a totally different perspective when we listened to them." Fazal replied that the issue of inclusion was an important one. "We need to break social barriers and language barriers and economic barriers," he said, but he also noted that many of the people currently in the room were invited precisely because they represent "networks that connect with lots of other organizations" – other civil associations and NGOs. Reflecting his apparent belief that the development of "people power" would be the most important outcome of the Initiative, over and above any popular input into the state planning process, his hope was that the roundtable process would grow into numerous other initiatives, and that each different group would brainstorm about ways to be more inclusive. He then outlined a series of possible new associations that could be formed to address specifically urban problems. "Where is the association of pedestrians?" he asked. "We don't have that yet. Maybe it will emerge and we could call it 'Feet First,' " he proposed. "And 'Pedal Power,' you know, for the cyclists," he offered, along with a "Bus Riders Association," and even a "Beggars' Association." These types of associations already existed in other

countries, he noted, and the meetings should explore the possibility of their implementation in Penang.

The logic behind each of these proposals – like the community indicators project and the rationale of the Penang Initiative itself -- was that urbanism itself now called for new forms of civic associations that would organize membership around a different principle of inclusion than most of the existing organizations in Penang. Older associations had formed to either serve the interests of a specific clan, guild, ethnicity, religion or dialect group, or to advocate for specific social issues such as mental health, disabilities, cancer, consumer protection or domestic violence. The "new" logic of these proposed associations was that interests and advocacy issues had now arisen that cut across previous social boundaries, ethnic categories, and concerns specific to certain cultural groups. This new organizing principle was the space of the city itself, which was now to be understood, not just as a greater metropolitan region, but as an ecological whole with multiple dimensions spanning different domains that was part of a larger national, regional, and even global territory.

Quality of Life and the Middle Class: Development for What?

Although the "international" speaker's presentation about Sustainable Seattle had not mentioned that there was anything class-specific about the process of formulating community indicators, there is a sense in which the organizers of the Sustainable Penang Initiative consciously understood the process as targeting both the

skills and the concerns of a segment of society that might be termed "middle-class."[23] Comparing Penang to Seattle, an overview of the Initiative explicitly stated that the concern for long-term sustainability usually arose only out of a prior condition of prosperity, something that Penang had already achieved:

> Previous projects to monitor indicators of sustainability have been typically carried out in cities where most of its citizens have reached a certain level of economic prosperity, and therefore have the luxury to think about long-term well being (SERI 1999a:7).

The space of the city itself – now considered diachronically as a greater metropolitan region that was itself part of a larger ecological whole – might be a "new organizing principle" – but within this space it was specifically prosperity that now allowed "most" citizens the "luxury" to think in broader terms, both spatially and temporally. The announcement for the Initiative had declared that "the people of Penang had worked hard for this prosperity" – it was not just the prerogative of an established elite – "but now it's time to pause for a moment and think seriously about where we are heading."

Concerns over qualities of the natural environment may have provided an initial impetus to organize the Initiative but, as organizers and speakers saw it, there were differences between environmentalism and sustainability and one of the stumbling blocks in distinguishing between them seemed to be the vantage point of prosperity itself. In his summation of the first roundtable session on specifically natural environmental issues, Dr. Leong Yueh Kwong, who held a PhD in botanical

ecology and was president of the Malaysian Nature Society and a member SERI's board, remarked that all the issues that participants had initially put up for discussion reflected middle-class concerns about "environmental quality." This was not the same, he said, as the more serious question of "ecological sustainability" that required people to think harder and more holistically. Giving an example, he said that no one had brought up the issue of food security, which is essential to sustainability, with everyone apparently assuming that "as long as we have money, we can buy food." However, considering a global trend towards unsustainability, he warned that there might not be any food imports to purchase in the future, and cautioned that Penang was already importing 60% of its water from the mainland. Leong also stated that if Malaysia were to reach its desired population of 70 million, Penang would proportionally have to cope with five million people. With its current population of 1.28 million, he said, Penang already required a geographical area 86 times larger than the currently available ecologically productive land in Penang to sustain its food needs. But, as later sessions of the Initiative would clarify, much more was at stake than food or water. Everyone's complete quality of life was implicated in trends toward unsustainability. The impact of development on quality of life was not just a middle class concern – everyone was implicated -- but a position of prosperity that might be called middle class could be the vantage point from which to do something about it.

In the overview of the Sustainable Penang Initiative, The People's Report that eventually came out of it noted that

> Penang. . . was selected by *Asiaweek* (December 11, 1998) as the sixth most liveable and attractive city in Asia. Yet it has also been plagued by hill collapse, floods, traffic jams, sacrificed heritage, social ills, and many other "side effect" and tensions of development (SERI 1999a:7).

A certain widespread level of prosperity is here seen as the root cause of many of Penang's current problems, but also as the ground for the possibility of doing something about them. Outlining the impetus for the creation of the Initiative, the People's Report stated that

> As in many rapidly developing centres, Penang's citizens became concerned because their relatively high quality of life was being threatened by rapid growth and development trends (SERI 1999a:7).

In short, prosperity had not only created certain problems, it also created the idea that there was something to protect and a certain vantage point from which to act. Within this vantage point people were looking into both the past and the future but what was being valorized was not so much the maintenance or achievement of a so called "middle-class" status or lifestyle as a more broadly encompassing regional (and urban) identity deeply tied to Penang as a particular place and what it was that made it different from other places. Dr. Leong underscored the comparative temporal and territorial dimensions of this sentiment when he underscored that Penang was still in a position to avoid the "get rich first, and clean up later" approach to economic growth that he said had been adopted by other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and

Taiwan. How a region or a nation was managing its environment now figured into how people who lived in a particular place saw themselves and others. In organizing a forum for discussion of these dimensions Initiative organizers were drawing on both a number of international movements and the potential power of a position of local prosperity. At the same time they recognized that Malaysian and Penang state government officials, while expressing a need to guide development holistically in ways that would address what could be called middle class concerns, had not always been able to realize this goal in practice. The Intitiative thus set up no clear battle line between the people and the state, and, like the cracked houses Action Committee, the overall goal was to work with the state and national policy and not against them.

Since the 1980s, concern for the environment had emerged as a critical focal point in assessing the costs of economic growth throughout the developing world, and the governments of Malaysia and Penang had not been blind to this movement. Growing international debate over the issue culminated in the widely publicized 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which was attended by Malaysia's prime minister and which resulted in Agenda 21, a blueprint for "global partnership" agreed to by 179 nation states. Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration states that "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." The 700-page Agenda 21 affirmed that sustainable development is primarily the responsibility of individual governments, who must adopt national policies, plans and strategies. The Rio Declaration and

Agenda 21 were cited in the announcement of the Sustainable Penang Initiative as its international precedents, along with the Habitat Agenda formulated at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul in 1996. This latter conference addressed housing and the deteriorating quality of life in human settlements in an urbanizing world; it affirmed that adequate shelter for all could be attained through partnerships between local authorities, the private sector, NGOs, and national parliaments.

Meanwhile, certain Penang state officials were considering the environmental and social implications of development as well as the rise of a middle class and were beginning to formulate their own version of Agenda 21. In a 1995 paper entitled "Development for What?"[24] Dr. Toh Kin Woon, Penang State Executive Councilor for Education, Information and Economic Planning, affirmed the importance of distinguishing between quantitative economic growth and qualitative development. Malaysia's economic growth, as measured by a rising Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and positive increases in per capita income, certainly meant that Malaysians' standards of living had increased, but he questioned whether this also meant an increase in the quality of life, given that "we have to face massive traffic jams almost daily, floods that occur frequently, insufficient water supply to some areas, [and the] piling up of heaps of garbage" (Toh 1995:23). During the 1970s, he argued, economic development had been defined in terms of the reduction of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Great strides had been made in these areas: "Absolute poverty has certainly been reduced, unemployment is almost non-existent, and inequality has

improved" (Toh 1995:23). But the environmental issues mentioned above, along with "global warming. . . . more polluted rivers and seas, more foul air and more death as a result of industrial and road accidents" indicate that "now, perhaps, we ought to. . . include an improvement in the quality of the environment into our definition of economic development" (Toh 1995:23-24). This move would mean less stress on a "growth only" or a "growth at any cost" strategy (such as Chandhoke (1998) had identified as characteristic of the "developmentalist state") and more emphasis on human development to be defined more broadly. Toh's portfolio of duties as a state councilor included both economic planning and education, and this is what he though about development and growth in human terms:

> Development should be to improve human welfare and bring it to ever higher levels over time. The welfare of Malaysians, in my view, is not just dependent on the level of income only, although such a level of income is an important determinant of well being. There are other determinants, such as availability of cheap and convenient public transportation and housing, lots of beautiful parks, scenic mountains and clean beaches for people to exercise and relax; no hassle of traffic jams; availability of cheap and convenient public transportation and housing; lots of libraries that are well-stocked with books and plenty of theatres for musical and theatrical performances. In short, rising incomes along with abundant facilities for relaxation of the body and enrichment of the mind and [the] cultural milieu all go a long way towards increasing the social welfare of Malaysians (Toh 1995:24).

Although Dr. Toh did not mention these issues as explicitly middle class concerns, the specific characteristics of Malaysia's new middle class, along with its stances toward governance, the environment, and issues of quality of life, were avidly discussed the following year (1996) in what can be considered a precursor of the Sustainable Penang

Initiative: "Agenda 21: Building a Fully -Developed Penang." Billed as the first of a series of economic seminars sponsored by Toh's Committee for Education, Economic Planning and Information, this was a conference of academic presentations convened by the Penang state government and attended by businessmen and state officials in order to "gain insight into the Penang populace's perceptions as to how their society should be fashioned in the next century" (Tan 1996: forward). The consensus reached by the papers and the discussions that ensued was that conventional economic indicators are not adequate measures of the well being of a society:

> While the benefits of double-digit growth are recognized and appreciated, the social trade-offs incurred are beginning to weigh heavily on the minds of the Penang people. Infrastructural bottlenecks, deteriorating environmental quality and social shortfalls are primary concerns that should rate high on the development agenda (Tan 1996: forward).

There was a plea to strike "a balance between a healthy economy and a wholesome society, the guarantee of an acceptable quality of life for all" and to work toward what was, in short, "a model of development tempered with a conscience" (Tan 1996: forward).

Throughout the proceedings of this seminar, participants compared Penang to other places. In one of the discussions, Toh noted that statistics for the United States and to some extent the United Kingdom "all suggest that performances of these economies are improving but still the middle class is unhappy." In the West, he said, the reason was job insecurity. In large cities like Tokyo and Seoul the issue is housing: "People are forced by the rising land cost and housing cost to move to the

outskirts and that has caused some social dislocation and unhappiness and because of these factors, ruling parties are in for a lot of trouble, despite the improved statistics." He wondered whether, in Malaysia, "we have a similar phenomenon happening, whether there is any particular issue that is bugging them, that makes them feel very unhappy, so much so that they might revolt against the government someday" (quoted in Tan 1996:62). He wanted to know why there seemed to be such a difference in political consciousness between the Malaysian middle-class "and the middle-class in Thailand where if, say tomorrow there should be a military coup, the middle class will be able to spearhead a massive demonstration against the imposition of authoritarian rule. . . . I don't know if the same kind of thing will happen in Malaysia." (quoted in Tan 1996:62). The issue, for him, was not the prevention of insurrection but how to foster a politically engaged civil society.

At that point, political scientist and social activist, Dr. Johan Saravanamuttu, who had presented to the seminar (as he would to the Sustainable Penang Initiative) some of the results of a survey on civil society involving several thousand respondents in northern Malaysia (including Penang), responded that the Malaysian middle-class fell somewhere in the middle between two trends that had been hypothesized as possible stances to be taken by the emerging middle classes of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). One thesis holds that the largely consumerist and materialist orientation of a middle class, with its predisposition to pursue the good life, would result in a docile political culture that would allow for the continuation of

authoritarian political regimes; the other posits that there are significant elements within the middle classes who are predisposed toward social and political action in the interests of social justice. Saravanamuttu explained that, in Penang, the middle-class supports a very large number of NGOs and that, according the index formulated for his survey, there is a very high level of civic consciousness about issues but little propensity to act:

> We don't have the kind of middle class like the middle class in Thailand and Taiwan which has a strong political agenda. Our middle class is more concerned with issues like the quality of life, the environment, the safety of their children, etc. In some senses, the middle class is very much in line with the kind of society Malaysia is becoming. We are not totally passive in that sense but the agenda of our middle class does not have a high political content. Instead it revolves around concerns that impinge on their daily life (quoted in Tan 1996: 63).

Saravanamuttu could only speculate on why this was so:

> Perhaps the current social system is too constraining for them to act. The present governmental structure, the present political context, is not one which allows for more civil action. I think it tends to contain civil action, so because of that people are even less inclined to act even though they may be conscious (quoted in Tan 1996:61).

He went on to predict, however, that one of the major issues on which people will increasingly begin to take civil action will be questions of the environment:

> I think that these are the kinds of issues that will begin to grab people's interest and grab people's attention because in a sense they are the very issues that affect their everyday life and it is a matter of self-interest, therefore you act in your own interest. But at the same time, by acting that way you are also getting more active politically and socially. I predict that this scenario might occur and there is a chance that we might move from a spectator political culture to a more pro-active political culture (quoted in Tan 1996: 61).

This is precisely what occurred when, in that same year (1996) houses began to crack around the Prangin Mall construction site, the residents' Action Committee was formed, and its members would move from self-interest to social consciousness and from passivity to action, despite a culture or structure of governance that did not encourage civil action.

Participants at this government seminar also identified a state-level pattern of brushing aside and ignoring, not just local knowledge and the popular expression of concerns about quality of life, but also information the state itself had commissioned or produced. Dr. Leong, who was also present at this meeting, noted that a large amount of information, including environmental information and land use studies, had already been collected by the state over the past two years but was sitting unused in Penang's new computerized geographic information system (PEGIS). "What Penang needs is not more studies," he said, but the integration of available information into decision-making so that environmental concerns can be incorporated into development planning" (quoted in Tan 1996:73). The chairman of the seminar, Datuk Chet Singh, expressed a similar sentiment when he said that "many things [that were] discussed ten, twelve, fifteen years ago [are] still lying in the files -- all somebody has to do is open the files and see what has to be done and let's do it, because the same middle class will one day ask: 'What have you done?'" (quoted in Tan 1996:84). He noted that the government was good at working with the business sector on infrastructure and development projects but there were other things that needed to be constructed:

> We must now build bridges and roads between the civil society and the government. We are very lucky that we've got a middle class that is very tolerant. . . . So as we go into the 21st century, I think the government should become more aware of the needs of the middle class, bearing in mind that they have the voting power. Perhaps our middle class is still a bit immature, but I think the learning curve is very steep. Give them another two/three years and they will begin to demand for better quality of life. How do we measure it? What price do we pay for it? I think the planners and the government have to decide (quoted in Tan 1996:84)

In less time than that the state sponsored Penang Initiative was underway, but its independent-minded activist participants were not leaving measurement and cost assessments to the planners and the government. Like the Action Committee, they were doing something on their own. Its chairman, Anwar Fazal, hoped that "a hundred, a thousand initiative" would come out of the process, with or without further state support. Though, again like the case of the Action Committee, not every grandly stated ambition was realized, "vision statements" were produced and the results of data gathered by teams of volunteers pertaining to forty different "community indicators" in five different domains (ecological sustainability, social justice, economic productivity, cultural vibrancy, and popular participation) were presented to Penang's chief minister, as planned, in the form of a "Penang People's Report" in 1999 (SERI 1999a). These indicators had monitored certain development trends and categorized them variously as "Good News" (5 indicators), "Mixed News (12), "Challenges" or negative trends (19), and "Question Mark" (4).[25]

During the course of the Penang Initiative, three new "emergent activity groups" did, in fact, emerge, and these were highlighted in the report. Participants

who where physically challenged, including the wheelchair-mobile, sight-, hearing-, and speech-impaired, who were well represented at most of the roundtables, formed what they called Sustainable Independent Living & Access with the acronym SILA ("*sila*" is Malay for "please"), a coalition of pre-existing groups that encouraged teamwork across disabilities to improve disabled access to a number of public areas they identified as priority locations throughout the city. Sustainable Transport Environment Penang (STEP) was formed in response to the worsening traffic and transport situation in Penang and worked to promote, walking, cycling, and investment in clean, efficient and affordable public transport instead of the building or widening of more roads for private motor vehicles.[26] And Water Watch Penang (WWP) was set up "to promote the awareness and practice of water monitoring, conservation and protection of water resources, towards the ultimate goal of a water-saving society" (Penang People's Report 1999: 115). The report also listed as resources for further action a directory of 47 NGOs or civil society organizations (all but seven of them based in Penang) and 29 state government departments and statutory bodies. It was hoped that the information about the phenomena measured and the reports of action groups forming would not languish on a shelf but would "create public awareness;" be an "educational tool" for teachers, decision-makers, and community organizations; serve as a "reference to help journalists keep tabs on the important issues;" and generally "provide a focal point for discussions about sustainable development and raise these issues to a higher level of public debate" (Penang People's Report

1999:8).[27] The hope that presentation of the People's Report would be an annual event, however, was not realized, and no new report was produced (as of 2002), which perhaps indicates that the bureaucratic practice of shelving information, or the eventual dissipation of energies stirred by the announcement of new initiatives, is not so easily overcome.

At the government seminar that was a precursor to the Initiative, Singh had summed up that event's proceedings by noting that the "softer side of development" was more important than a decade of double digit growth "because double digit means nothing" (quoted in Tan 1996:83). Declaring that "Penang has progressed very well over the last two-three decades," he also observed that

> The best way for it to proceed into the 21st century is to learn from our past mistakes, learn from what other people are doing, and incorporate that into an action programme. . . . economic planning must be conducted with full consideration for, not only environmental concerns, but all other social aspects which are termed very naughtily by economists as externalities because they can only concentrate on empirical issues. So I hope we can combine the two and we will no longer have externalities but have an integrated approach for the future of Penang (quoted in Tan 1996:84).

Whether or not the Sustainable Penang Initiative at least partially contributed to this goal (and to the discovery of Rumi's infinitely extendable, but at the same time internal "tree of life") remains to be seen but it is an example of what I am calling the "moral ecology" at work in the on-going production of urban space and the creation of a civil society within the context of a postcolonial state.

The sentiments that Singh and Fazal and other speakers at the Initiative had expressed regarding the ways in which measurement can inform action were not new ones on the international development scene but they were customized here for a local context. Economists such as Amartya Sen, in "Development as Freedom" (Sen 1999) and other works had already re-thought the validity of such classical macro-economic concepts as income per capita and gross domestic product as expressions of genuine human prosperity or progress. As Toh had pointed out in both the earlier seminar he had convened and as a speaker at the Penang Initiative, one of the key points was to distinguish between the concepts of growth and development. In a paper by Kinsley and Lovins that was distributed to roundtable participants this distinction is neatly summarized: growth is increase in size, while development is an increase in quality and diversity. Development increases the value of both public and private investments, while growth tends to require increases in these investments that may or may not increase in value (Kinsley and Lovins 1996:1). As both government officials and community activists well realized, tensions between the two were regularly being played out in Penang's urban fabric – in the mania to build and grow in which material achievements such as the length of bridges and the heights of buildings were duly noted in record books, and in the moral check to be found in the realization that there were other values to be found in both the past and the present that could profitably be extended into the future.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed a local place-based initiative or place-based form of social action whose membership was very different from that discussed in the previous chapter but whose ultimate goals were remarkably similar – the creation of a better way and a better place to live than what would appear to be the outcome if certain recent trends remained unchecked. Operating out of the conviction that the space of human habitation is truly shared among a diverse range of actors, cultural traditions, natural forces, and economic, political, and spiritual and social realities, practices and ideals, they sought to assure that spaces would remain within the future trajectory of development, and specifically urban development, for values that were human and not exclusively economic. Within this "moral ecology of the city" as I call it, their key concerns included such efforts as establishing a framework for responsible moral action regarding the on-going social and material production of urban space, the creation of an informed and politically engaged civil society, and the extension in space and projection forward into time of certain positive moral content that they considered intimately tied to a sense of their own particular place but which they perceived as more broadly relevant to other people elsewhere. The state was not opposed to them in these efforts nor were they completely opposed to the state. Rather, the idea was to reform certain aspects of the mechanism of governance and to perhaps concretize and realize in practice the state's intent to nurture harmony and co-

operation among different groups and a "caring society" along with economic growth and development.

Urban space was not just the focus or arena of these groups' concerns. It provided a kind of unifying umbrella suitable for organizing people according to a different criterion than had been prevalent in the past, when most civic social action was group specific (ethnically, linguistically, religiously, etc.) in both origin and object. There seems to have long been a "Penang identity" that cross cut other more "primordial" identities among an originally immigrant population, and this identity, while not of a "melting pot" variety, was likely always tied to a sense that Penang was culturally multiple place. But now a new realization and emphasis that urban space is truly shared and is a space marked by diversity and difference was beginning to have new political implications. The idea that "whoever lives around you is important and is part of your environment," as Mr. Lau had put it, was providing a way to reconcile both individual and group self interest with a wider public good, overthrow certain ethnic categories that had kept people apart politically since the colonial era, and was itself becoming the basis for an informed, politically engaged, and morally responsible form of place-based civil and social action.

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[1] In 1998-99 the state government of Penang commissioned SERI to produce a socio-economic study of the Indian community in Penang. Since 1999 it has been charged with providing the state government with a monthly "Economic Briefing," and a quarterly report of "Penang Statistics." Upon the advent of the Asian economic crisis in 1997, it also produced for the state a fortnightly "Asian Economic Crisis News" from January through June 1999, which was superseded by the "Asian Economic

Recovery News" from July through December 1999. This continuing fortnightly report to the state is now known as "Asian Economic Outlook."

[2] The first "Penang Strategic Development Plan," covering the years 1991 to 2000 "and beyond," was published in 1992 as "Penang into the 21st Century: A Strategic Plan to Build a Fully-Developed, Post-Industrial Society" in the aftermath of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed's promulgation of "Vision 2020" in 1991 (Mahathir 1991).

[3] Reflecting a national trend toward the privatization of government services and agencies, SERI was established as an independent, non-profit research organization funded by the state government, grants from international agencies, and consultancy fees.

[4] Packets of readings were also distributed to all participants. These included papers and articles on foreign, international, national, and local-level topics relevant to each theme.

[5] *Boria* and *bangsawan* are popular forms of musical performance and theater and are now only rarely performed.

[6] *Chap goh meh* is a celebration on one of the days of Chinese New Year in which single young women would throw oranges into the sea to be retrieved by potential suitors. A modified version of this event is now sponsored annually by Penang state.

[7] Padang Kota is the municipal parade ground adjoining the British colonial town hall and Fort Cornwallis that is now used as a park and for public events. Gurney Drive is the seaside avenue, formally the site of many elegant mansions, that now has a pedestrian promenade and many venues for hawker stalls and outdoor dining. Penang Hill is the highest point in Penang and a popular recreational location, reachable by funicular railway.

[8] *Rojak* is a spicy salad of mixed fruits.

[9] *Nasi lemak* (literally "rich rice") is rice cooked with coconut milk and is a popular Malay breakfast food.

[10] Due in large part to the lobbying efforts of Penang Heritage Trust (PHT), a portion of the old inner city of George Town was being nominated for designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. PHT also successfully worked to have the old inner city of George Town listed as one of the world's "100 most endangered sites" by the World Monuments Watch (Amery and Curran 2001:100-101).

[11] Chinese associations and both Muslim and Hindu endowment boards owned or controlled many rent-controlled properties throughout Penang.

[12] Plot ratio refers to the proportion of built-up space allowable on a particular plot of land.

[13] *Nasi kandar* is South Indian Muslim cuisine, primarily curries, popular among all ethnic groups in Penang. "*Nasi*" is the Malay word for rice. "*Kandar*" refers to the

pole slung across the shoulders with which itinerant hawkers once carried their products door to door.

[14] Khoo is referring here to *teh tarik* (literally "pulled tea") a Penang favorite that, as explained later on in this chapter, is thought to be best when prepared by professional Indian-Muslim hawkers who mix very hot tea with condensed milk and pour the mixture back and forth between a small pitcher and a glass, often from an arm's-length distance and with great bravado, producing a froth similar to that of cappuccino.

[15] The Metropole Hotel was clandestinely and illegally demolished on a recent Christmas Day by the developer of a large office complex planned for the site. The developer was given a relatively small fine and ordered to rebuild the building or at least the façade, which by then was nearly impossible.

[16] The first meeting of the Initiative was held at the Bukit Jambul Country Club, an elite, members-only recreation and golf facility. Subsequent meetings were moved to the Caring Society Center, a new complex built under the sponsorship of the Penang State Government to provide office and meeting spaces for Penang's numerous non-governmental organizations.

[17] Publications such as these account for a widespread awareness, for example, that Penang's KOMTAR tower was once the tallest building in Asia, that Kuala Lumpur now boasts the tallest building in the world, and that the Penang Bridge is the world's third longest suspension bridge. On a lighter note, Penang's minister for culture and tourism had recently promoted the world's "longest buffet," jointly hosted by a number of beach resorts.

[18] The "Asian Economic Crisis" of 1997, among other affects, diminished Malaysia's growth rate, devalued the ringgit by 40%, and reduced by even higher percentages the value of many individuals' investment accounts.

[19] "The Sustainable Penang Initiative, Penang People's Report 1999" summarizes the Initiative as follows:

> Thinking globally and acting locally, the Sustainable Penang Initiative hopes to promote a statewide movement for holistic development and sustainability. A movement comprising progressive partnerships between citizen's groups, business and government. Starting with educational outreach and small local initiatives on issues of ecology, equity and economy. Building on our cultural strengths through popular participation (SERI 1999a:7).

[20] AtKisson was also a core member of the Balaton Group, an internationally well-known environmental and ecological think-tank.

[21] Giving what he called a controversial example, AtKisson said that the GPI of the United States, which had previously been rising, started going down in 1972 because of costs such as increasing crime and a greater gap between the rich and the poor.

[22] YB Dato' Dr. Toh Kin Woon, "Counting Crows – How a Community in Malaysia is Monitoring Development," a talk given at the conference "A Voice for All: Engaging

Canadians for Change," organized by the Institute on Governance, October 27-28, 1998, Quebec, Canada.

[23] An attempt was made to include more working-class perspectives by scheduling, as part of the Popular Participation roundtable, presentations by a representative from the Penang Inshore Fisherman's Welfare Association, a largely Malay group struggling to maintain the viability of traditional fishing techniques, and by an activist working with Indian estate workers in another part of Malaysia who had lost their jobs and were evicted when the plantation on which they had lived and worked for decades was sold for a development project.

[24] This paper was published in the first Annual Report of the Gerakan Club, a club for Malaysian students studying in London, England, founded by the son of a senior member of Gerakan, the current ruling party of Penang state.

[25] The 40 indicators also broke down to 14 indicators of environment (Ecological Sustainability Roundtable); 12 on community (Social Justice Roundtable); 6 on economy (Economic Productivity Roundtable); 4 on culture (Cultural Vibrancy Roundtable) and 4 on participation (Popular Participation Roundtable).

[26] STEP's first public meeting, held on August 23, 1998 on the theme "Sustainable Transport Options for Penang," was attended by approximately 80 people, including several municipal councilors and the state cabinet member responsible for transportation, who, however, was present only for the opening ceremony. STEP's other projects included a design for an ideal bus stop; a "Cycling Action Plan for George Town and Bayan Baru" which was submitted to the municipal council; a "Cycling Day"; and a photo survey illustrating the inadequacies of the KOMTAR bus station. The group also issued press statements about public transport issues and published a series of promotional flyers entitled "Feet First," "Pedal Power," and "Bus is Better" that outlined the environmental and social benefits of walking, cycling, and public transportation and the rights and needs of pedestrians, cyclists and bus riders.

[27] The report also listed 25 national and international conferences or publications at which the Sustainable Penang Initiative was represented or asked to contribute.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In presenting an ethnographic account of the ways in which people in a particular place find, understand, create, use and imagine the material and social environment in which they live, this study has considered the social production of space in both its epistemological and material dimensions. Social, religious and cultural meanings, together with the concrete materials and structures in and through with which they are physically expressed in the built environment, were seen as linked aspects of an on-going process whereby human action transforms the natural world and creates the spaces and places of everyday life. As residents and users of these spaces and places themselves see it, the built environment and the spaces it creates has, or rightly should have, a certain moral human content that contributes to the maintenance and reformulation of a whole range of long standing and deeply held values and identities. I have shown that there is also a temporal dimension to the spatial meanings that are produced along with the production of space itself. Meanings that were deemed significant in the past and that continued to inform the present were now seen by residents as subject to new socioeconomic constraints that might compromise residents' ability to reformulate or project them into the future. Most of the people I spoke with and knew in Penang had little doubt that specific ethnic and religious identities and values would continue to be expressed in one way

or another in the future. The question was whether the built environment of the city in which they lived would continue to be a significant medium for the relatively autonomous expression of identities and activities that were not just rooted in specific ethnicities. The city's past had witnessed a plethora of individual, group-specific and small-scale expressions whose material architectural traces continued to make up much of the city's built-up fabric. But people creating spaces for themselves and in their own terms did not appear to be the way of the future. Centralized state and national planning decisions were being made behind closed doors, and the outcome of these decisions was affecting everyone's quality of life. Many urban residents expressed uncertainty that a valued tradition of small-scale entrepreneurship, for example, an activity long engaged in by a range of diverse ethnic groups historically resident in Penang, would not be able to continue or to be relevant to the economic development and corporate interests that were transforming urban space and how many people now made a living.

Urbanism in Penang had recently expanded well beyond the city of George Town's original grid and was increasingly marked by high-rise mega-projects and spatial transformations that expressed the business interests of large corporations. National development policy also emphasized universal home ownership and individual household participation in what amounted to an ultimately speculative housing market in which high-rise units were the only type of housing that many could afford. The overproduction of such units meant that investment values were often

unstable and such projects had drastically transformed the spaces and places of a greater metropolitan region and had produced a series of negative environmental effects. What people felt was at stake in this new built environment was not so much the specific ethnic identity of any one group but everyone's quality of life, the moral perspectives being inculcated in succeeding generations, and the distinction and identity of Penang as a place widely known throughout the region for its culturally multiple expressions, practices and urban spaces. The problem was not that most new building projects were ethnically unmarked structurally – any place/space could be customized to express or at least partially embody its current inhabitants' identities – but that what was now perceived to be emphasized in such large residential developments were things other than the long standing cultural and social ideas and expressions that Penang's architecture had long embodied. Large, new, corporate and state sponsored residential development projects were perceived by many to emphasize exchange values over use values, profits over people, and the expression of identities that increasingly referred to a household's economic status or income level in ways that were beginning to be articulated more exclusively in terms of class.

At the time of my research, designations like "middle" or "working" class were largely confined to academic and professional research domains and were not widely used in popular parlance. Many of those who had remained in the inner city and whose familiar ways of life in single-unit houses were protected by rent control had managed to attain only tentative participation in Malaysia's recent economic boom. It

was often only the low cost of their housing situation that allowed these households to participate in a new level of material consumption that might be called "middle class" by outside commentators. In popular understandings, this pattern of consumption was seen, not in terms of class-consciousness, but as morally double-edged. On the one hand, it represented one of the everyday benefits of Malaysia's current "economic miracle," in which almost everyone shared in a higher standard of living in an era in which hard-core poverty had very nearly been eliminated. But on the other hand, it was also widely perceived to have led to environmental degradation, increased opportunities for the expression of individual or corporate irresponsibility if not greed, and worries that materialism might be overtaking other values, especially among a new generation of youth who seemed to be particularly enamored of brand-name products and the consumer experience of shopping malls. All of these consequences of a new economic prosperity were being expressed and embodied in transformations of urban space and especially in the built residential environment. I have shown how, in evaluating this environment, which included both old and new housing types, residents considered not just standards of living measured by income levels but also the impact that massive urban development projects had had on certain valued qualities of life. Without being nostalgic, many people expressed an understanding that there was a darker side to economic development that might be driving everyone's quality of life in the wrong direction.

This study has presented various ways in which people in Penang understand the social and material fabrics of their city to be deeply linked. Among those who preferred and were able to remain as residents in the inner city despite the spatial transformation of its greater metropolitan region, there was a sense that processes productive of urban, and especially urban residential space, were slipping out of the hands of individual, individual household, or community-group control in ways that encouraged the evasion of moral responsibility. Whereas the city may have previously been an arena for the articulation of ethnic and religious specificities and the moralities that these entailed -- with each group largely taking care of only their own -- many residents of Penang realized that a new way of thinking about the commonality of urban space and social responsibility was now required that would be productive of a pan-ethnic sense of civic responsibility of each to all. In addition to presenting an ethnographic account of certain everyday urban residential spaces, this study has also discussed various steps taken by concerned residents toward the creation of a more actively engaged civil society that would span and incorporate more than individual or group-specific interests. I have discussed the perceptual grounds for the possibility of this form of social action through a discussion of how people understand and appreciate, imagine and use, the structures and places they had historically established and continue to use and create – in short, their imagination of space. Within this imagination there is much room for consciousness of, and respect for difference at a range of social, cultural, linguistic, educational, and territorial levels. For those who

chose to become politically engaged by organizing to preserve, maintain or enhance what they perceived as everyone's interest in the production of space and the quality of life this production entails, the idea that urban space was truly shared and was a space of diversity and difference became a kind of unifying umbrella or organizing principle on which to base social action. Identity could be used as a tool to accomplish certain sociopolitical goals and in these cases a pan-ethnic "Penang" identity, tied to what people of all ethnicities expressed as a deep attachment to Penang as a place, was called into service. In the view of these activists, the city had always been marked by diversity and multiple differences. These concerned citizens, as well as many less politically engaged residents, believed that these dimensions should continue to have roles in the on-going production of Penang's urban space.

The issues of housing, house design and structure, and the production of specifically residential space was chosen for emphasis for a variety of reasons. Housing units and the larger residential spaces in which they are located are implicated in many of the events that constitute everyday life, including processes of socialization and identity formation. In Penang the issue of housing was additionally a major focus of much local concern about the future of the city. The city of George Town, like many urban centers in Asia, always was and largely still remains, primarily a city of individual houses, many of them single-unit terrace or shop houses built in an era when living and work were often in the same location, or at least usually very near to each other. This is not to say that every city resident was an independent

entrepreneur living above a family-run business or shop, but that, throughout the history of the city, housing had always been a presence in the urban fabric at least as prominent as the activities of commerce. During the colonial period, the staffs of most schools, workshops, warehouses, government departments and other large enterprises could expect to be provided with accommodations at or near their place of work – a tradition which continued well into the era of national independence and the contemporary period, in which electronic components assemblers are housed in new dormitory blocks and construction workers are provided with cargo containers to fashion into job-site homes. House design, type and location could thus be indicators of identities in ways that were not always just ethnically specific but that included how or where one worked and what one did for a living. This social articulation of housing types according to the people who lived in them, provided one of the bases, I believe, for much local concern about issues of housing. Houses and residential architectural designs, new development or preservation projects, and other housing issues were avidly discussed in many venues, both formal and informal, by tenants and home owners, by the government and the press, and by just about everyone, throughout my stay in Penang.

As discussed in Chapter 1, what initially attracted me to George Town as a site for research into the production of space was the expression of specifically ethnic identities in most, if not all of the city's houses built prior to World War II. Under a system of indirect British colonial rule and rather minimal building and planning

restrictions, people for the most part built what and how they chose. With the inhabitants and spaces of the city characterized by cultural multiplicity since the founding of the island's first permanent urban settlement, it seemed important to many people to remind themselves and others of who they were, where they had come from, or how they identified themselves. Though not every structure was directly built by those who would inhabit it, most buildings in Penang were ethnically and often religiously marked in ways that were clearly and publicly recognizable to everyone. With only a few exceptions, it was only in the post-war period that new buildings in Penang began to be constructed in modern architectural styles that were ethnically unmarked or "neutral" in their basic structure or permanent design features. With this latter type quickly becoming the norm for most new construction in Penang, including the recent proliferation of housing units in high-rise projects located some distance from the city center, I wanted to examine the relationship between identities and housing types or house-design features. I considered each of these to be mutual co-productive processes and I wanted to find out in what ways, if any, both ethnic identities and the structures people had created to express who they were continued to contribute to the on-going social production of space in Penang and to perceptions of its built environment, both old and new, at a range of territorial levels.

Among other findings, what I discovered was that houses and the greater metropolitan area in which they were located were both perceived as arenas of diversity and that both were implicated in the creation and maintenance of a regional

identity. Penang and its people had a regional urban identity that was not confined to ethnic specificity but incorporated awareness and recognition of multiple levels of differences between people within a shared common space. This Penang identity and a widely shared sense of attachment to Penang as a place to live were pan-ethnic and were often articulated in ways that were appreciative of diversity, difference, and autonomy -- or in ways that placed a positive moral value on being "multicultural." Given the future-looking emphasis in much publicly mediated discourse in Malaysia and in popularly disseminated articulations of both state and national level development policy, residents of houses in the inner city that were marked as both ethnic and "old" expressed varying degrees of appreciation of each of these characterizations of their housing situation. For most residents of all ethnicities, "new" was not necessarily better, but the fact that their houses and/or neighborhoods embodied or publicly expressed their own ethnic identities within a larger space of diversity was more important to Malays and Indians (both local minorities in Penang) than to Chinese (locally the majority but nationally a minority population) for whom the public prevalence of things that mirrored or reinforced their own Chinese identity in many venues throughout the city was something of an assumed standard.

As background to the current articulation of ethnic identity in Malaysia, Chapter 1 discusses how most works of social science on the topic, by both Malaysians and outsiders, emphasize political over cultural issues and specifically the politics of ethnicity in which memberships in three of the four political parties in the

ruling national coalition are defined by ethnicity. Whether one is "Malay," "Chinese" or "Indian" very much matters politically, and people seem to have largely accepted these categories as self identifiers even while realizing that they mask a greater degree of sub-group ethnic specificity that is still marked by such things as language, cuisine, and rituals of lifecycle transition. Borrowing Malaysian anthropologist and political scientist Shamsul A.B.'s use of the term "epistemological space" to articulate how these broad ethnic categories, formalized under colonialism, continue to color political and social consciousness in Malaysia, I have endeavored to show how this epistemological space plays out in the materially real and cultural spaces of everyday life and specifically in the production, use, and meaning of houses, ideas about housing, and urban residential space. Shamsul and other Malaysian commentators have identified what they consider a popular desire to transcend the divisiveness of ethnic typologies that still inflect so much thought and political action in Malaysia and that often seem to deflect attention away from a more common good. I show how a sense of the city as a space or place that is truly shared as a site for the expression of multiple differences has become the organizational focus for new forms of social action and for activists who seek to transcend the divisiveness of these social categories inherited from the era of colonialism. In broadening the ethnographic treatment of the spaces of everyday life beyond particular houses, housing types and ethnic identities to include the imagination of larger spaces, I discuss how place attachment, urban autochthony, and demographic consciousness of difference all

figure into both everyday life, and into certain activist organizational efforts explicitly concerned with recent transformations of urban space and the effects of development upon quality of life. These activists were attempting to come to terms with the co-existence of multiple identities, cultures, and differences between people within a larger interconnected social and material fabric identified as the city itself and its greater metropolitan region. In asserting a view that urban space is something that is truly shared and should properly be the object of everyone's concern, they sought to overcome the divisiveness of a political culture in which so much is still articulated in more or less exclusively ethnic terms.

Chapter 2 describes an area of George Town in which most residents self identified as Malay (locally a minority but nationally a protected majority), and it discusses some of the spatial implications of the originally self-built, Malay village or kampung-style houses there. Residents here appreciated that their houses expressed or embodied their Malay identity and they considered their style and structure to be Malay despite extensive renovations and additions utilizing materials or design elements not historically associated with "the Malay house." These residents considered that, despite such material changes, their houses still conformed to the ideology of a Malay vernacular building tradition that valorizes such things as autonomy, simplicity, mutual self-help and a certain open social cohesion. What made these houses "Malay" for their residents was not any historical purity of detail or design but a combination of social and material factors in which setting, sociability,

and the expression of religious faith were more important than structure and in which spatial meanings embraced both seen and unseen dimensions. An example of the latter is the way in which certain sites called to mind memories of a very localized form of social history that was understood by residents as "heritage" but that they did not necessarily consider "historical." This chapter shows how residents understood the material and social fabrics of their residential environment to be linked and to have a certain human and moral content. It also shows how, in the midst of experiencing both social and material change, residents here organized an association in which they attempted to address certain problems by, in effect, endeavoring to bring current village realities more in line with what they understood a kampung ideally should embody or had actually represented in a not-so-distant past. The spatial imagination at work in forming this association valorized a place-based sense of autonomy in that village territory was understood to be defined on the basis of a very localized experience of spatial meanings and use. This imagination of village space thus did not conform to any of the spatial demarcations or divisions fostered by either the city's municipal authorities or the state-level religious council officially responsible for administering a part of the Muslim endowment land (*wakaf*) that made up village territory. Organizers of this new residents' association felt that the time had come for residents to be somewhat more self-conscious about what village space meant and the need to take steps to manage consciously what previously had been a less formal management of village affairs. I show how, at the same time, the spatial imagination

at work in this organization was not reactionary, isolationist, or exclusive but was territorially expansive and socially inclusive: Organizers included as members former village residents; there were non-Malay members including one Chinese committee member; and the spatial imagination at work here included a conception that the social ideals of a Malay kampung could be relevant to Malays and non-Malays alike in solving certain problems associated with other housing types located elsewhere.

Chapter 3, which compares and contrasts the Malay kampung with a largely Chinese residential area and one which most residents identified as ethnically "mixed," continues with a further elaboration of how consciousness of difference and diversity contributes to the production and understanding of urban residential space. Differences in education, language use, and sometimes even in religious practice can be localized even to the level of differences between individuals in the same household and across generations of the same family. This chapter discusses how such differences, along with a good number of commonalities not specific or exclusive to any one group, inform Chinese and Indian residents' uses, perceptions and appreciations of the inner city as a place to live and as a site for the expression of a regional "multicultural" identity. Discussion here includes the value many residents placed on small-scale production based in or near the home, especially the preparation and sale of hawker food that is often quite ethnically specific but that is consumed and enjoyed by many across ethnic differences and in public venues (coffee shops and on the street) in ways that contribute to the culturally multiple character of urban space.

While the family of everyone currently resident in Penang was originally from elsewhere, and many could trace their ancestors to particular places in Asia, inner-city residents of all ethnicities nevertheless had something in common in that they were often very attached to the houses and locations in the city where they or previous generations of their family had lived for so long. Few were attracted to the idea of thinking of housing in terms of investment and exchange values, or as indicative of a household's economic status or aspirations. These were meanings of residential space that seemed to be emphasized by both state development policy and a recently booming but speculative residential property market whose volatility was underscored by the recent Asian economic crisis. Still living modestly, and according to their own terms in "old," vernacular-style houses protected by rent control, many residents valued the long-term stability but not necessarily the age or historicity of their housing arrangements. Many further valued the convenience and sociability fostered by an inner city location and the ease with which it permitted both social contact and business or employment opportunity.

As the demographically dominant population in George Town, where so many people and things were "Chinese" such that the city continued to be identified throughout the region as largely "Chinese," Chinese residents seemed to take somewhat for granted that there would be venues for the public material expression of their own ethnicity. Even new housing units could be customized with Chinese design elements or furnished with equipment for religious practice that also publicly

proclaimed their users' ethnic and religious identities. The fact that many of the Chinese residents I visited were living in Chinese style houses was thus less important to them than the analogous situation among the Malays living in the kampung, where residents regarded highly the facts that they were Malays living in Malay-style houses and that many of these had been built by their ancestors. Likewise, the Indians living in the oldest part of the inner city greatly appreciated that their residential area was publicly identified as "Little India" – a name that reinforced widespread recognition of the fact that there had been an Indian presence in the city since its founding. Chapter 3 also discusses the spatial imagination at work in certain aspects of Chinese religious practice and how such practices account for, manage or attempt to incorporate certain social, religious and cultural differences found within a shared residential space. I show how these imaginations and practices contribute to the understanding and meaning of territories and social histories at a wider range of levels than one's own immediate residential space.

The valorization of a certain sense of autonomy in household living and working arrangements was something that was found to be shared across ethnic groups and social categories, even though not all residents in the areas studied worked at or near home, were self-employed, or lived in houses that they or their families had actually built. Many expressed a desire to avoid the assumption of long-term debt that ownership of a "new" housing unit, even one that was "low cost," would entail. Most "new" housing units were considerably smaller in size than single-unit houses and

were in large high-rise projects distant from the much appreciated and familiar city center. High-rise units were further associated with certain changes in lifestyle such as a greater emphasis on consumer culture and materialism, higher monthly expenditures to cover loans and transportation, as well as such negative social implications as concern over youth seeking escape from cramped high-rise quarters and thus spending less time at home, and the fear of social isolation resulting from living far from the casual activities of the street. The valorization of autonomy in this case did not mean that people desired complete household independence or privacy but that, in many ways, life in a high-rise housing project was perceived to be somewhat more difficult and less comfortable than the familiar arrangement of single-units housing at street level which facilitated open communication and easy passage between inside and outside. Many residents of houses perceived that doors to high-rise units always remained closed and that people living there often had little knowledge or contact with neighbors. The possibility of living in a high rise, despite the promotion of such projects as "modern," "new," and the way of the future, was thus often understood as tantamount to a decline in household quality of life and a constraint on the possibility for self-determination, at least as far as household economy and residential arrangements were concerned. Such concerns were usually more heated topics of conversation than the expression of ethnic or religious identities in the built environment or in public spaces, which was standard practice throughout

the city and was assumed to be able to continue in some form whatever the residential context or house type.

With so much that was changing in the built environment of their city and in the urban development of its greater metropolitan region, many in Penang were highly articulate, if not passionate, in expressing how their quality of life, for both better and worse, was being affected by Penang's and Malaysia's economic "miracle" in recent decades. As explained in each chapter, housing and the spaces and places of everyday life were often the foci of such concerns. Chapters 4 and 5 make use of the willingness of many Penangites to ruminate philosophically and often in great detail about their city in general and what was good and bad about certain development projects and about the ways in which so many new buildings were transforming everyday life, not just for themselves but for everyone. These chapters discuss two very different cases of what I am calling "place-based" forms of social action. In these two voluntary associations or projects – the Residents' Action Committee and the Sustainable Penang Initiative -- social concern and action were explicitly directed toward the production of space and the qualities of life it permits, facilitates, or constrains. These chapters thus present local articulations of spatial meanings at a greater level of abstraction than the details regarding the individual houses in specific places that were the subjects of the previous two chapters. Expressing a need for more people to see, as they did, that the material and social fabrics of the city were intimately linked together within a larger metropolitan, regional, and even global

ecological whole, these activist organizers worked to ensure, though communication and action, that the future trajectory of development in Penang would be humane and would be socially responsible to the city's history of independent and often small-scale enterprise, its diversity, and its cultural multiplicity.

Chapter 4 discusses how one organization of inner-city residents sought to formalize local knowledge into a by-law that would protect old houses everywhere by assuring that future construction projects throughout the state would be planned responsibly. It also shows how, in formulating plans for a "Neighbor's Day" celebration that the organization hoped would be internationally relevant, Mr. Lau and members of the Action Committee were advocating, on the one hand, a new structure for civic responsibility and, on the other, an additional possibility for social identification that would complement but not supersede existing categories of ethnic identity. Chapter 5 analyzes the agenda of the participant contributors to the Sustainable Penang Initiative who advocated new ways to measure progress and attempted to collect research data linking together social trends and material realities in ways that would be so communicatively powerful as to compel morally responsible action in future planning decisions. Though both efforts were eventually less successful in effecting change than their organizers had initially imagined they would be, I show how, in each case, their goal was nothing less than the reformulation of political action along less ethnically polarizing lines and the creation of a more popularly engaged and truly participatory civil society.

What both organizations felt was at stake was not just their own and others' qualities of every life, but the sense of Penang as a place where diversity, difference and culturally multiple identities had freely flourished in the past and where they could yet be preserved, maintained, created, reformulated or enhanced, together with and as part of the on-going social production of space. I show how this a newly formulated emphasis on urban space in its shared and interconnected material and social dimensions was key to their organizational focus and how it provided a rallying point general enough to incorporate multiple differences under its umbrella. Identities can often be tools for social action. In these cases their sense of Penang as a place – which was the explicit object of their concern -- was also tied to the co-production of a distinctive pan-ethnic Penang identity that had recently been articulated in terms of the positive value of "multiculturalism." Organizers were concerned, not just about the future and the continued viability of Penang as a distinct and distinctive place that had a certain effect upon their own identities and qualities of life, but also about how this newly articulated place-based multicultural identity could be more broadly relevant as a problem solving tool in other culturally multiple milieux both in the immediate region of Asia and the rest of the world. If Penang had been, or would be successful in solving the potential divisiveness of diversity and difference, perhaps other places could follow suit in ways that would only enhance the presence or identity of Penang on the world map and the distinction of its people as creative and progressive. This

was a different kind of ambition than the "miracle" of annual double-digit economic growth rates that Penang and much of the rest of Malaysia had already achieved.

Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire

Address (street, house number): ______________________________
Family names (of each family): ______________________________

Name of Interviewer: ______________
Date of interview: ______________

Name (and number) of the resident providing this information: __________

Who lives in this house?

Sex: F = female / M = male
Status: S = single / + = married / D = divorced or separated / W = widow or widower

(Please bracket each additional family unit and indicate its head of household.)

Name		Relationship to Head of household	Sex	Status	Age	Occupation
Family Members	F1	Head of household				
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
	8					
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					
	13					
	14					
	15					
	16					
	17					
	18					
	19					
	20					
Lodgers	L1					
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
Employees	E1					
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					

Where is your family from originally? ____________________

____

____

Where do other members of your family live?

Name (optional)	Town/State	Area/Street	Type of house	Occupation
Father				
Mother				
Brothers				
Sisters				
Children				

How long have you lived in this house? (actual amount of time): ____________________

☐ less than 5 years ☐ 5-10 years ☐ 10-20 years ☐ 20-30 years ☐ more than 30 years

Do you know how old this house is?

☐ No ☐ Yes

(if yes) When was it built? ____________________

Have previous generations of your family lived in this house?

☐ No ☐ Yes

(if yes) Who lived here? (mother; father, aunts, etc.): ____________________

____

Do you remember the circumstances of you or your family moving to this house?

☐ No ☐ Yes

(if yes) **Please explain:** ______________________

____

____

Do you own the house or rent it?

☐ Rent ☐ Own ☐ Just a lodger

(if own):

Was it ☐ **purchased or** ☐ **inherited?**

When was that? ______________________

(whether purchased or inherited):

What was the approximate purchase price? __________

What is its approximate value now? ______________

(if rent):

Are you. . . ?

☐ sole tenant ☐ chief tenant ☐ sub-tenant ☐ equal status tenant ☐ lodger

How much rent do you pay per month? (actual amount):______________________

☐ less than RM 100 ☐ RM 100-200 ☐ RM 200-500 ☐ RM 500-1000

☐ more than RM 1000

(if sub-tenant or lodger):

How much rent does the chief tenant pay? ________

☐ don't know

Is this house rent controlled? ☐ ·no ☐ yes ☐ don't know

Has your rent gone up in recent months? (when/how much): ______________________

____

(for all):

Who is registered as the owner of this house? ______________________

Do you ever rent out space to others?

☐ no ☐ yes

(if yes)

How much rent do you charge? ______________________

How many lodgers do you have now? ______________________

Do they work here or just live here? ______________________

How do you find lodgers? ______________________

What languages/dialects are most often spoken at home here? ____________

☐ Bahasa Malaysia ☐ Bengali ☐ Cantonese ☐ English ☐ Hakka
☐ Hokkien ☐ Hainanese ☐ Mandarin ☐ Tamil ☐ Teochew
☐ other (specify): ____________

What other languages do people living in this house use? (specify who) ____________

____

Where and when do they use these other languages? ____________

____

What is your ethnicity? (include sub-group) ____________

____

What religion(s) does this household practice? ____________

____

(if there is a prayer area or altar):
Please tell me about this ____________

____

____

Use of rooms in the house (sketch of the plan):

Room used for	Approximate Length, width, Height	Lighting (number and type of windows, lights)	Furnished with (AC, TV, number of tables, chairs, etc.)
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			

Who is responsible for. . .? F1, 2, 3, etc, from page 1:.

Who is responsible for. . .?	F1, 2, 3, etc, from page 1:
Cooking	
Shopping for food	
Cleaning the house	
Tidying up outside	
Laundry	
Care of the children	
Care of altar or prayer area	
Repairing	
Mailing or going to pay bills	

What is shared with non-family members living in this house?

☐ eating area ☐ kitchen ☐ toilet ☐ bathroom

☐ other (specify rooms by number) ______________________

What is shared with neighbors?

☐ water ☐ kitchen ☐ toilet ☐ bathroom

☐ other______________________

Household infrastructure, amenities, fumishings, equipment:
(observation and ask for any clarification needed)

☐ water: (number of taps):________

☐ electricity

☐ telephone
☐ hand phone

☐ refrigerator
☐ gas cook top
☐ oven
☐ washing machine
☐ dish washing machine

☐ stereo set
☐ TV
☐ video recorder
☐ computer
☐ still camera
☐ video camera

☐ bathroom (location): ____________
☐ flush toilet (location): ____________

☐ car (number): ____________
☐ motorbikes (number): ____________
☐ bicycle (number): ____________

☐ portable fan (number): ____________
☐ ceiling fan (number): ____________
☐ AC (number of units; which rooms):
____
____

☐ matching furniture set
☐ cabinet for display
☐ bookcase
☐ outdoor furniture

☐ garden (growing what?):______________________

(observation):
Type of house: ____________________

Physical structure of house (observation):

	Wood/ Timber	Reinforced Concrete	Brick/ Clay	Other material (specify)!	Good/fair/poor condition (specify)
Façade					
Roof					
Exterior walls					
Exterior stairs					
Partition walls					
Interior stairs					
Floor					
Upper floors					
Air well covering (if any)					

Does anyone engage in income producing activities in the house? (such as selling or producing items for sale)? (specify F1, 2, 3, etc., and activity) ____________________

____

Has the way the house is used changed in the last 5 years?
☐ **yes** ☐ no
(if yes):
Please explain: ____________________

____

Has any physical part of the house deteriorated lately?
☐ **yes** ☐ no

(if yes):
Please explain: ____________________

____

What parts have been changed or improved?

	When? last 5 years	more than 5 years ago
☐ façade	_____	_____
☐ roof	_____	_____
☐ doors	_____	_____
☐ windows	_____	_____
☐ exterior stairs	_____	_____
☐ garden/yard	_____	_____
☐ whole structure	_____	_____
☐ bathroom	_____	_____
☐ toilet	_____	_____
☐ interior walls	_____	_____
☐ floor	_____	_____
☐ plumbing	_____	_____
☐ electrical	_____	_____
☐ other ____________________	_____	_____
☐ other ____________________	_____	_____

(For individual household members):

Name (and number) of resident responding: ____________________
Address (street, house number): ____________________

Could we record this part of the interview just so we remember what you say?
☐ yes ☐ no

What are your main activities during free time at home? ____________________

____

	Where do you usually do this? Room (specify number):	Outside:
☐ inviting friends to visit	________	____
☐ relaxing	________	____
☐ reading	________	____
☐ TV, video	________	____
☐ card, game playing	________	____
☐ sewing	________	____
☐ playing with children	________	____
☐ other: ________		

In your opinion, what is the condition of this house? ____________________
☐ good ☐ fair (medium) ☐ poor

Comments:

In what condition is your house compared to other buildings in the area? ________
☐ better ☐ worse ☐ about the same

What are the prominent features of your house? ____________________

____

Would you say that this is a [ETHNICITY OF HOUSEHOLD] **house?**
☐ yes ☐ no

Why? ____________________

____

Could a stranger tell that this is a [ETHNICITY OF HOUSEHOLD] **house just by looking at it?**
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure ☐ don't know

(if yes):
How? ____________________

What do you like about this house? ____________________

What does the house lack? ______________________________

____

Is there anything you would like to change about the house? ☐ yes ☐ no

(If yes):

	Why?		Why?
☐ façade	______	☐ bathroom	______
☐ roof	______	☐ toilet	______
☐ doors	______	☐ interior walls	______
☐ windows	______	☐ floor	______
☐ exterior staircase	______	☐ plumbing	______
☐ garden/yard	______	☐ electrical	______
☐ whole structure	______	☐ other ______	______

In your opinion, does this house have historical or heritage value?

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

Why? ______________________________

Does this house play an important role in the built environment of this area?

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

Why? ______________________________

If there were no financial obstacles, what kind of house would you like to live in?

☐ detached bungalow ☐ semi-detached house ☐ terrace house
☐ shophouse ☐ kampung style house ☐ walk-up flat
☐ high rise flat ☐ condominium ☐ same kind of house that I live in now

Why? ______________________________

If there were no financial obstacles, where in Penang would you like to live? __________

Why? ______________________________

What areas of Penang would you definitely NOT like to live in? __________

Why? ______________________________

Is there any other place in Malaysia where you would like to live? __________

Why? ______________________________

Would you like to live in Kuala Lumpur? __________

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

Why? ______________________________

Would you like to live in Singapore? __________

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

Why? ______________________________

Have you heard about the Idea of "bangsa Malaysia?" ☐ yes ☐ no
(if no, describe, then ask): What do you think about the idea of "bangsa Malaysia"? ______

____

What is this neighborhood called? ______________________________

Is this a [ETHNICITY OF HOUSEHOLD] neighborhood? ______________
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure

Is this neighborhood/area of historical or heritage importance?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure
Why? ____

____

Do you know of any historical events that took place near here?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure
Please explain: ____

What are the boundaries of [NAME OF NEIGHBORHHOOD GIVEN]? __________

____

Could you please draw me a simple map indicating your house and the boundaries of the neighborhood? (give a pen and a blank sheet of paper)

(while he or she is drawing):
What are the prominent features in the area around your house? __________

____

What are the prominent features of this neighborhood? ______________

____

Are there any historical monuments, buildings or sites in this neighborbood?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure
(if yes):
What are they? ____

In general, do you like living in this neighborhood? ________________
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ no comment

How well do you know your neighbors? ___________________________

____
☐ we meet often ☐ children play together ☐ we help each other ☐ we go out together
☐ we meet occasionally ☐ we borrow/lend items ☐ not very well

Do neighbors ever drop in to visit you without asking you or planning ahead of time?
☐ yes, often ☐ occasionally ☐ seldom ☐ no, never
____

Please tell me about your satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the following features of this area:

☐ convenient	☐ inconvenient	☐ neither
☐ near to work place	☐ far from work place	☐ neither
☐ fresh and clean air	☐ stale or polluted air	☐ neither
☐ quiet	☐ noisy	☐ neither
☐ lively	☐ not lively; dull	☐ neither
☐ beautiful	☐ unattractive	☐ neither
☐ good relationships with neighbors	☐ not good relationships with with neighbors	☐ neither
☐ favorable for children	☐ not favorable for children	☐ neither
☐ a lot of green	☐ a lack of green	☐ neither
☐ adequate facilities for cultural activities	☐ inadequate facilities for cultural activities	☐ neither
☐ favorable for old people	☐ unfavorable for old people	☐ neither
☐ low cost of living	☐ high cost of living	☐ neither
☐ others ________	☐ others ________	

What is your definition of "a healthy city?" ________________

Is George Town "a healthy city?" ________________

What role do you think your part of town plays in the urban setting? ________________

☐ residential area ☐ mixed residential/commercial ☐ inner city area
☐ historic city center ☐ central business district ☐ tourist area
☐ other________________

Do you remember what this area was like 20 years ago? ☐ yes ☐ no
(if yes):
Please tell me what it was like: ________________

Has the character of this area changed considerably over the last few years? ________

☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure
(if changed):
In what way has it changed? ________________

☐ new buildings ☐ restoration of old buildings ☐ deterioration of old buildings
☐ road widening ☐ more traffic ☐ more people living here
☐ more tourists ☐ replanting ☐ road widening ☐ higher standard of living

Has this neighborhood benefited from these changes? ______

______

Are there any major problems in this area? (specify) ______

______

(if there are problems):
Which problems need to be solved first? ______

______

Who will solve them? ______

______

Do you think there are any special problems of difficulties with raising children in a high rise flat? ______

______

In your opinion, what will your part of town be like in the future? ______

______

What do you think George Town will be like in the future? ______

______

How do you feel about changing English street names in Penang to Malay names or Malay words that have completely different meanings than the original English?

______

______

☐ approve ☐ disapprove ☐ no opinion

Do you have any plans to move in the immediate future?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ not sure
(if yes, specify where) ______

______

If you had to move, would you want to stay in this area? ______
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ it doesn't matter

Why? ______

What do you like to do when you have free time and you go out? ______

______

______

Where do you go for. . .?

	On same Street	In same area/ part of town (specify)	Within George Town (specify)	Other Places (specify)	How often do you go there?
Religious worship					
Walking					
Card/game Playing					
Sports					
Cultural activities					
Food shopping					
Other shopping					
Eating out					

When you eat out, where do you like to eat? ____________
(check as many as apply):
☐ hawker stall ☐ coffee shop ☐ local restaurant ☐ indoor hawker center
☐ fast food restaurant ☐ hotel restaurant ☐ company or institution canteen
☐ other: ____________

How often do you eat outside the home? ____________
☐ more than once a day ☐ once a day ☐ almost every day ☐ twice a week
☐ 3 to 5 times per week ☐ seldom ☐ never

Are you a member of any associations? ☐ yes ☐ no
(if yes): **Which ones? Where are the meetings held and how often do you go there?**

Location of meetings:

Name of association and it's function	On same Street	In same neighborhood/ part of town	Within George Town (specify place)	Other places (specify)	How often do you go to meetings?

Would you say your standard of living is . . . ☐ well-off ☐ o k ☐ low ☐ poor

What is your main source of income? ______________________

Other sources of income? ______________________

Who else contributes to the household income? (F1, 2, 3, etc.) ______________________

____

What is your average total income per month?

☐ less than RM200 ☐ RM 200-399 ☐ RM 400-599 ☐ 600-799
☐ 800-999 ☐ RM 1000-1499 ☐ RM 1500-1999 ☐ RM 2000-2499
☐ RM 2500 – 2999 ☐ RM 3000-3499 ☐ RM 3500-3999 ☐ more than RM 4000

(if working or retired):
What do/did you do for a living? ______________________

Where do/did you work? ______________________

(if not working at home):
How do/did you get there? ______________________

How long does/did it take to get there? ______________________
☐ less than 15 minutes ☐ 15-30 minutes ☐ 30 minutes – 1 hour ☐ more than 1 hour

(if own business):
Is/was your business . . .? ☐ self founded ☐ family business ☐ bought ☐ inherited

Who are/were your main customers? ______________________
☐ neighbors ☐ people from George Town ☐ people from beyond the city
☐ tourists ☐ people outside of Penang

Are/were your customers mostly . . .?
☐ Malay ☐ Chinese ☐ Indian ☐ all kinds of people

(if producing a product):
How do/did you deliver your goods?
☐ hand carry/cart ☐ bicycle ☐ trishaw ☐ bus ☐ motor bike
☐ car ☐ lorry ☐ other ______________________

What education did you have? ______________________
☐ no formal education ☐ primary school ☐ Form 3 (SRP) ☐ Form 5 (SPM)
☐ Form 6 (STPM) ☐ Polytechnic ☐ vocational school ☐ apprenticeship
☐ local university ☐ foreign university

Name of last school attended: ______________________

What language(s) was most of your education in? ______________________

Appendix B

Responses of Residents
When Asked to Rate Featuresof Their Neighborhoods

Kampung Dodol Area

Percentage (Number) of Respondents:

men	100% = (18)
women	100% = (22)
total	**100% = (40)**

	convenient	inconvenient	neither	no answer
men	67% (12)	22% (4)	11% (2)	-
women	82 (18)	5% (1)	14% (3)	-
total	**75% (30)**	**13% (5)**	**13% (5)**	**-**
	near to work place	**far from work place**	**neither**	
men	56% (10)	17% (3)	17% (3)	(2)
women	41% (9)	36% (8)	9% (2)	(3)
total	**48% (19)**	**28% (11)**	**13% (5)**	**(5)**
	fresh and clean air	**stale or polluted air**	**neither**	
men	33% (6)	17% (3)	50% (9)	-
women	23% (5)	9% (2)	68% (15)	-
total	**28% (11)**	**13% (5)**	**60% (24)**	**-**
	a lot of green	**a lack of green**	**neither**	
men	39% (7)	44% (8)	17% (3)	-
women	27% (6)	50% (11)	18% (4)	(1)
total	**33% (13)**	**48% (19)**	**18% (7)**	**(1)**
	beautiful	**unattractive**	**neither**	
men	28% (5)	6% (1)	50% (9)	(3)
women	14% (3)	23% (5)	50% (11)	(3)
total	**20% (8)**	**15% (6)**	**50% (20)**	**(6)**
	quiet	**noisy**	**neither**	
men	33% (6)	11% (2)	56% (10)	-
women	32% (7)	5% (1)	64% (14)	-
total	**33% (13)**	**8% (3)**	**60% (24)**	**-**

	lively	**not lively; dull**	**neither**	
men	89% (16)	6% (1)	6% (1)	-
women	55% (12)	-	41% (9)	(1)
total	**70% (28)**	**3% (1)**	**25% (10)**	**(1)**

	good relationships with neighbors	**not good relationships with neighbors**	**neither**	
men	100% (18)	-	-	-
women	86% (19)	9% (2)	-	(1)
total	**92% (37)**	**5% (2)**	-	**(1)**

	favorable for children	**not favorable for children**	**neither**	
men	83% (15)	6% (1)	11% (2)	-
women	59% (13)	18% (4)	18% (4)	(1)
total	**70% (28)**	**13% (5)**	**15% (6)**	**(1)**

	favorable for old people	**not favorable for old people**	**neither**	
men	83% (15)	6% (1)	11% (2)	-
women	59% (18)	-	9% (2)	(2)
total	**83% (33)**	**3% (1)**	**10% (4)**	**(2)**

	adequate facilities for cultural activities	**inadequate facilities for cultural activities**	**neither**	
men	56% (10)	33% (6)	6% (1)	(1)
women	23% (5)	45% (10)	18% (4)	(3)
total	**38% (15)**	**40% (16)**	**13% (5)**	**(4)**

	low cost of living	**high cost of living**	**neither**	
men	22% (4)	33% (6)	44% (8)	-
women	18% (4)	5% (1)	72% (16)	(1)
total	**20% (8)**	**18% (7)**	**60% (24)**	**(1)**

Note: Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

Appendix C

Responses of Residents When Asked to Rate Features of Their Neighborhoods

Lorong Seratus Tahun (LST) Area

Percentage (Number) of Respondents:

men	100% = (20)
women	100% = (11)
total	**100% = (31)**

	convenient	inconvenient	neither	no answer
men	100% (16)	--	--	--
women	100% (15)	--	--	--
total	**100% (31)**			

	near to work place	far from work place	neither	
men	88% (14)	--	13% (2)	--
women	47% (7)	20% (3)	33% (5)	--
total	**68% (21)**	**10% (3)**	**23% (7)**	**--**

	fresh and clean air	stale or polluted air	neither	
men	38% (6)	13% (2)	50% (8)	--
women	13% (2)	20% (3)	67% (10)	--
total	**26% (8)**	**16% (5)**	**58% (18)**	**--**

	a lot of green	a lack of green	neither	
men	--	75% (12)	24% (4)	--
women	--	73% (11)	27% (4)	--
total	**--**	**74% (23)**	**26% (8)**	**--**

	beautiful	unattractive	neither	
men	25% (4)	--	44% (7)	(5)
women	7% (1)	7% (1)	53% (8)	(5)
total	**16% (5)**	**3% (1)**	**48% (15)**	**(10)***

	quiet	noisy	neither	
men	56% (9)	6% (1)	38% (6)	--
women	47% (7)	7% (1)	47% (7)	--
total	**51% (16)**	**6% (2)**	**42% (13)**	**--**

	lively	**not lively; dull**	**neither**	
men	44% (7)	--	56% (9)	--
women	73% (11)	13% (2)	13% (2)	--
total	**58% (18)**	**6% (2)**	**35% (11)**	**--**

	good relationships with neighbors	**not good relationships with neighbors**	**neither**	
men	52% (9)	--	43% (7)	--
women	47% (7)	13% (2)	40% (6)	--
total	**52% (16)**	**6% (2)**	**42% (13)**	**--**

	favorable for children	**not favorable for children**	**neither**	
men	75% (12)	6% (1)	13% (2)	(1)
women	60% (9)	13% (2)	20% (3)	(1)
total	**68% (21)**	**10% (3)**	**16% (5)**	**(2)**

	favorable for old people	**not favorable for old people**	**neither**	
men	69% (11)	13% (2)	19% (3)	--
women	67% (10)	--	27% (4)	(1)
total	**68% (21)**	**6% (2)**	**23% (7)**	**(1)**

	adequate facilities for cultural activities	**inadequate facilities for cultural activities**	**neither**	
men	19% (3)	50% (8)	19% (3)	(2)
women	60% (9)	27% (4)	7% (1)	(1)
total	**39% (12)**	**39% (12)**	**13% (4)**	**(3)**

	low cost of living	**high cost of living**	**neither**	
men	13% (2)	--	81% (13)	(1)
women	7% (1)	7% (1)	80% (12)	(1)
total	**10% (3)**	**3% (1)**	**81% (24)**	**(2)**

* One respondent did not answer this question and 9 were not asked it.

Notes: Percentages rounded to nearest whole number. One respondent of the total of 32 respondents surveyed in LST was not asked any of the questions here.

Appendix D

Responses of Residents
When Asked to Rate Features of Their Neighborhoods

Tanjung Area

Percentage (Number) of Respondents:

men	100% = (20)
women	100% = (11)
total	**100% = (31)**

	convenient	inconvenient	neither	no answer
men	90% (18)	0	10% (2)	--
women	91% (10)	9% (1)	--	--
total	**90% (28)**	**3% (1)**	**6% (2)**	**--**
	near to work place	**far from work place**	**neither**	
men	60% (12)	5% (1)	10% (2)	(5)
women	55% (6)	18% (2)	27% (3)	--
total	**58% (18)**	**10% (3)**	**16% (5)**	**(5)**
	fresh and clean air	**stale or polluted air**	**neither**	
men	40% (8)	35% (7)	20% (4)	(1)
women	27% (3)	27% (3)	45% (5)	--
total	**35% (11)**	**32% (10)**	**29% (9)**	**(1)**
	a lot of green	**a lack of green**	**neither**	
men	5% (1)	50% (10)	35% (7)	(2)
women	--	45% (5)	36% (4)	(2)
total	**3% (1)**	**48% (15)**	**35% (11)**	**(4)**
	beautiful	**unattractive**	**neither**	
men	25% (5)	--	10% (2)	(13)
women	9% (1)	18% (2)	--	(8)
total	**19% (6)**	**6% (2)**	**6% (2)**	**(21)***
	quiet	**noisy**	**neither**	
men	25% (5)	45% (9)	25% (5)	(1)
women	9% (1)	45% (5)	45% (5)	--
total	**19% (6)**	**45% (14)**	**32% (10)**	**(1)**

	lively	**not lively; dull**	**neither**	
men	50% (10)	15% (3)	30% (6)	(1)
women	64% (7)	9% (1)	27% (3)	--
total	**55% (17)**	**13% (4)**	**29% (9)**	**(1)**

	good relationships with neighbors	**not good relationships with neighbors**	**neither**	
men	65% (13)	--	25% (5)	--
women	36% (4)	9% (1)	45% (5)	(1)
total	**55% (17)**	**3% (1)**	**32% (10)**	**(1)**

	favorable for children	**not favorable for children**	**neither**	
men	45% (9)	30% (6)	25% (5)	--
women	9% (1)	18% (2)	73% (8)	--
total	**32% (10)**	**26% (8)**	**42% (13)**	**--**

	favorable for old people	**not favorable for old people**	**neither**	
men	65% (13)	5% (1)	25% (5)	(1)
women	55% (6)	--	45% (5)	--
total	**61% (19)**	**3% (1)**	**32% (10)**	**(1)**

	adequate facilities for cultural activities	**inadequate facilities for cultural activities**	**neither**	
men	35% (7)	15% (3)	35% (7)	(3)
women	36% (4)	36% (4)	27% (3)	--
total	**35% (11)**	**23% (7)**	**32% (10)**	**(3)**

	low cost of living	**high cost of living**	**neither**	
men	45% (9)	20% (4)	30% (6)	(1)
women	36% (4)	9% (1)	55% (6)	--
total	**42% (13)**	**16% (5)**	**39% (12)**	**(1)**

* These 21 people were not asked this question.
Note: Percentages rounded to nearest whole number.

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