

The Sense of Place Transformation before and during Pandemic Era in Public Space: Masjid Al-Malik Khalid, USM, Penang, Malaysia

Tessa Eka Darmayanti
{tessaeka82@gmail.com}

Interior Design Dept, Art and Design Faculty, Universitas Kristen Maranatha
Jl. Surya Sumantri No.65, Bandung, Jawa Barat 40164, Indonesia

Abstract. This article was formed from the author's experience during Ramadan while living and studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang. The pandemic situation is very influential on the transformation of a place which in turn affects the attachment of the people who are around the place and the mosque as one of the public spaces affected by the pandemic. This study aims to find out the sense of place transformation that occurs in a public space, namely the mosque Al-Malik Khalid within the USM campus. To be able to answer the objective of this qualitative research, a phenomenological-narrative approach was used. The birth of a sense of place towards space was influenced by the presence of memory, imagination, and one's interaction with the various activities that occur in it. This encourages the embodiment of one's attachment to the place and creates its language of space.

Keywords: Sense of Place; Transformation; Phenomenology; Spatial Language; Masjid

1 Introduction

The concept of sense of place drew attention to human experience. Due to that, these senses describe our relationship with places, conveyed in dissimilar dimensions of human life involving stories, emotions and imagination through personal experiences [1]. Sense of place is related to the emotive bonds and attachments people develop or experience in particular locations and environments, at scales ranging from the home to the nation. This term is also used to describe the distinctiveness or unique character of particular localities [2]. Briefly, Adams (2013) said that the sense of place is the lens through which people experience and make meaning of their experiences in and with place [3]. More deeply, Pallasmaa (2007) says that the sense of place will be stronger when it involves architectural existence [4] and this article will focus on the embodiment of masjid (mosque) as religious and public architecture. However, recently human relations with places were scratched when the covid 19 pandemic hit the world. The pandemic indirectly forces and brings us to different environments and circumstances. This is because various rules have also changed. Numerous countries have taken unprecedented measures to prevent social contiguity and slow down the spread of the

virus, such as prohibiting public events and closing many public places. The pandemic also imposes other rules wearing masks and checking the temperature to impede the spread of the virus. Therefore, there is a transformation of the sense of place in various places, including masjid. Asara et al (2015) state that transformation is an active construction of new practices and meanings. Therefore, transformation is known as a complete change in appearance both physical and character [5]. In this article, the term of appearance is present in the form of various activities in masjid Al-Malik Khalid, USM, Penang.

The pandemic was triggered through the covid 19 outbreak in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and rapidly spread in many countries all over the world [6][7]. The virus spreads around the world, China, Italy, Spain, and the US being hit hardest. In March 2020, the World Health Organization has declared the situation as a global health emergency [8], and in April 2020 more than 1 million people have been infected, and more than 110,000 have died from the virus (www.who.int). The first Covid-19 case in Malaysia was officially recorded on January 25, 2020. It started on January 23, 2020, which involved the arrival of three Chinese citizens in Malaysia via Singapore. To deal with the pandemic, the Prime Minister of Malaysia introduced and enforced a lockdown phase called *Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan* (PKP) or Movement Control Order (MCO) to reduce the spread of the virus [9]. And at the end of April 2020, 6002 cases of Covid-19 infection were reported in Malaysia, with 102 deaths recorded. And at the end of April 2020, 6002 cases of Covid-19 infections were reported in Malaysia, with 102 deaths recorded [10][11]. This study discusses a mosque within the campus complex of USM, Penang, known as the Masjid Al-Malik Khalid. Why the masjid Al-Malik Khalid was chosen because the author is an experienced recipient of this mosque. The masjid is not the most beautiful architecture, the oldest building age, or the best known in Penang, but this mosque is the heart of worship and social life, especially during Ramadan in USM. In addition, the masjid is a hallmark of local activities on campus during the month of Ramadan. Therefore, this building becomes a charm for campus residents and surroundings. Various activities in the mosque make this masjid alive and become an icon on the USM campus, Penang. Based on the explanation above, this article aims to get the reader to know about the sense of place and its transformation has occurred in Masjid Al-Malik Khalid as a public space when the pandemic hit Malaysia. To achieve the goals, the research questions were formed: How was a sense of place formed, and how does sense of place transformation occur in public space, namely Masjid Al-Malik Khalid?.

2 Methodology

This research data was obtained through the author's experience during Ramadan in 2019, 2020, and 2021. These three years are important and interesting because those years have significant differences in Ramadan activities. 2019 is the year before the pandemic comes (covid-free year), followed by 2020, where the first year the pandemic takes place (lockdown year), and 2021 is the second year of the pandemic with conditions that have begun to allow limited activities with strict SOPs. The data will be processed and explored through the concept of sense of place with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a way of investigating an area or object that allows us to see phenomena, in this article is the Masjid Al-Malik Khalid, USM, Penang. Discussion in phenomenology requires perception because it involves emotions towards objects. Through a phenomenological perspective, various possibilities in bridging human relationships with a situation can be presented. Phenomenology also involves awareness and experience of events that occur to produce their

own experiences. Referring to Kusworo (2009), phenomenology reflects human experience that carried out intensively or repeatedly related to an object [12]. This phenomenological approach is generally conveyed through narration or storytelling about the object [13]. In this article, the reader will be presented with a general narrative about various typical activities at the Masjid Al-Malik Khalid, USM, Penang, and the changes based on the circumstances that affect the place.

3 Results and Discussion

Public activities are recognized, which can lead to experience productions within the public spaces [14]. The spaces can greet in their way according to an individual who sees them. Beyond its constitution in experience, architecture mediates between the outer world and the inner realm of the self, creating distinct frames of perception and understanding [15]. Various special activities occur during Ramadan, such as tarawih prayers and iftar activities at the mosque. Both are activities awaited by the USM campus residents, they are students from various countries who live inside the campus. Although Ramadan only lasts for 30 days, it appears that there is a close relationship between the mosque and the person who experiences surrounds it. This can be ascertained because the place and previous activities have been embedded in the memory of the individual concerned, activated by human sensory. The statement is in line with Pallasmaa (2005) that sensory play a fundamental role in people through any form of actions [16]. Moreover, it involves an architectural existence because it does exist the mutual relationship between architecture and people's habits [17].

3.1 The first sense of place in Masjid Al-Malik Khalid

Frequently asked questions in the sense of place issue are what kind of place is this? what does this place mean to you? and what does this place give you, and what do you do about it? [13]. These questions state the importance of background knowledge of a place. Therefore, it is necessary to know the general description of the Al-Malik Khalid Mosque and what activities are in it, especially during the month of Ramadan. This is important because it is the breath of this article. In March 2018, the author came and lived inside the USM campus complex. Often visits the masjid to pray, rest or do writing, but do not experience Ramadan activities. Even so, the experience of the masjid has stored in the memory. Experience various Ramadan activities starting in 2019 and enrich the feeling and attachment with the masjid. The most awaited activity is queuing for iftar foods with hundreds of other people. Even though the line is long, there is still a sense of excitement because when standing in line other activities can be done, such as greeting each other, meeting and chatting with friends, family, or people around (figure 1). The sense of place is involved with talk activity. Talk produces the people's voices. That matter involves senses, and it creates feelings of belonging and attachment to the place. Pallasmaa (1994) shed the light on that, He says that *–the sounds could be attached to our memory and touch our imagination about the places* [18]. According to Pallasmaa's statement, it means that certain voices belong to certain places. The sound that comes from the activity of queuing in the masjid front yard belongs to the masjid Al-Malik Khalid, it becomes an identity that is not owned and found in other places.



Fig. 1. Queuing Activity in Front of Masjid Al-Malik Khalid during Ramadan
Sources: Author's Documentation, 2019

3.2 The alteration of sense of place in Masjid Al-Malik Khalid

In 2020, the spread of covid 19 truly affect Malaysia. In the early year, all public activities were not permitted dan people were forced to stay at home. The situation extremely changes the place not only tangible but also intangible values. The condition also applies within USM campus, classes, offices, library, playground, and masjid were closed. There were almost no people outside the houses for months except for primary or emergency needs, such as buying food in the canteen or shops and going to the clinic. The pandemic is shaping the absence of routine activities in a public place. Masjid Al-Malik Khalid is one of the victims of it. That condition can lead to a reduced sense of attachment to a place. The tremendous emotional feeling during lockdown was felt when Ramadan come, exciting long queues for iftar foods prohibited and the call to prayer – *adzan* changed from *hayya 'alasshalah* (rise up for prayer - in Masjid) become *As Shalaatu fir rihaalikum* (pray at your house). That fact about the connection between emotion and place is supported by the statement of Grimshaw et al. (2021) they said that emotional attachment to the places could arise from growing up, living, or experiencing repeatedly. Sense of place can link the past to the present [19]. The author directly digging last year memory and cooperate with imagination to project all activities in the Masjid to compare with current situation.

A drastic transformation absolutely in the front yard of the masjid, there is no longer a queue of food for iftar. In addition, the *anjung* (front pavilion) of the masjid, which is usually used to celebrate togetherness during iftar, and taraweeh prayer looks empty, as well as inside the mosque (figure 2). Two different conditions in figure 2 may look simple, but they will have different meanings for people who experience it and have an attachment with the place. Statements agree with Russ et al (2015) said that sense of place evolves through personal experiences, and defines how people view, interpret and interact with their world. Different people perceive the same place in different ways [20].

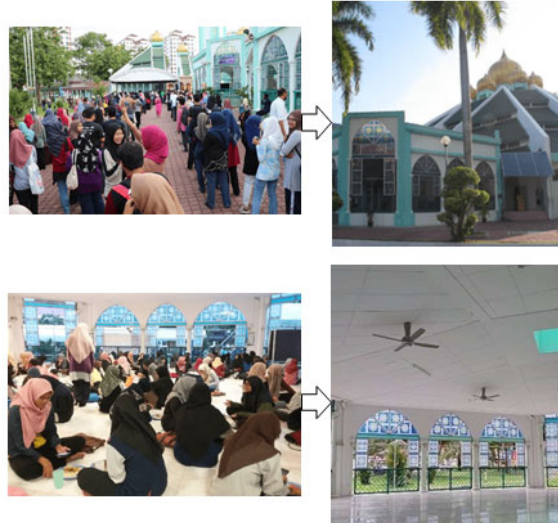


Fig. 2. The Transformation Activity in front of Masjid (above) & at *Anjung Masjid Al-Malik Khalid* during Ramadan (bellow)
Sources: Author's Documentation, 2019 & 2020

After almost a year, the pandemic situation has been improving. The vaccine process has begun, and the Movement Control Order (MCO) has changed to a lighter regulation, namely the *Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan Pemulihan* (PKPP) or Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO). In this phase, social activities are permitted but with particular operating standards. Iftar activities and taraweeh prayers are allowed with the mandatory wearing of a mask, maintaining a distance of at least one meter, scanning the barcode, and checking body temperature when entering the area (<https://covid-19.moh.gov.my>). Based on these conditions, the USM campus implemented the rules. The campus residents could again treat their longing for the Masjid Al-Malik Khalid and its activities. Queuing for iftar foods again occurs, but without the “typical crowd”. In that moment, the sense of place has slightly changed. The last year’s “crowd” sounds and feeling are not fully present, probably will never come back. The concept of the activity is the same but provides a different experience. The pandemic covid 19 has change all sense (figure 3).



Fig. 3. Queuing with Distance & Scanning Area at Masjid Al-Malik Khalid during Ramadan 2021
Sources: Author's Documentation, 2020 & 2021

Circumstances have influenced the behavior, experiences, and senses of everyone who experiences them, both indoors and outdoors. In this case, the behavior transformation is due to the pandemic shown in Figures 4 and 5. However, that is the key to the sustainability of the masjid's sense of place. Masjid Al-Malik Khalid as architecture does not only provide the experience of the sense of sight, but also the other senses. The statement is in line with Pallasmaa (1996) that activities around architecture can produce strong attachments to the place. Because architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world around us, and mediation occurs through the senses [21]. There is an urgency and a challenge to adapt to a pandemic like the current situation. The situation indirectly built acceptance for another placemaking, and develop a different sense, which was influenced by previous memory.



Fig. 4. Taraweeh Prayer with Distance in the upper floor (above) & at *Anjung* (bellow) Masjid Al-Malik Khalid during Ramadan 2021
Sources: Author's Documentation, 2021



Fig. 5. Eid-ul Fitr Prayer with Distance at Masjid Al-Malik Khalid during Ramadan 2021
Sources: @usmofficial1969, 2021

4 Conclusion

The presence of activities to allow people to explore and interpret places can contribute to developing a sense of place and the meaning of places accordingly. This study showed that the embodiment of activities becomes the role of transformation of sense of place happens in masjid Al-Malik Khalid, USM, Penang. The transformation is due to pandemics because of the changes in activities, but this is precisely causing the continuity of the sense of place in the masjid as a religious and public place. The place survives and mingles into the current situation without deleting the value of the place. The pandemic pushes the active process of adapting and shifting sense of place. The new regulations are compulsory to be applied and mandatory to be implemented and indirectly create own language and beauty of masjid. Through this article proved that a sense of place also can develop through emotional responses. The pandemic creates an emotional feeling that we cannot go outside and come to masjid during Ramadan, but the sense of place in Masjid Al-Malik Khalid can help people to appreciate aspects of the surrounding environment.

References

- [1] K.H. Basso, "Wisdom sits in places: Notes on a Western Apache landscape, " In S. Feld and K.H. Basso (Eds.), *Senses of place*, pp. 53-90), 1996. Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press.
- [2] K.E. Foote., M. Azarhayu, "Sense of Place in International Encyclopedia of Human Geography," Elsevier Science. 2009
- [3] J.D. Adams, "Theorizing a sense of place in transnational community," *Children, youth and environments*, 23(3), 43-65, 2013
- [4] Pallasmaa, J, "Embodied Experience and Sensory Thought," *Journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39(2), pp. 769-772, 2007
- [5] V. Asara., I. Otero., F. Demaria., E. Corbera, "Socially Sustainable Degrowth as a Social-Ecological Transformation: Repoliticizing sustainability, " *Sustain Sci*, 10(3), pp . 375-384, 2015
- [6] F. Jiang., L. Deng., L Zhang., Y. Cai., C.W. Cheung., Z. Xia., "Review of the clinical characteristics of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)," *J. Gen. Intern. Med.* 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-020-05762-w>
- [7] M. Lipitch., D.L Swerdlow., L. Finelli., "Defining the epidemiology of COVID-19 — studies needed. *N. Engl. J. Med.*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2002125>.
- [8] J. De Vos, "The Effect of COVID-19 and Subsequent Social Distancing on Travel Behaviour," *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 5, pp. 1-3, 2020
- [9] Prime Minister's Office. 2020 economic stimulus package– PRIHATIN. 2020. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2020/03/pakejrangangan-ekonomi-prihatin-rakyat-prihatin/>
- [10] Foo, L.-P., Chin, M.-Y., Tan, K.-L., & Phuah, K.-T, "The impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry in Malaysia." *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(3), pp. 1–6, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1777951>
- [11] A. Zwain, "George Town Heritage City traditional shophouses residents respond to COVID-19 pandemic: Issues and possible solutions, " *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 31:1-4, pp. 394-408, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2020.1833805

- [12] E. Kusworo, *Fenomenologi: Metodologi Penelitian Komunikasi*. Bandung: Widya Padjajaran. (2009)
- [13] T. E. Darmayanti, and A. Bahauddin, "NARASI GERBANG RUMAH PERANAKAN DI PECINAN, LASEM, JAWA TENGAH: PENDEKATAN FENOMENOLOGI," *MODUL*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 126-133, Nov. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.14710/mdl.20.2.2020.126-133>
- [14] T. E. Darmayanti, and A. Bahauddin, "Understanding Vernacularity through Spatial Experience in the Peranakan House Kidang Mas, Chinatown, Lasem, Indonesia," *Journal of the International Society for the Study of Vernacular Settlements*, Vol. 7(3), pp. 1-13, 2020. http://isvshome.com/pdf/ISVS_7-3/ISVS_ej_7.3.1_Tessa_Eka_Damayanti_Final.pdf
- [15] J. Pallasmaa, "Architecture as Experience: The Fusion of the World and the Self," *ARF*, Vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 9–17, Jul. 2018
- [16] J. Pallasmaa, "The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses," 2Rev Ed ed. Chichester: Academy Press. 2005
- [17] J. Pallasmaa. "Embodied and Existential Wisdom in Architecture: The Thinking Hand," *Body and Society*, January. 2017
- [18] J. Pallasmaa, "An Architecture of The Seven Senses," In: *Architecture and Urbanism*, July, Special Issue: Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture. Tokyo: A+U Publishing Pte., Ltd. 1994
- [19] L. Grimshaw., L. Mates, 'It's part of our community, where we live': Urban heritage and children's sense of place. *Urban Studies*. July. 2021.
- [20] A. Russ., S.J. Peters., M.E. Krasny. and R.C. Stedman, "Development of ecological place meaning in New York City," *Journal of environmental education*, 46(2), pp. 73-93. 2015
- [21] Pallasmaa, J. (1996). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses (Polemics)*. London: Academy Editions.