

STREET FOOD AS COMMUNITY ANCHOR

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Walking down the bustling streets of Downtown Kuala Lumpur (KL), one occasionally finds street hawkers selling food and beverages in their makeshift carts. Street hawkers are preferred eateries for Malaysians as they serve local favourites at generally affordable prices. Eating in an outdoor or semi-shaded environment can also offer respite from stuffy and non-air-conditioned eateries.

Street hawkers that operate in the laneways of Downtown KL are an inextricable part of the city's intangible heritage. Away from busy main streets, these hidden gems are located on pedestrian laneways between low-rise traditional shophouses. This preferred typology of hawkers has given the city a unique place identity and an important anchor for its local community.



Street hawkers on Lebu Pudu, Downtown KL, March 1989.

STREET HAWKERS AS NODES OF SOCIETY

Kuala Lumpur, like many of its peers, is slowly being transformed into a safer, cleaner and less chaotic city. In the last two decades, the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (KLCH) has been working hard towards resolving the city's social problems, including the regulation of illegal street hawkers. In 1997, it was reported that there were 36,500 petty hawkers and traders in Kuala Lumpur (Nazri 2019).

KLCH understands the importance of retaining some street hawkers as part of intangible heritage with cultural and touristic value. Old establishments, transformed into familiar landmarks, also offer a form of wayfinding, a tool to navigate busy streets. These eateries also serve as nodes of society, by giving locals a place to hang out without needing to spend much money. As far as KLCH is concerned, it does tolerate some irregularities as long as there is acceptance from the local community.

Still, KLCH has embarked on a drive to clear the city's sidewalks and major roads from street hawking, to improve walkability, traffic flow, and to create neater-looking public spaces. While necessary, this has inadvertently pushed some street hawkers to cease operations altogether, or to move to food courts, wet markets, or other approved locations. This has an immediate impact on the social value of the city, as regular customers lose a familiar place to meet and hang out. These processes fracture good community relationships, as it takes time for locals to find another eatery they are comfortable with.



Cluster of street hawkers on laneway off Jalan Hang Lekiu, December 2019.

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Over the years, enforcement activities, coupled with natural attrition from retirements or the lack of successors has led to a decrease in the number of street hawkers in Downtown KL.

It should also be noted that in the past, hawker stalls were mostly temporary arrangements. Today, many of them have become somewhat semi-permanent or permanent institutions, with KLCH itself now taking the lead to provide licensed hawkers with permanent stalls at specific laneways, complete with utilities.

The laneways of Downtown KL continue to draw office workers, passers-by, and people in search of good food. The cluster of hawkers located at Lebuhraya Pudu and Jalan Hang Lekiu, nestled between rows of traditional shophouses that typically open for breakfast and lunch only, regularly serve up to 50,000 office workers. Over the decades, they have developed into a tightly-knit community. These disparate stalls have created an ecosystem where culture, race, and socioeconomic classes mingle in a distinctly Malaysian way.

WARUNG MEK KELANTAN

Location: Laneway off Jalan Hang Lekiu

Years of operation: 38

Best seller: Curry *Ikan tenggiri* (mackerel)

Cuisine type: Malay

"My husband (Syukri) learned to cook from his brother. We were both from Kelantan and came to Kuala Lumpur 40 years ago. We started off sharing a stall with another vendor. We eventually took over the stall when she retired. Our stall has no signage, but we are known as Warung Mek Kelantan," says Kak Ramlah.



SISTER NGOR WANTAN MEE

Location: Laneway off Jalan Hang Lekiu

Years of operation: 32

Best seller: *Wantan* noodle

Cuisine type: Chinese

"This is my father-in law's noodle stall. He taught me the recipe and I took over the stall when he passed away 22 years ago. My customers are mostly college students and office workers. Life as a street hawker is difficult. I wake up at 4am every day to prepare. My kids aren't interested in the business, so I hired staff to help me out," said Sister Ngor.



MR. YEONG CURRY PUFF

Location: Laneway off Jalan Hang Lekiu

Years of operation: 40

Best seller: Egg curry puff

Cuisine type: Southeast Asia

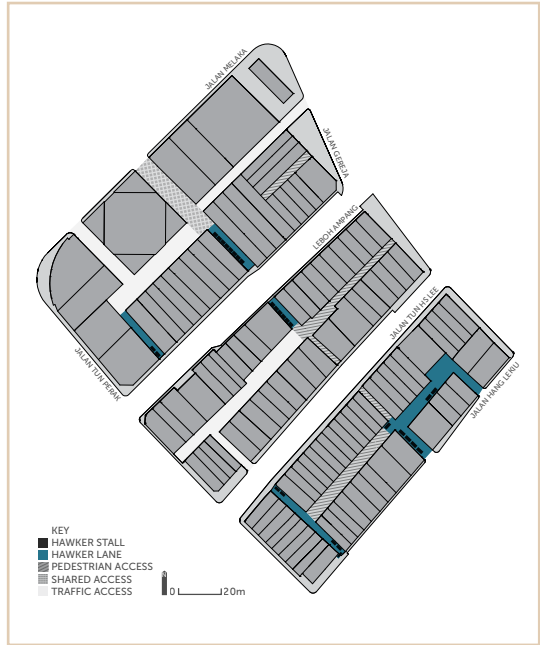
"My husband and I started off on Jalan Hang Lekiu. Eventually KLCH eradicated street hawkers there, and we ended up on the laneway. We've been here for so long and have good relationships with other hawkers like Kak Ramlah," said Yeong.



FROM SANITARY LANES TO F&B HOTSPOTS

The rapid growth of Kuala Lumpur into a major urban centre took place in the late 1880s when the British Colonial administration moved the administrative capital for the state of Selangor from Klang to Kuala Lumpur. By 1887, there were 518 brick and tiled roof buildings in the city (Gullick 2000).

Each new city block was approximately 150m long and 40m wide with predominantly two-storey Neoclassical and Art Deco style shophouses. Narrow laneways of 3 to 5 m wide were designed between the rows as sanitary lanes to allow bullock carts to collect night soil and to provide emergency access.



Typical city blocks with laneways for street hawkers in Downtown KL.

As development intensified, some low-rise shophouses were demolished to give way to modern high-rise buildings, resulting in an eclectic mix of architecture styles. Even with the advent of modernisation, laneways remain an integral part of Downtown KL's identity as it offers much more than a path for pedestrians. With established eateries, the provision of food and shade in a compact space offers a unique environment that is attractive for both locals and tourists.

FUTURE OF HAWKING DO'S

- **For street vendors** – Other than ensuring food quality, building good relationships with customers and providing a clean and comfortable eating environment are also crucial to sustaining business. To widen the pool of potential customers, vendors can consider tapping into online marketing and improving food packaging for corporate clients.
- **For local communities, NGOs, and customers** – The local community, along with the 'Eat local movement' and heritage advocates, must do more to promote good hawkers across all platforms, while continuing to provide constructive feedback.



Makeshift eating area on laneway off Jalan Hang Lekiu, December 2019.

- **For local authorities** – Regulators and planners must provide infrastructure support by allocating proper operating locations, and continuously pushing for higher hygiene and sanitation standards. At the same time, authorities must engage hawkers so that there is genuine dialogue, rather than practising top-down management styles. Elsewhere, KLCH can consider providing financial assistance such as through the Small Business Grants Scheme.

DON'TS

- **Lack of hygiene and sanitation** – Laneways are limited by the lack of utility services. Hawkers don't have electricity, water or common (underground) bins. In addition, leftover food waste attracts pests, causing public health issues. Assigned hawker laneways should be transformed for basic needs.
- **Obstruction to pedestrian flow** – Some hawkers build permanent structures on the laneways like metal roofing attached to shophouses to create shade or mount kitchens that obstruct pedestrians.

REFERENCES

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