

Tzu Chi Welfare Centre in Muar Town: Reinvigorating Active Aging with Community towards Social Integration

Siah Mei Fen

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

Dr. Tareef Hayat Khan

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia, tareef@utm.my

Abstract

The objectives of this study are 1) re-establishing the elderly still as a contributor to the community while cherishing their golden years upon active aging in place, and 2) architecturally sympathetic response towards existing fabric integrating surroundings of the site. After careful research through existing literature, interview and observation, this paper amplified the sensitivity on different criteria such as existing social lifestyle and the traces of the past that leads to architectural solution for newly established uses, program, activities, social welfare and universal values of the community towards social integration. In this study, the existing hawker culture and the shop houses was attempted to be brought forward to adapt to modernity for a better quality of life for the existing active aging lifestyle among the senior citizens in the context in Muar town, Malaysia.

Keywords: Active Aging, Social Welfare, Community, Social Integration, Elderly, Preservation

1. Introduction

The thesis explains in an overview that how a new entity does coexist with the existing building, which is a row of shop houses, located at the heart of Muar Town beside Hawker Street with mostly senior citizens mingling around. When the town, culture, people and ideology evolves together with time, it needs open-mindedness, fantasy and sensitivity, in order to add something new in a convincing form to the new substance. An appealing, multilayered existing building is like a gift from the past. It is a manifold dialogue between old and new that enables the new to emerge in togetherness, with each other or against each other. (F. Schluter, 2010).

Throughout the research, the following issues are identified and further explored to have a thorough understanding before architectural solution manifested. Firstly, cultural and urban issues of Muar Town which caused serious traffic congestion and racial polarization among the citizen. Secondly, elderly is considered as the major users and potential occupants of the proposed site, with a row of existing old shop houses which shall be rehabilitated by injecting new life and vibrancy. Lastly, developing on contemporary building image upon symbiotic relationship between existing building and its culture and values that Tzu Chi and Buddhism holds. Hence, design concept and strategy to the issues have included cultural and urban development of Muar Town; elderly-friendly design; structural integration by addition and conversion; lastly, building image formation through new ideology of existing substance and values from Tzu Chi and Buddhism.

2. Background Study

2.1. Active Aging in Place: The Best Approach for Elderly Rehabilitation

An active aging lifestyle is not measured by living alone, but the way a person functions with their daily activities. Increasing or decreasing levels of activeness is controlled based on healthcare monitoring, community involvement and financial situations (Nippak, 2010). There are many different attributes that determine active ageing, but they can be summarized to recognize the important aspects of community, financial and healthcare options available.

Aging person's anthropomorphic relationship to the previously familiar home-environment begins to be affected as the physical, social and economic changes; the social situations and sense of those familiar places also begin to change. The values and concepts regarding the old environment may no longer to stay harmony with cultural constructs which once gave them meaning. Hence, the mental and sensory abilities may no longer have significance in the old environment for the aged. (Nippak, 2010)

2.2. Social Welfare Integrating Community: Reinvigorating Active Aging in Place

Welfare is defined as the provision of a minimal level of well-being and social support for all citizens, also referred to as public aid. Welfare is mainly provided by the government, charities, informal social groups, religious groups, and intergovernmental organizations in most developed countries. Welfare centre is a place to service the needs of people of background and the wider community offering a range of programs and services such as volunteer training and support, day care for senior groups, community age care packages, vacation care centre, casework and counseling.

In contemporary culture, community is neither easily designed, nor necessarily place-based, but built rather by the actions of people over time. What inspires people to join together seems to be mutual interest rather than geographic location. The problems cannot be solved through the 'creation' of physical communities alone. People create communities, and these communities grow and change continuously. Places, however, can be built and it is the

role of designers to make sure that these places are not designed for single communities but encourage neighborliness and mutual support.

The encouragement of neighborliness and community are realized through a series of socio-spatial qualities and these qualities are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, they are interwoven with a complexity that reflects the subtle relationships between social issues and physical form. Buildings, spaces and people shall be seen as inseparable elements of a complex matrix. Architecture as the background and space of human interaction, which can be encouraged or prevented by what is built, but never has the automatic result of generating a social network. (J.J. Beaudoin, 1985)

2.3. Preservation of Historical Value: The demand of the Site (Context)

For a long time, there are three fundamental reasons for working with existing buildings: First of all, a new building is not seen as worth the investment and considered as not affordable, and so the old one is kept in use. In the second case, when the existing building has landmark status which seems to be not viable to any demolition, instead it can be incorporated into new development. The third applies when an existing structure is altered instead of demolishing it due to the attractive land use ratio of the existing building would no longer be permitted for a new one, but the existing structure is not that old to be demolished. (F.P. Jager, 2010)

When architects and clients resolve to integrate parts of old buildings into new buildings, irrespective of landmark preservation requirements, the new entity is presumed that it will profit from the presence, the functional strengths, and the historical traces of such a building. What matters is the spirit of place and the historical period that a building represents, even if it has not made history itself. (F.P. Jager, 2010) The contemporary addition also enhances the existing substances. By the act of implementing another characteristic style and architectural approach of another architect in a building endues it with a new interpretation.

3. The Context of the Site

Muar's close proximity to the river, long history of agriculture, and wet markets selling daily produce ensure the freshness of ingredients used by eateries in Muar, resulting in their fine quality. Consequently, over the years, Muar has gained a reputation for its food. Throughout Muar are numerous eateries ranging from pushcart stall to fast-food restaurants, catering to all ages and races. Besides being a necessity, food brings people together. In Muar, people congregate wherever there is good food. However, there is little interaction within races as the existing major nodes in Muar Town are biased by race. Current community is polarized accordingly to their own culture such as cuisine, custom and so on. (H.W. Ho, et al, 2011)

3.1. 'Elderly Street' in Muar Town

Jalan Haji Abu which is famous with the name Food Street or so-called Elderly Street, serves as a major node in Muar Town for the elderly at most of the coffee shops besides the old retail and small business like roadside stalls which mostly are handled by the elderly themselves. Therefore, the street serves as an active zone for this high number of elderly. The town area is a place for them to sustain themselves in living independently by setting up food stalls, collecting recycled materials, selling newspaper, working as cleaners and so on. The senior citizens will actively spend their leisure time mingling around the town area and chit-chatting among themselves. The existing active aging lifestyle among the elderly as part of the hawker culture or drinking coffee at the old shop houses collectively forms the existing fabric.

3.1.1. The Food Street: Hawker Culture

With more than 30 different hawkers, ranked the highest concentration of street food in the town. Most stalls along the street have been there for more than three generations and though the buildings remain the same. The “drive-through” character contributes significantly to the hawker’s income as it is more convenient for the road users. (H.W. Ho, et al, 2011) Though issues such as obstruction of traffic and hygiene problems have threatened its survival, hawkers have always banded together to defend it, pulling through hard times as an entity. The pushcarts are individually own the hawker and they have different ways of operating their business.

3.1.2 Existing Shop houses: Involvement of Active Elderlies

Customers to the existing coffee shops are able to purchase food items from pushcarts stalls set up along the street for consumption in the coffee shops, displaying a symbiotic relationship between the coffee shop and the Food Street. (H.W. Ho, et al, 2011) Besides coffee shops and food market which responding to the Food Street, there are Chinese praying material shop, Chinese traditional herbal shop, local Chinese food products shop and barber shop placed along the shop houses. Some of the existing shop houses also lease rental storage spaces for pushcarts in front or backyard of their shops. The town also benefits from a commercial aspect as business run by the aged actively contribute to the town’s economy. More universal design features could be incorporated to transform existing public space to be safe for the elderly.

3.2. Social Welfare: The Demand is high in Muar Town.

The economic opportunities offered by Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Singapore are far richer. Hence it is inevitable that the expectations of Muarians may have outgrown the limits of Muar itself. As a result, even more people especially the younger generation migrate to other cities hoping for better education and job opportunities and left the elderly aging independently or assistedly in place.

Consequentially, Muar has an increasingly ageing demographic. This is shown in the statistics gathered by the government, where the median age of the population in Muar has consistently been increasing from 25 years in 2007 to 28.1 years in 2010. In 1993, Tzu Chi volunteers from Melaka travelled more than 70 km to Muar with aim to visit an immobilized old man in a home visit case. It shows increasing number of cases in Muar within the next two years and the volunteers from Melaka had to make more frequent trips. In 1994, Brother David Liu of Melaka Branch was actively looking for someone from Muar to join Tzu Chi. The volunteers from Melaka have broaden their social network by making more frequent trips to Muar to carry out home visits, organize tea receptions and talks, as well as visiting schools. As a result, a few brothers and sisters who have worked with Melaka volunteers decided to form the Muar Chapter of Tzu Chi and started their mission of spreading the spirit of Tzu Chi and cultivate this field of blessings to the locals. (J. Hwang, 2008)

3.3. Preservation versus Development

From historical perspective, our relationship to the existing built fabric is extremely dynamic: Whereas, working with existing building for practical and economic reasons has generally been the rule during the two millennia since Classical Antiquity, it is getting seldom on the threshold of the Modern era in the nineteenth century. Finally, in the twentieth century, demolition followed by new construction became almost universal.

“Building preservation” often implies safeguarding and caring for a building. But it is barely to be touched or prepared for a new function. However, architects build living spaces. A landmarked building must live, or be revitalized when it stands empty. Therefore,

“Building development” is found much more contemporary where understood in the sense that people develop buildings and their surroundings further.

In this case, the two-story shop houses facing the busy Food Street with its facades are striking in yellow and pink, reflecting the vibrant colors and activities of the street holds very many memories of Muar Town since 1930’ (H.W. Ho, et al, 2011) Through partial demolition, something like an accentuation resulted. The place and the memories of it were concentrated, consolidated within the former sanctuary. It is a matter of the perception of things and their reflection, in other words the activation of an associative realm of experience. Preservation and development stands equally important to the people and their contemporary need in that place.

4. Issues

A creative approach to the existing fabric is exciting and leads to enormous complexity in the course of planning. In some cases, it is to resolve to intervene explicitly and extensively in an existing building, because otherwise no clarification. Hence, issues were identified internally and externally to be responded in the design strategy.

4.1 Cultural and Urban Issues of Muar Town

4.1.1 Traffic Congestion

Jalan Haji Abu is a one-way street, one of the busiest roads in Muar especially during the peak hour. Traffic congestion oftenly caused by “drive-through character” among the road users.

4.1.2 Racial polarization

There is little interaction within races as the existing major nodes in Muar Town are biases by race. Current community is polarized accordingly to their own culture such as cuisine, custom and so on.

4.2 Elderly as Major Users and Potential Occupants

The major users and occupants based on site context and social issue are the elderlies. Therefore, understanding of this group is essentially important to be integrated into architectural design. The realization of the elderly sets that they still want to be doing something and most of them want to be in the workforce to feel that they are still useful regardless of their age. Potential building users consists 10 percent of dependent group who has difficulty in term of mobility. Visual access of elderly and natural surveillance of public as mutual support shall be taken into consideration.

Besides, surveys show that people with sufficient money and time to enjoy their lives are among age groups of 50s and 60s. During 40s and 50s, they have no longer pay for their children’s education, they have completed repaying housing loans, and they have received retirement payments. Those who have money do not want to receive any financial help from their children, and they want to use what they have for their own living. The findings show that the time and money that can be spent freely increase from 50-64 to 65-74, but that in the 75 and over, time increases but the amount of money declines. People between ages 65-74 have sufficient time and money to spend. Therefore, the elderly are the most suitable user groups at both contributing and participating in social welfare activities.

4.3. Injecting New Life to Old Buildings

It is good to let our surroundings, with their visible and invisible influences, have an effect. It could be specific characteristics of the place have a much greater influence on the project than any building that may be there. Thus, as a basic principle, it is important to ask

ourselves what influence comes from, for example, the topography, a large tree, or an existing building or street. Ultimately, it is about making something that reacts to the place. (C. Meixner, 2010)

Every old building and its individual spaces do something to whoever wanders through them. It is hardly to comprehend and even hardly to formulate – a mixture of spatial perception, atmosphere, evidence of past use, visible historical traces, light, and material. (P.Bruckner, 2010) In this case, the existing 2-storey old shop houses and existing active aging culture holds the essence of the place which makes the elderly feel belonging even though modernity and new entity starts to enroll, injecting a new life for the existing built fabric.

4.4 Developing on Contemporary Building Image

4.4.1 Existing Fabric: Symbiotic Relationship between Old Shop Houses and its Culture

By analyzing what is encountered, the result is usually a clearly self-evident and resolute stance toward dealing with the existing situating. The spectrum thereby extends from the explicit preservation of what is encountered to its apparently complete disappearance. It is important that the architectural concept can withstand things. It must be robust enough to withstand, for instance, cutbacks in the materials or minor changes in the planning. At the same time, the basic idea shall be kept on eye; otherwise the project may suddenly no longer correspond to what you originally wanted. The persistent thinking outside the box, which must be cultivated whenever technicians and designers collaborate, is indeed often strenuous and time-consuming, but it is also enriching. (C.Meixner, 2010)

4.4.2 Tzu Chi and Buddhism

The era of temple management committees focusing only on running the temples is long past. The new social landscape demands that temples engage more actively in social services and several temples have hardly struck a balance between running a temple and engaging social services. However, it is important to bear in mind the key factors that may prevent temples from venturing into social services: finance, volunteers and expertise. Smaller temples especially have limited resources. Many temples also do not have access to volunteers or have the know-how to plan and execute social service. There is also an urgent need to look at how to facilitate their involvement of temples into social services. The development of the temple as a provider of welfare coincides with the varying strategies implemented by the community to cope with economic and social changes within society. The relationship between religion and charity has always been an intimate one. The role of a provider of charity and welfare for the less fortunate public has generally gone unnoticed and unacknowledged by the general public due to its small scale.

5. Concept and Strategy

5.1 Cultural and Urban Development of Muar Town

5.1.1. Traffic Congestion

Solution to the problem have included re-route the car flow to a better circulation where higher traffic density preferred in the wider road which is the primary or secondary road; secondly, pedestrianization; and lastly by controlling the hour for loading and unloading goods to the shop houses.

5.1.2. Racial polarization

Back lane with certain image and identity would attract pedestrian from one point to another. By fully utilizing the back lane, cultural activity provision can sustain the community and as part of charity program from the source of income for street cultural performers and kiosks.

In this case, back lane as a cultural street as well as forming linkages to connect from Jalan Haji Abu (Hawker Street) to Jalan Sisi (Bazaar) to integrate the cultural activities by different races as a whole.

5.2. Elderly-Friendly Design

The aging person's sense of identity with a place, its vivid or unique character, may no longer be recognizable as having positive, distinctive qualities. The sense of a place depends on spatial form and quality, but also on the culture and current purpose of the inhabitant. With changing physical capacities and social roles an aging person's identities with the home-environment much change if an appropriate, sensible and fulfilling life pattern is to be rediscovered. The home-environment must reacquire significance or a new environment must be found for which significance can once again be gained. The new place must provide opportunities to re-establish basic values, life processes, new historic events and a fundamental social structure. (J.J. Beaudoin, 1985)

Most of the commercial activities in the shop houses are congregated by most of the older persons, and therefore the space are specified designed according to the need of older persons by integrating working space and leisure space in order to minimize physical movement. From living conditions to social networking and mobility, new features for barrier-free access and proper traffic junctions will allow the elderly and the disabled to venture around the town easily.

5.3. Structural Integration

Culture is not static, and will lost. It has to be brought forward to adapt to modernity. We seek to perpetuate the cultural synthesis in the contemporary moment pursued in communion with local need. The shop houses evolved in term of functions and undergoing structural changes according to the local need responding to contemporary economic and social changes from time to time. Extension of space, enlargement of opening, changes in layout, addition and elimination of architectural components and etc. was applied to fulfill contemporary usage and benefits.

By modifying the floor plan, adding stories, or through extension, buildings from this period can be upgraded in such a way that they receive a new, long-term perspective. Every instance of the integration of existing structures in a new building, and every qualifying extension or renovation of an existing building equals practiced sustainability. The ecological significance lies first and foremost in the fact that an existent property that still easily fulfills its purpose continues to be used for as long as possible. Thus it is essentially a simple matter of thrifty and prudent economic management. In addition to ecological benefit that is achieved by retrofitting a building for greater energy efficiency, the savings in raw materials and energy that are attained by renovating existing buildings, as opposed to constructing new ones, should not be forgotten. (F. Schluter, 2010)

5.3.1. Addition

Addition comprises of extending, adding stories, enlarging, integrating, supplementing, rounding off, enclosing- the multitude of terms for the construction measures that can be summarized under "addition" immediately reveals the broad range of design possibilities. Gaining more space, upgrading a building to enable new uses, or enhancing the

appearance by adding a new enclosure around the existing building is the aim of addition. In this respect, “adding-on” sounds slightly crude, because the expression conveys nothing about the opportunities for qualitative gain. The architecturally attractive old building informs the newly added part, lending it aesthetic maturity and ambience. The coexistence of widely disparate layers of time and building phases contrasts attitudes; it generates unexpected rough transitions, spatial sequences, and etc. The old and the new enhance and strengthen each other, and the contrast inscribed by the architecture inspires users. The new whole is more than the sum of its parts.

5.3.2. Conversion

The new perspectives for use resulting from the conversion are often the prerequisite for the survival of an old building. Converting buildings with moderate effort is generally more economical and almost always more environmentally sustainable than the new construction. Adaptive reuse does not, however, only mean successfully putting new uses into an old shell. At best, the impression is given that a building, at the moment of its conversion, has finally achieved its true destiny once completely repaired and freed of disfiguring additions. The traces of the past become aesthetic backdrops for newly established uses. Ideas for adaptive reuse uncover the potential of buildings and give them second lives.

A successful and multifaceted connection to “place” was one consideration, the conceptual maturity of the treatment of the existing fabric another. The new building is, in this case, an expression of the active re-cultivation of places that have in the meantime depreciated or become fallow.

5.4. Building Image Formation

5.4.1. New Ideology of Existing Cultural and Town Image

The table below shows the universal value extracted from the existing building and culture to be integrate with design of new entity:

Universal value	Indicative space/ culture	Analysis
Thrifty Appreciative	Courtyard	With small pond underneath the roof’s penetration, rain water is collected and recycled for domestic usage especially washing dishware and cooking utensils
Responsible Hygienic	Hawker Culture Cleaning stall Washing dishware Maintenance of cleanliness	The addition of water source near the boundary of each hawker stall increases the convenience of cleaning process by the hawkers.
Synthesis: Lotus form of roof design incorporated with grey water harvesting system injecting new essence to the local culture. Lotus as the symbol of Buddhism		
Courtesy Respect Modest	blinds	The flexibility of blinds adjusted according to thermal comfort New comer will need to bend down to cross over forming a polite way of his/her existence
Synthesis: New intervention shall embrace modernity of current progressive society without demolishing the beauty of the past, however the past brought forward to adapt to modernity.		

Table 5.0: The existing building and culture which generate communal universal values to be integrated into design of new entity.

5.4.2. New Ideology of Tzu Chi and Buddhism

The ideology of self-reliance was intensified by Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation Malaysia as a non-profit organization, has several sub-organizations with comprehensive spanning worldwide to serve the needy. A charitable organization must improve its economic

models and update its traditional operational philosophy, proper plan on its management system, and specialize in its missions. Unlike business enterprises, nonprofit organizations center on a mission beyond generation. When the mission resonates with the need of society, this support is essential to the capacity of nonprofits volunteers are the cores of these organizations. (J. Hwang, 2008)

One of the best achievements from the volunteer group is Jing-Si bookstore and Café that shares the wisdom through books and talks, produces and sells recycled products at the same time financially sustain all charity missions. Thus, new ideology of welfare centre shall be built upon social and economic changes to fulfil the need for only certain groups, but universally as a whole.

6. Conclusion

Every architect today needs to decide, independently from the assessment of the building preservation authorities, with the understanding through the culture and people in the living context, what value shall be attached to an existing building for the purposes at hand. Owing to the criteria of the building authorities considers the value of a building as historical evidence, but not all the possibilities it offers when considered from the perspective of an open-minded observer. A lack of architectural appreciation blocks the path to the preservation of these structures, not by their structural condition. (P.Bruckner, 2010)

References

- F.P. Jager. "Old and New: Design Manual For Revitalizing Existing Buildings", The German National Library, 2010.
- K. Powell. "Architecture Reborn: The conversion and Reconstruction of Old Buildings", Laurence King Publishing, 1999.
- F. Schmertz, "New Life for Old Buildings: An Architectural Record Book", McGraw-Hill, 1982.
- S. Cantacuzino. "Saving Old Buildings", The Architectural Press London, 1980.
- H.W. Ho et al. "Muar: Tributaries and Transitions", Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore, 2011.
- The Edge, 19 February 2001, "Golden oldies" in "Survey and Guide"
- AAP (2009). National Policies and Programs on Ageing in Asia and the Pacific. Available at: http://www.unescap.org/esid/psis/publications/spps/09/2_SPP9-Part_1.pdf. Accessed on August 15, 2012
- Hamid, T. A., and Asnarulkhadi (2006). "Demography of Ageing and Community Care of the Elderly in Malaysia: Issue and Challenges", In Tey and Wong (2006), *Our People OurFuture*, University Malaya Press.
- WHO. Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide.
http://www.who.int/ageing/publications/Global_age_friendly_cities_Guide_English.pdf, accessed August 30, 2012
- Hogund, J.David. *Building Type Basics for Senior Living*. USA: John Wiley & Sons, INC, 2003.
- Brummans, B. and J. Hwang, (2008) "Tzu Chi's Organizing for a Compassionate World: Insights into the Paradoxical Nature of Buddhist Organizing." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 3(2), pp. 136-163.
- Tzu Chi Foundation. (2010), *Tzu Chi almanac 2009*. Hualien, Taiwan: Author.