Suffocation between Heartbeats

A city that forgot to exhale

A city suspended in the pause between heartbeats—caught in the tension of unspoken dreams and stifled ambitions. Its streets whisper stories of motion without progress, of buildings that climb higher but never breathe. This concept explores the urban condition where growth suffocates under its own weight, where progress is measured in concrete and steel, but the soul of the city remains breathless. A call to reimagine urban spaces not just as structures, but as living, breathing ecosystems that thrive in rhythm with the human spirit.

1786

1786: British East India Company transformed Georgetown into a crucial trading hub.

From 1800 to 1805, Governor Sir George Leith and Sir Robert Farquhar oversaw various municipal construction projects in George Town.

(1800–1802, 1803–1804), George Leith expanded urban planning into the southwest and western marshlands in 1803 to accommodate population growth

1804-1900

1869 – Industrial Revolution and the opening of the Suez Canal as well as the tin mining boom in SEA lead to Penang's prominence in tin processing.





1696-1970

1969 – Revocation of free port status in Penang:

Massive job losses, especially in port-related communities.

Outmigration of skilled youth breaks communal continuity.

Decline of traditional industries and cultural practices.

1974 – KOMTAR project begins: Hundreds of heritage buildings and homes demolished. Displacement of long-standing communities in city center.

1974-1980

Penang shifted to manufacturing by creating a Free Industrial Zone (FIZ) to attract foreign investment, reduce unemployment, and diversify its economy. FIZ refers to areas for export-oriented manufacturing, offering tax breaks and other incentives.

However, suburbanisation followed, as residents moved to FIZ areas, causing George Town's population to fall and worsening its economy.

1974-1980





2008-Present

On July 7, George Town was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for its exceptional multicultural heritage and well-preserved architecture.

Malaysia's best restored and re-adapted traditional architecture.

"Street of Harmony" = cultural and religious diversity living side by side.

Target Audience

This project is designed with a primary focus on the elderly, recognizing their deep-rooted connection to the neighborhood and the challenges they face in rapidly changing urban environments. By prioritizing comfort, safety, and familiarity, the design aims to create spaces that are not only accessible but also emotionally resonant. The project seeks to honor their lived experiences and restore a sense of belonging, dignity, and participation in the public realm.



"To not rebuild the past, but soften the present."



Table for Time

Elderly patrons reconnect over kopi and toast in a bustling hawker center—a small defiance against a city that measures progress in haste, not connection.



Market Pulse

Amid urban clamor, elders revive the heartbeat of the street through food, stories, and spontaneous laughter around a humble cart.



Keeping Traditions Alive

Amid the city's fast changes, small trades like this cushion shop quietly carry on—preserving skills, stories, and community in the everyday work of their hands.



Porch of Memory

A grandma sits where walls remember what the city forgets. Amid the rubble of urban progress, her porch becomes a threshold between survival and belonging.



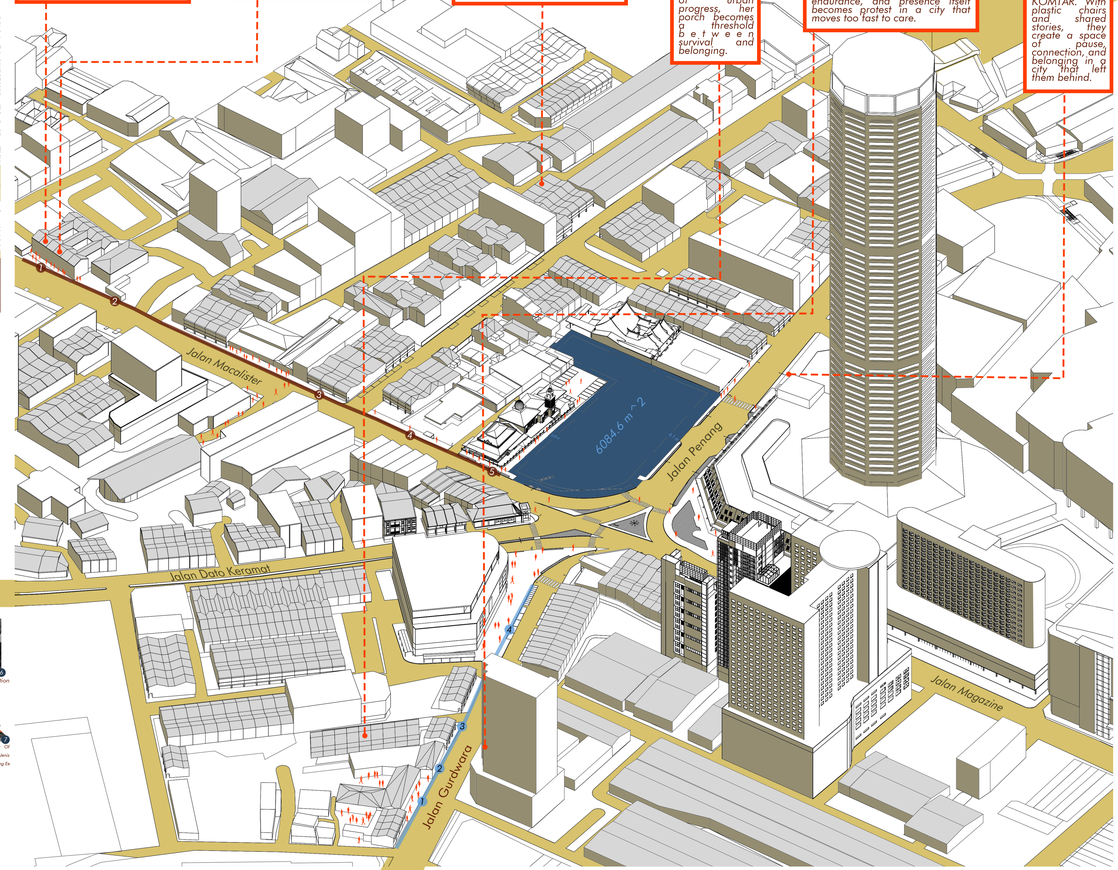
Walking Through the Noise

Two elders carry their essentials across a city that barely notices. Amid glass facades and indifferent traffic, their quiet footsteps echo a deeper truth: survival is an act of endurance, and presence itself becomes protest in a city that moves too fast to care.



A Space of Their Own

Amid the city's rush, elders reclaim a quiet corner of KOMTAR. With plastic chairs and shared stories, they create a space of pause, connection, and belonging in a city that left them behind.



Urban Morphology





SWOT

S *Rich cultural heritage (clan jetties, kopitiams, temples). Strong community memory and identity. Places like Hin Bus Depot keep the local spirit alive.*

W *Disconnected urban rhythm; city feels fragmented. Wide roads, KOMTAR, and modern malls break pedestrian flow. Elderly pushed to the margins; city lacks human scale.*

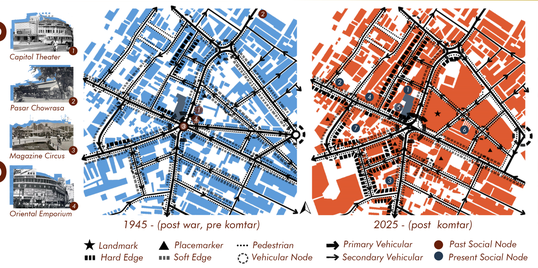
O *Reconnect spaces with shade, walkability, and pause zones. Design for memory and belonging, not just movement. Bring elders and community life back to the center.*

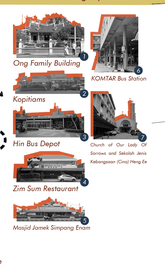
T *Development may erase heritage and push locals out. Risk of permanent disconnection — a city that grows but doesn't breathe.*

Issues

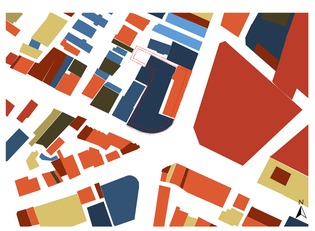


Imageability





Land Use



Contradictory zoning places churches, cafes, hotels, and voids side by side with little spatial negotiation. Car parks, alleys, and informal workshops further disrupt continuity, fragmenting the urban fabric.

Legends

- Retail & Commercial Shophouses
- Commercial Buildinngs
- Cafes & Restaurants (F&B)
- Hotels / Accomodations
- Institutional / Educational
- Public Service Facilities
- Construction Zone
- Residential + Hybrid Shophouses
- Cultural / Religious Buildings
- Parking Facilities

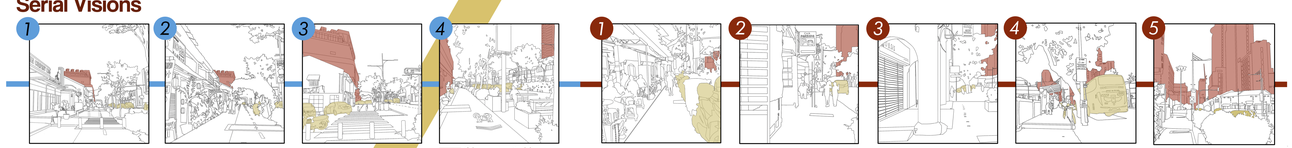
Content





A mismatch in shophouse styles disrupts the urban rhythm. Inconsistent facades, signage, and architectural details create visual noise. For older pedestrians, this lack of continuity makes navigation harder—what should be a familiar path becomes disorienting and uncomfortable.

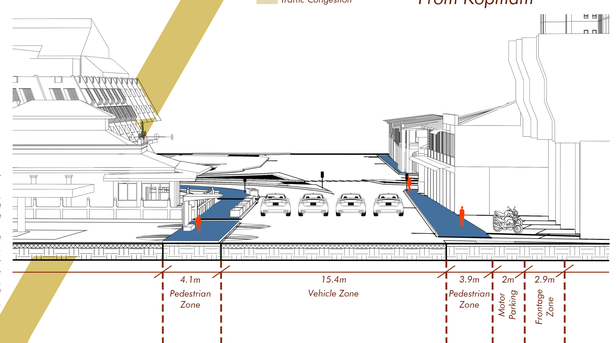
Serial Visions

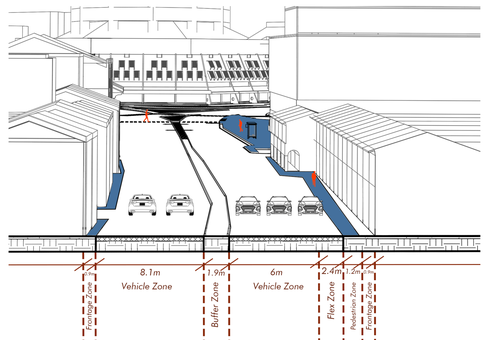


Street Design

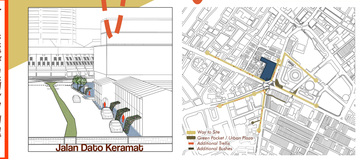


The current street design is inconsistent and prioritizes vehicles over people. Pedestrian movement is pushed to the edges, with shophouses visually and physically blocked by traffic lanes and parked cars. Even where pedestrian walkways exist, they lack essential features like shade and seating, making them uncomfortable to use. At a major intersections, thete are traffic lights but no marked crosswalks, creating unsafe conditions for those on foot. Universal design is kissing: no ramps, no tactile paving, and no clear wayfinding.

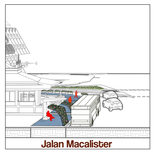




Phase 1







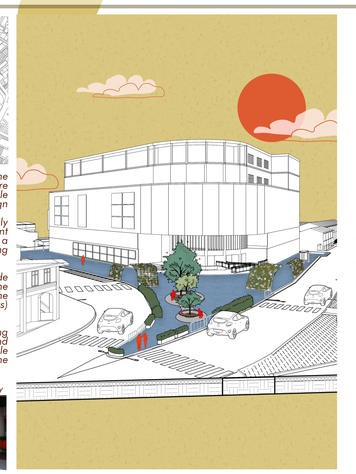
Phase 1 focuses on transforming the existing walkway into a safer, more comfortable, and more enjoyable pedestrian experience. The design introduces several key elements: Trellises with scented flowers not only provide shade and a pleasant walking experience, but also act as a buffer from nearby traffic, improving safety.

Green pockets, some placed inside small alleys, offer resting spots for the elderly as they walk from the surrounding activity points (magnets) toward our site.

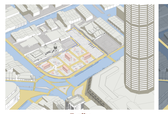
The urban plaza creates a welcoming social space with seating and gathering areas, encouraging people to stay longer and engage with the site.

Precedent Study: Hin Bus Depot Walkway



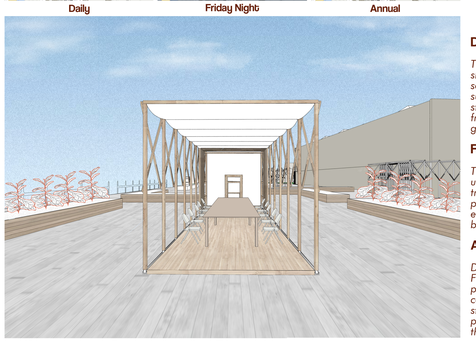


Phase 2











Precedent Study: Pop-In, Pop-Out, Pop-Up: Collapsible Street Cinema

Daily

The structure, extended out, provides shade for the people to relax, garden, and socialize. Planter boxes around the site support planting activities, and the structure serves as a spot to rest, eat food from nearby kopitiams, or play traditional games.

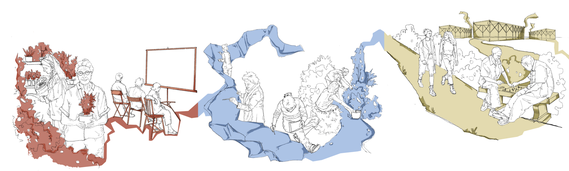
Friday Night

The canopy folds in and a projector is set up in front of the structure. The site transforms into an open-air cinema where people gather to watch classic films while enjoying food from nearby rickshaws, bringing back the lost cinema culture.

Annual

During annual events like the Georgetown Festival, the structure becomes a space for public art and performance. Locals can contribute to a shared canvas hung on the structure, while musical and dance performances activate the space throughout the event.

Impact Analysis



Social Impact

Instead of recreating the past, the focus is on easing the present—especially for elders—by creating familiar, inclusive spaces that support dignity, memory, and community connection

(Year 5)

Result: Daily planting and Friday films become emotional anchors for elders, restoring rhythm and belonging.

- Supports Person–Process bond: memory builds place attachment.

Cultural Impact

Cultural ownership is shifted to local communities, empowering them to shape and celebrate their own stories, traditions, and identity through everyday spaces.

(Year 5)

Result: Locals co-create space through shared rituals, building pride and continuity.

- Reflects Place–Social bond: identity grows from participation.

Environmental Impact

Encourages walkability and reduces car dependency to lower carbon footprint. Human-scaled, green design promotes healthier, more sustainable urban living.

(Year 5)

Result: Slower, greener spaces reduce emissions and invite care.

- Fulfills Process–Place loop: routine leads to protection.

Tripartite Model of Place Attachment

According to Scannell and Gifford's Tripartite Model of Place Attachment, there are 3 different dimension. At the person level, it supports individual connections through comfort-driven design and group identity through shared social spaces. The psychological process is addressed emotionally (through nostalgic elements), cognitively (by reinforcing a sense of place), and behaviorally (via routines like walking, resting, and attending events). The place dimension ties to both physical features—like trellises and plazas—and their social meanings as hubs of memory, culture, and community. Altogether, the design fosters emotional attachment, belonging, and continued engagement for older adults in the evolving urban fabric.