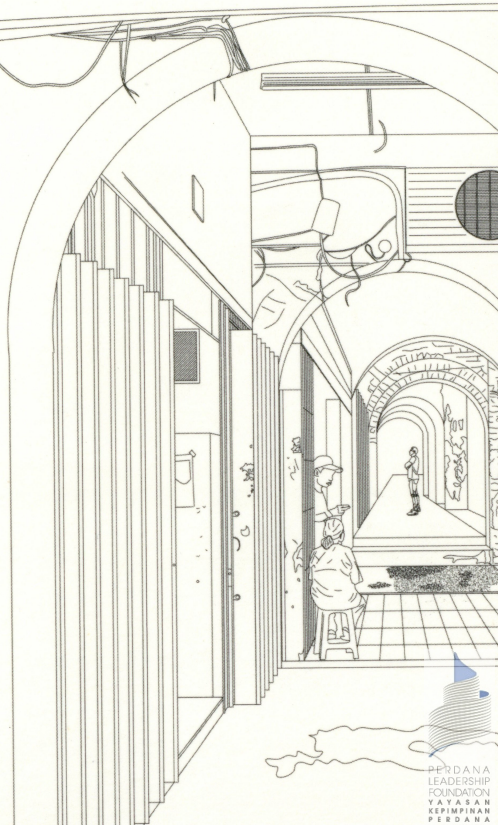


KAKI LIMA STORIES

LIFE IN THE FIVE-FOOT WAYS OF
DOWNTOWN KUALA LUMPUR

Camelia Kusumo
Lee Sze-Ee





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Dearest Tun Mahathir,
Happy 100th
Birthday!

LIFE IN THE FIVE-FOOT WAYS OF
DOWNTOWN KUALA LUMPUR

KAKI
LIMA

Warmest Regards,
Niap Ming



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FOREWORD

by Hamdan Abdul Majeed,
Managing Director of Think City.

As you explore Downtown Kuala Lumpur, you may have noticed the covered walkways in front of shop lots or shophouses, known as *kaki lima* or five-foot ways. Have you ever taken the time to observe the vibrant activities taking place within these spaces? Have you ever wondered about their purpose and how they contribute to the local economy?

The answers to these intriguing questions can be found within the pages of a remarkable book titled "*Kaki Lima Stories – Life in the Five-Foot Ways of Downtown Kuala Lumpur*". This publication has been made possible with the support of the Downtown Kuala Lumpur Grants Programme. It sheds light on the historical and cultural significance of *kaki lima* and explores their contemporary usage. The insights gleaned from this cultural endeavour highlight how history and culture have shaped these spaces and continue to influence their present-day role.

This book is a part of Think City's efforts to activate the Kuala Lumpur Creative and Cultural District (KLCCD) Strategic Master Plan, under the auspices of the Ministry of Finance (MoF). Supported by the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL), Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, National Heritage Department and Yayasan Hasanah. The aim of KLCCD is to rejuvenate and revitalise the historic areas of Kuala Lumpur, showcasing their rich heritage and enhancing their allure to visitors through arts and culture.

On behalf of Think City, I would like to congratulate the authors and the Taylor's University team, led by Camelia Kusumo and Lee Sze-ee, for crafting this insightful book together. This book is a valuable resource that provides readers with a deeper understanding of Kaki-lima and their significance, both now and for generations to come.





INTRODUCTION

Five-foot ways or '*Kaki Lima*' are an important feature in historical urban centres of tropical Southeast Asian cities. These colonnades along the rows of commercial shop houses provide comfortable pedestrian walkways in the hot and humid urban centre. Additionally, they provide a behaviour setting for many 'sticky' activities to take place in these passageways. However, due to their comfort, they attract the privatization of the walkways by some of the property owners. In their attempt to rejuvenate urban neighbourhoods, the local authorities often clear up everything along the pedestrian ways and the Improving Street of Kuala Lumpur report¹ suggested that these seemingly 'chaotic' five-foot ways are considered obsolete for the city revitalization due to their discontinuity and multi-level pavements.

Despite the decline of the liveability in many Malaysian historical urban centres, the streets with five-foot ways have proven their resilience. The *kaki lima* in the historical urban centres of Malaysia are bustling and alive. Traditionally, five-footways serve as a place for micro-culture in Malaysia. Five-foot ways do not only act as a place for trading activities, but also as a low-barrier space to which everyone has access². To a certain extent, it provides a space for informal economy to take place. The stationary activities along the five-foot ways in Kuala Lumpur historic core are diverse and rich in cultural meaning. While the necessary activities such as eating and grocery shopping contribute largely to the liveability of the place, many of those activities are influenced by the ethnic diversity of the people who live and work in Kuala Lumpur. The uniqueness of the eating culture gives an added value to the stickiness of the place, it makes it possible to create a place for meeting: for seeing, hearing, talking, and having visual contact.



Therefore, the book explores the richness, the diversity and the beauty of life along five-foot ways in the Downtown Kuala Lumpur. It captures not only how the physical attributes of the five-foot ways in the historic core of Kuala Lumpur contribute to the 'stickiness' of the street, but also the human stories along the five-foot way.

The book starts with *kaki lima* stories from Southeast Asia, particularly from the nations adjacent to the Straits of Malacca. After a short review on the theoretical background of the importance of the *kaki lima* sticky activities for the city's liveliness, the book investigates the five-footway as the generator of the public realm by capturing the stories of the people in *kaki lima* and illustrating how the physical attributes of the 31 *kaki lima* sticky activities contribute to the livability of downtown Kuala Lumpur. These activities might slow down the movement, but this is exactly what makes the pedestrians concentrate on *kaki lima* and makes public space great.

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A Singapore Story

A Sheltered Bustle: Singapore's Five-foot ways

by Fiona Lim

In the late 19th and right up to the mid-20th century, an assortment of traders, from tinsmiths, barbers and cobblers to letter writers and parrot astrologers, conducted their businesses along the five-foot ways, while hawkers peddled food, drinks and even household sundries. Operating in the five-foot way required minimal capital, therefore it was the most viable option for those with little means. In turn, vendors could provide essential goods and services to consumers cheaply. The five-foot way came to sustain the economic and social life of a working class of mainly immigrants who had come to Singapore to find work, hoping to give their families back home a better life.

The five-foot way was originally intended for the use of pedestrians. Not only would the sheltered path provide respite from the tropical heat or a sudden downpour, it also served as a safe path away from road traffic. However, over time, the Asian communities began to use the five-foot way for their own purposes, according to their needs and the realities of the day. The five-foot ways in the town's Asian quarters teemed with so much obstruction and activity that pedestrians were often forced onto the road.

Pragmatic shop owners often used the five-foot way outside their shop to store or display goods. The more enterprising ones rented out parcels of space to other small vendors—an attractive deal considering the good flow of human traffic and low overheads. Soon, all sorts of trades and activities began occupying the five-foot ways.

BUSTLING FIVE-FOOT WAYS

In the Kampong Glam district, designated as the Arab quarters in Stamford Raffles's 1822 Town Plan, the five-foot ways became thriving sites for Bugis, Arab and Javanese businesses and all manner of Islamic trade. On Arab Street, historically referred to as Kampong Java, Javanese women sold flowers along the shophouse verandahs. So famous was this street for its flower trade that it was known as *Pookadei Sadakku* (Flower Street) in Tamil.





An itinerant satay seller on the five-foot way, c. 1911. Andrew Tan Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



Meanwhile, lined up along the five-foot ways of nearby Bussorah Street were *ambin*, or platforms, on which people could rest or have a shuteye. Rosli bin Ridzwan, who grew up on Bussorah Street, recalled that whenever an elderly person was seated on the *ambin*, younger ones would greet him or her and promptly walk on the road alongside as a show of deference ¹.

The most common occupant of the five-foot way was probably the food vendor. Hawkers were either itinerant, meaning they would move around looking for customers, or they might occupy a fixed spot on the five-foot way or on the kerbside, sometimes even extending their makeshift stalls onto the road with tables and chairs. All manner of food was sold, including satay, *laksa*, "tok-tok" noodle, *putu mayam* and *kacang puteh*. During lull periods, some hawkers laid down their wares and took a nap in the five-foot ways.

Besides food, one could find tradesmen and women engaging in various occupations that supported the inhabitants of the densely populated Chinatown. Letter-writers armed with ink and brush penned letters for illiterate customers or wrote festive couplets for Chinese celebrations ². Barbers simply pulled out a chair and hung a mirror on the wall in front before providing haircuts and shaves for customers ³.

Foong Lai Kum, a former resident of Chinatown, remembered a man known as *jiandao lao* (剪刀佬; colloquially 'Scissors Guy' in Mandarin) plying his trade on the five-foot way of Sago Lane, sharpening the scissors used by young women working at rubber factories, or the knives used by hawkers or butchers. And, thanks to the itinerant pot mender, one never had to shell out money for a new pot ⁴.

Five-foot way traders were also found in the Serangoon Road area, today's Little India. The lady selling *thairu* (curd) would be perched on a step, with packets of the Indian staple displayed on a wooden crate. On another five-foot way nearby was the *paanwalla*, who prepared the betel-leaf-wrapped snack known as *paan*. Indian parrot astrologers were also a common sight: based on the customer's name and date of birth, these fortune tellers used green parakeets to pick a numbered card inscribed with the customer's fortune from a stack ⁵.

During festive occasions like Hari Raya, Deepavali and Chinese New Year, shop owners and vendors packed the five-foot ways, with their goods often spilling onto the streets. And whenever a *wayang* (Chinese opera) performance or other communal event was staged, the five-foot way became part of the viewing arena.

At dusk, as traders wound up for the day, residents gathered at the five-foot way for a conversation, to smoke opium or just enjoy the fresh air. Many shophouse residences were occupied by coolies and *samsui* women, who each rented a tiny cubicle out of the many that had been carved up for subletting in a single unit. This resulted in cramped living quarters with poor ventilation. Unsurprisingly, residents preferred to relax outdoors after a hard day's work, and often the only available space was the five-foot way below. Some even opted to sleep there at night as it was airier than their dank and overcrowded cubicles ⁶.

The five-foot way did not merely serve economic needs – it was also a space for social interaction. Rather than being just a "conduit for human traffic" as it had originally been intended, academic Brenda S.A. Yeoh suggests that Asians perceived the five-foot way in a "more ambivalent light", such that the space was "sufficiently elastic to allow the co-existence of definitions"⁷. It was precisely this flexibility of use that created the colourful multiplicity of local life found in the five-foot ways.



A PUBLIC HEALTH THREAT

While mundane daily life unfolded in the five-foot ways, the authorities were dogged by sanitary issues such as clogged drains and sometimes even abandoned corpses. A strongly worded letter published in *The Straits Times* in 1892 by the municipal health officer accused "vagrant stallholders" of dumping refuse and bodily excretions into drains, causing an "abominable stench"⁸.

An exasperated member of the public echoed this sentiment in 1925, calling the obstruction by hawkers a "grave menace not only to the safety but also to the cleanliness and order of the town"⁹. The congestion of the five-foot ways prevented the municipality from carrying out sanitation works, such as the maintenance of drains. Over the years, the campaign to remove five-foot way obstruction was often couched in the interests of public health and hygiene. Adding to the public health threat was the issue of visual disorder, which was also anathema to the government.

WHOSE RIGHT OF WAY?

As the public and private spheres met in the liminal space of the five-foot way, conflict over the right of use became inevitable. Almost from the very start, the verandah had been a thorny issue for the municipal authorities. Members of the public – mainly Europeans – expressed their frustration at having to jostle for space with vendors and their wares, along with shops whose goods occupied the entire walkway and the odd coolie having a siesta. Complaints revolved around the "risk of sunstroke or being run over" as pedestrians had to walk along the side of the road¹⁰. Meanwhile, the municipality faced great difficulty in regulating the verandah for pedestrian use.

Conflict over the use of the footways persisted for over a century, with the "Verandah Question" becoming a hotly debated topic in many municipal meetings. In 1863, it seemed that the municipal commissioners and frustrated pedestrians had won the battle when the court ruled that all verandahs were to be "completely cleared and made available for passenger traffic"¹¹.



However, as few people actually adhered to the regulation, the encumbrance of the five-foot ways continued, much to the chagrin of law enforcers. Finally, in July 1887, legislation was passed granting municipal officers the power to forcefully clear the five-foot ways and streets of any obstructions. The perceived incursion into the space used by the Asian communities resulted in a three-day strike and riot in February 1888.

Nonetheless, the five-foot way trade and the various obstructions continued unabated—as did complaints by the Europeans—with the Asians fighting back against any threat to their livelihoods and way of life. At the end of the 19th century, the municipal authorities decided that it would be impossible to enforce a completely free passageway; instead, they sought a compromise such that vendors could carry on with their trades as long as they were itinerant and did not encroach on any particular area for prolonged periods.

By 1899, the five-foot way problem was referred to as the “very old Verandah Question” in the press¹², with the situation devolving into a game of “whack-a-mole” as officials sought out “obstructionists” and meted out fines to offenders. On 26 September 1900 alone, 70 individuals were fined \$5 each for obstructing the five-foot way¹³. However, as the sheltered walkway was a transient space that saw the movement of both humans and goods, the task of completely eradicating occupation of the five-foot ways proved rather onerous. A letter to *The Straits Times* in 1925 said as much: “The most insidious and worst kind of obstruction is the temporary one. It consists generally of merchandise being either despatched from or received into a godown. In reality the obstruction is permanent, because as soon as one lot is removed another takes its place.”¹⁴

From 1907 onwards, night street food hawkers were subject to licensing by the authorities. After Singapore's independence in 1965, food peddlers were moved into new standalone hawker centres. Nevertheless, the occasional itinerant food vendor could still be spotted along five-foot ways up until the 1980s. Over time, other five-foot way traders also disappeared as the rules and their enforcement were tightened. Those with the means could relocate to a permanent location, while others simply gave up their trade for good.

RESURGENCE OF AN OLD PROBLEM

In 1998, the problem resurfaced when Emerald Hill in the Orchard Road district was redeveloped into a nightlife area. To promote vibrancy in Emerald Hill, the Urban Redevelopment Authority permitted the use of the five-foot way for food-and-beverage businesses. However, this drew the ire of a long-time resident, who said she was deprived of "the seamless, sheltered stroll she used to enjoy", denying her the "equal right to that public space as intended by the town planners of yore"¹⁵.

In 2015, the popular nightlife at Circular Road near Boat Quay came under threat when the Land Transport Authority became stricter with countering pavement obstruction. Officials spotted "goods, tables and other materials" that had been "untidily" laid out on the streets, five-foot ways and back lanes of shophouses. This led to pedestrians having to skirt these obstructions and walk along the side of roads, causing them "inconvenience and danger"¹⁶—a refrain that harks back to as early as the 1840s.

But one thing has changed: the use of the five-foot way for business is today framed in terms of culture and heritage as people feel that allowing a more flexible use of the five-foot way would help preserve the "city's character"¹⁷. These days, albeit rarely, one may still encounter a cobbler, florist or tailor on the five-foot ways of Little India, Chinatown or Kampong Gelam, or shophouse businesses using the walkway space in front to display their goods.



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An Indonesia Story

The Five-foot way Story

by Johannes Widodo

THE ORIGIN OF THE TYPOLOGY

The story of the five-foot way in the shophouse typology in Southeast Asia relates to the shophouse typology and morphological history of cosmopolitan coastal cities in this region. The shophouse, generically called a townhouse, is a unique architectural typology commonly found in urban areas throughout Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

In Southern China, the origin of most Chinese immigrants from Southeast Asia, the traditional shophouse unit typology is based on a timber frame structure, where the structural load from the roof and the entire building is carried to the ground by the timber post and lintel structure. The narrow façade is made of timber components assembled in a knock-down system for optimum flexibility of the front room usage, such as a living room doubled as a shop, an eatery, a clinic, etc. When the façade is fully opened, the room can be used as a shop, workshop, or ceremonial space. The individual verandah on the façade is the transitional space from the street into the front room.

Several individual shophouse units form a row along the street, and each unit is separated by a dividing wall that includes the verandah or terrace. The shared terrace or interconnected verandah is usually created for adjacent units with common ownership or kinship. Otherwise, the verandah is an individual, not a common public space. An example of the interconnected verandah can be found in the Hakka settlements in the mountainous region of Fujian and Guangdong provinces, while in coastal cities in the same region like Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Xiamen, etc., the oldest shophouse typology outside the city wall close to the harbour area, where the Southeast Asian typology was derived from, is individualised.





Old Shophouse in
Quanzhou, Fujian, China
(1992)



Shophouse with individual
tropical verandah in
Jakarta (1993)

TYPOLOGICAL TRANSPLANTATION IN THE URBAN TROPIC OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

The shophouse typology was transplanted into the coastal cities of Southeast Asia around the nineteenth century when European colonial powers established trading ports in the region and the influx of immigrants from Southern China, India, and Arabia. During this period, migrants from those regions moved to Southeast Asia and established themselves as traders and merchants within the morphological structure of the port cities.

Builders from various cultural backgrounds and craftsmanship adapted traditional shophouse typology from the temperate region of southern China to the local tropical climate to meet the urban population's demand for trading activities, comfortable living, and local dwelling culture. They created a new hybrid typology by mixing the European structural load-bearing walls and construction system with traditional building craftsmanship and knowledge from their ancestral places and the local context. The locally available building materials, such as the length of the timber, and Dutch property taxation system influenced the unit's width, which is based on the property's width, not the length, like, for example, in the Dutch's Melaka and Batavia. The tropical condition in warm-humid Southeast Asia required better protection against the sun and rain, with larger roof protrusion towards the street to cover the terrace, compared to the temperate or four-season climate in the northern hemisphere. The shophouse's subsequent development in colonial towns in Indonesia kept the verandah as an individual and not interconnected feature.

Sir Stamford Raffles, a British colonial administrator credited with founding the city of Singapore in 1819, is often associated with the five-foot way, a distinct architectural feature found in historic shophouses throughout Southeast Asia. Raffles was instrumental in developing Singapore as a trading hub, and he recognised the importance of creating a built environment that would support this activity. He did this by introducing regulations that required all new buildings to have a covered walkway in front of the ground floor, which would provide shelter from the tropical sun and rain. This covered walkway, which came to be known as the five-foot way, was designed to serve as a pedestrian thoroughfare while also providing space for outdoor commercial activity. Raffles believed this feature was essential to creating a vibrant and bustling trading centre. The British regulation stipulated that the walkway had

to be five feet wide (hence the name "five-foot way") and at least eight feet in height to allow for unobstructed passage. The covered walkway was considered a public space designed to serve as a pedestrian thoroughfare while providing space for outdoor commercial activity.

FIVE-FOOT WAY IN INDONESIA

George Town, Penang and Medan in North Sumatra have similarities in their urban planning and architecture due to the close trading relationships across the Straits of Melaka from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Although the direct influence of British planners from Penang on urban planning and architecture in Medan is not well documented, the influence on shophouse typology in terms of similarities can be seen. It is possible that British planners from Penang may have had some indirect influence on the development of Medan. Penang and Medan were both important trading ports in the region, and ideas and techniques related to urban planning and architecture were likely shared between the two cities. Additionally, some British architects and engineers may have worked in Medan during the colonial period. Their ideas and approaches could have influenced the city's-built environment, including the five-foot way along Kesawan Street, the main shopping and commercial area in Medan.

During the Dutch colonial period in the early nineteenth century, Bandung, a city located in the province of West Java, was developed as a hill station to provide relief from the hot and humid climate of the lowlands. The city was transformed from a small town to a major urban centre in the early 20th century, especially when it was planned as the new capital for the Dutch Netherlands Indies in the 1930s, by constructing new buildings, roads, and public spaces. This development period was marked by construction of many Art Deco and Modernist buildings designed to showcase the city's modernity and prosperity. The five-foot way in Bandung was introduced during this time, to



provide shelter from the tropical sun and rain for pedestrians and customers visiting the shophouses lining the city's streets in the commercial area, especially around the new market (Jalan Pasar Baru) and the area at the city centre. The five-foot way was also an important feature for social and cultural reasons. It provided a space for people to interact with each other and created a sense of community among the residents and shop owners. It also allowed for the display of goods and merchandise, adding to the vibrancy and character of the streetscape.

In Yogyakarta, the five-foot way was first introduced during the reign of Sultan Hamengkubuwono I in the late 18th century. The Sultan was known for his efforts to modernise the city and improve its infrastructure, including constructing roads and buildings. The five-foot way was one of the innovations introduced by the Sultan to improve the city's urban environment. In Yogyakarta, it is not uncommon to find *Lesehan* dining areas set up in the five-foot ways of shophouses. *Lesehan* is a Javanese term that refers to a style of dining where people sit on the floor, often on mats or cushions, and eat with their hands. *Lesehan* is a popular dining style in Yogyakarta, especially in the markets and street food stalls. These spaces are often decorated with colourful fabrics and cushions, and customers can sit cross-legged on mats or low tables while they enjoy their meals. The combination of the five-foot way and *lesehan* dining creates a unique cultural experience for visitors to Yogyakarta. It allows people to immerse themselves in the city's traditional architecture and culinary culture simultaneously.





Shophouse with five-foot way in Kesawan, Medan (1998)





Opposite page:
Shophouse with five-
foot way in Kesawan,
Medan (1998)

This page, from top
Vendors in Pasar Baru,
Bandung (2004)

Vendors in Malioboro,
Yogya (1993)

Leshan in Malioboro,
Yogyakarta (Source:
Creative Common/
Flickr - [https://
www.flickr.com/
hotos/130075348@
N08/52060895408](https://www.flickr.com/photos/130075348@N08/52060895408))

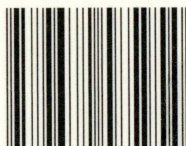
The Kaki Lima is a delightful little book that unfolds the urban aesthetics of the five-foot way that is a common typology to Asian cities. With urbanization, the five-foot way has undergone many changes and challenges, leading to a series of spatial outcomes that add vibrancy particularly to the Kuala Lumpur urban condition. This book provides a curated set of drawings and mappings of five-foot ways, in narrating these urban qualities.

Associate Professor Dr. Veronica Ng,
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