



SEATIDE Online Paper 6

**A Flat with a View.  
Real Estate and Industrial Work in Penang**

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Followed by a response to 'A Flat with a View.  
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# A Flat with a View. Real Estate and Industrial Work in Penang

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*“We see the worlding city as a milieu of intervention, a source of ambitious visions, and of speculative experiments that have different possibilities of success and failure [...] Such experiments cannot be conceptually reduced to instantiations of universal logics of capitalism or post-colonialism. They must be understood as worlding practices, those that pursue world recognition in the midst of inter-city rivalry and globalized contingency.” (Roy, A., Ong, A., 2011: xv)*

## Introduction

George Town has been ranked as the most liveable city in Malaysia, eighth most liveable in Asia and the 62nd in the world in 2010 by [ECA International](#), an improvement in ranking from recent years. (Wikipedia)

This is a reflection on what a place is, what it means for those who inhabit it and for those who frequently relate to it, whether in a practical, day-to-day, month-to-month way or in an imaginary way. It is also a reflection on what has to be borne in mind when actions are undertaken that modify permanently inhabited environments and landscapes. The chosen example is Penang: an island with an English-founded harbour city, Georgetown, now expanding its conurbation to most of its territory. This paper, then, also considers some aspects of what makes a city in Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>.

Penang proposes a model of “cultural”, human, high-standard life environment. While megalopoli such as Jakarta, Manila or Bangkok endlessly expand to include formerly farmed land into chaotic, unplanned suburbs, Penang can be inscribed into another type of modern Asian city – the island city, like Singapore, Hong-Kong and Macao, limited in its expansion by the sea and sharply called to manage whatever part of its land is not built yet (the majority of the island, in this case). From an imaginary perspective Penang also connects to New York, San Francisco and other harbour-cities featuring famous bridges with their much advertised images: the marathons, the postcards, the standard modern-romantic panoramic sights. Because of its exemplary role, Penang can be ranged amongst what Aihwa Ong (2011) regards as “worlding cities”: urban poles that consciously fabricate globality by intercepting various streams of political, economic, social and cultural transnational powers, including competition with other cities, close by or far away.

The starting point of my analysis is a feeling. Feelings can seem simple and intuitive. One feels something and this comes as an intimate sensation, a personal, non-motivated idea: but it is often a crossover of historical, political and economic considerations (Tsing 2012).

The feeling I discuss here is that Penang is losing its islandness, its shape and its views and visions while making ever renewed efforts of self-definition which are grounded in a discourse on its islandness, its shape and its views and visions.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this writing to the late S. Muniandy.

Through the analysis of a day-by-day visual experience I will consider the contemporary discourse about Penang (Penang, the cultural island blessed with beaches, heritage buildings and modern shopping malls) as opposed to the silence about what is at work in Penang (industrial work, migrant work, low-paid and average-paid work, undocumented work). I will highlight that what is considered as an example of successful Southeast Asian integration can also withhold the basis of some people's definitive exclusion from the prosperity they contributed to create. This is nothing new; but I will show that my contrasted feelings about Penang's merchandised vision of itself as a cultural city echo the dangers of such policy for the citizens of the island, and their concerns.

I will also show that while developmental studies are more and more often using the word "integration" to define successful modernity, the word "development" falls back into its most material, English-grounded meaning: real estate, building site, building enterprises, cement, houses, and streets. So this paper is also about development and developers of houses<sup>2</sup>.

## **1. The best views in the island**

In 1991, when I first came to Penang and was taken on a motorbike ride from the city to Teluk Bahang, I was impressed by the constantly changing views of the sea which I experienced along the way. The Northern coastal road lined with big trees would in turn unveil sights of the sea, of Malay villages, of an Indian temple on the shore and signs of fishing activity – boats, nets, fish, petrol tanks, people. In Batu Feringhi, some luxury hotels had been built but only the Rasa Sayang blocked the passer-by's vision of the sea.

The North Coast was very different from the city, Georgetown, which was, then, where "things happened": important offices, the main religious centres, the prestigious schools, the hospital were all included in the area and in its extensions, Jelutong and Gelugor. In town, one was reminded of the sea by the reference to the arrival of the ferry and the colonial buildings. It was a functional sea. At that time, the Komtar, a high-rise building built between 1974 and 1988 for commercial and administrative purposes, was the official symbol of Penang's contrast between tradition and modernity: it offered the first aerial, "breath-taking" sight of the sea but was not defined by it but by the radical discontinuity with the surrounding traditional Chinese habitat. Of course, I am not talking of 1950 Penang. Gurney drive was already on the way to be completely built up in high-rise towers; outside town, Paya Terubung, Farlim, and the whole neighbourhood of Bayan Baru were expanding rapidly. But they were not the places I was taken to by a young Indian Penangite who wanted to introduce me to the best of his island. In fact, the sweet Northern Coast he took me to was the symbol of modern, enjoyable Penang, what the island intentionally tended towards and so far, what I (a 30 year-old anthropologist interested in rituals) thoroughly enjoyed. As my guide repeatedly said, in Penang one could experience everything. Luxury and tradition, the sea and the city, black men and white women. In this touristy attitude, my chaperon was defining himself as a citizen of global modernity by attempting to convince me that he came from the best place ever, where diversity was represented and assembled in harmony. He was actually voicing a developmental plan which would soon invest the whole island, beginning right from the North Coast: I, a foreigner, was the perfect listener.

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Anil Netto for his precious reading of this paper as well as for his long enlightning and supporting friendship. Of course, this text stays under my entire responsibility.

The “Make Malaysia Second Home” plan reads:

*“MALAYSIA WELCOMES THE WORLD - Retiring in Malaysia*

*The Malaysia My 2nd Home is open to all citizens of countries recognized by Malaysia regardless of race, religion, gender or age. ([http://penang-property.com/malayisa\\_mm2h.htm](http://penang-property.com/malayisa_mm2h.htm))*

*The cost of living in Malaysia is comparatively low for foreigners, joining the MM2H program can give you the lifestyle you have always wanted. Malaysia is an amazing multi-cultural country with thousands of places to eat and visit, incredible scenery and some of the most diverse wildlife in the world – what are you waiting for?” (<http://www.mm2h.eu>)*

This plan justified building, developing, and investing, a major asset for Malaysia; conversely, it also described what imaginary of prosperity Malaysia was putting forward. As Marc Augé highlighted in his book on real estate ads for secondary residences, the language used to describe a person’s second house bespeaks that person’s society’s dreams of opulence (Augé 1989: 26).

Since 1991, I have been taking the road from Georgetown to Teluk Bahang over and over with a growing feeling of oppression. High-rise buildings have mushroomed. The tree tops, which used to be the sole hindrance to the sea view from the road, have become the least relevant one as the space between them and the sea, and them and the steep hillsides on the opposite side, has filled with luxury high-rise condominiums and a few malls. In 2006, the very shape of the island changed as a large portion of land (240 ha.) was reclaimed in Tanjung Pinang (Seri Tanjung Pinang Phase I), featuring an enormous and massive building, a mall, which hides from the passer-by’s view a very exclusive neighbourhood of family houses. A massive Seri Tanjung Pinang Phase II is now in progress, literally a new island alongside the first reclaimed portion promising more exclusivity and paradisiac waterfronts but blocking the view to both the inhabitants and the strollers of Gurney drive (see [www.penangproperties.my](http://www.penangproperties.my)).

While in Penang all the developers were boasting the view on the sea of their freshly built condominiums, the sea disappeared from my, or the passer-by’s, sight, if we exclude some “panoramic” spots where everybody is supposed to stop, take a picture and move on. The feeling was that except for those small, pre-selected spots, visions of the sea were to be sold to the exclusive, possibly foreign new owners of exclusive flats. Seeing the sea was then, in Augé’s terms, a dream of opulence but no longer a daily visual experience.

The sea has become an unregulated commercial value, a decoration to a living room. Most of the luxury condominiums of the North Coast are equipped with a swimming pool because the Strait of Melaka is a polluted sea (Rusli, M. H. B. M., 2012) and its waves can be dangerous, so the “waterfront” is more a scenery than a playground. Ships do not inhabit its vision of jet-ski, sailing boats and wealth. “Where the city meets the sea”, recites the outer fence of a building site right in Georgetown, very close to the harbour: images of deckchairs by the rising sun do not include the passage of the ferry.

While the North coast filled up, the sea started to seem valuable to developers on the whole of the island. All the more so since the second bridge was inaugurated (2014) and what used to be the remotest area of the island, Batu Maung and the small town of Balik Pulau (literally meaning “the back of the island”), became well connected to the key points of the island. Building sites and their promising fences sprouted everywhere and they all boasted the precious view in their very

name: the South Bay project, the Light Waterfront, the Andaman Quayside. At Bayan Mutiara, a large plot of land was sold by the State to the developers. As in the North Coast, sea views are regulated and enclosed in specific spots. In front of Queensbay, a large mall that one can reach directly from the expressway, a site has been prepared for people to stroll while taking a look at the Second Bridge. There, young couples take their selfie while brides in white have their marriage pictures taken in glamour.

A landscape architect, Sally Bonn (2008), emphasizes that the control of people's points of view is fundamental to the construction of a landscape. Drawing on Foucault's idea of "device of vision", Bonn reminds us that landscapes produce subjectivity and exist only by the subjectivity they produce. The regulation of the points of view is essential to the touristic and real-estate driven image of Penang as it constructs an imaginary possibility for everyone, not only for the few who actually buy the properties. It is a specific, compelling promised vista. A virtual landscape on the edge of concretization. Who would disagree that living in the apartments described on the outer fences of the building sites and on the websites of the companies is nice, pleasant and satisfying? It is the ideal of a higher middle class family, who appreciates culture in its appropriate spots (the heritage buildings, a museum, a restaurant), sea in its appropriate settings (under their eyes, out of their windows), and rest in its appropriate days (a lazy Sunday morning on the deckchairs).

Of course, only some people are allowed to buy the promised vista for themselves; it's called "exclusive" because that is what it does – it excludes. In theory, all the new condominiums should feature "affordable" flats, that is, between 70.000 and 400.000 RM – but this is not really affordable by a majority of Penangites. On the contrary, the promised vista requires a resettling of the whole island. The fact that actual residents of the island face the risk of being completely evicted from it is so blatant that the State Government has started the construction of five lots of public housing both on the island (below 400.000 RM) and on the mainland (below 250.000 RM): the office handling the requests was literally assaulted when it opened.<sup>3</sup>

The feeling of oppression I mentioned as the starting point of this paper, then, withholds a complex articulation of visions in time. Back in 1991, I loved the ideal Penang which was being constructed under my eyes. I loved the new landscape and the new subjects it promised to produce, including myself. In practice, while the ideal Penang is being implemented and made real according to a different model than the "only mildly developed city" one I implicitly expected, I am being progressively excluded from it alongside the majority of Penangites.

This invites to ask what is not present in the engineered "touristed" landscape (Law, Cartier 2005), and who? I am aware that, as Aihwa Ong wisely underlines (2011: 18), a rich-versus-poor classical (Foucault-inspired) interpretation is necessary but much too reductive and in order to avoid it, I will turn to the first disguise which the image relies upon: the sea.

The sea, in Penang, especially after the massive land-reclamations, is not the tropical lagoon depicted on the outer fences of future condominiums in construction but a moving lot of mud, fish, polluting agents, ships, boats, birds, tidal differences, dead fish, garbage, stink and yes, sometimes also clear water (but "beware of jellyfish", as the tourist is warned). It varies a lot from one coast to the other and is accessed and used in many different ways. Far from being "leisure

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2013/12/15/3000-forms-given-out-in-five-minutes-Hopeful-Penangites-started-queueing-before-dawn-to-apply-for-af/>

time” nature, it’s a mess of society, culture and business. It resists landscaping because it is still made of water (and in fact, its value increases if it can become land and be built upon). Is the unsought for sea that one gets to see from underneath an expressway pillar or framed by the small, screened windows of some of the most ancient low-cost flats the same as the one which is seen by those who are ready to spend good capital in order to be entitled to it?

Opposite the sea, the ideal image of Penang as a second home for rich foreigners obliterates a whole section of the landscape which is familiar to all those who drive up and down the island, namely, the large industrial area and the low-cost, working class flats which were built around Bayan Lepas and Air Itam alongside factories in the Free Trade Zone. After all, in Penang, the first invitation which was made to foreign capital did not concern holidays and second homes for retirement but sheer land with tax exemption and close to an airport and a motorway for industrial purposes. Where is that vision in the ordered landscape of an imagined Penang with a “view on the sea”? Similarly, the MM2H plan never considers that many foreigners already have made Penang their second home because they are already working and living there but are invisible as they are not considered as legal residents. They must be technically unseen by the actors of the other scene if recently, it was suggested that foreigners be forbidden to work at food stalls – lest they spoil Penang’s characteristic atmosphere (they can still work inside restaurants and hotels).

I shall add one more consideration to the contours of the island and visions of future Penang. Images of houses are per se static, but the Penangites are often stuck in a traffic jam and dramatic solutions are constantly under study. For about 10 years, the main one – I am tempted to write the main threat – was the Penang Outer Ring Road (PORR): a motorway which would be built on the sea and around a part of the island so as to allow a quick connection from its bridge (now bridges) to the town and high class residential areas. Even though the project is no longer viable in its original framing, plans for a flyover which would be partly offshore and connect Teluk Bahang with Tanjung Bunga – exactly the road I was driving along on my Indian friend’s motorbike - are being discussed in these months together with an old dream, that of an undersea tunnel connecting the city (Gurney Drive) directly to the mainland in Bagan Ajam. In blogs and around coffee shops some Penangites are fighting against the massive invasion of the environment that such a project would involve and warn of the mud-tides after the land was reclaimed in Tanjung Tokong; while others fight fiercely for the right to move around the island in proper infrastructures, in spite of any *nimby* (*Not In My Back Yard*) attitude.

What is then hidden by the advertised landscape of luxury skyscrapers is also the problem of circulation to and from the condos, and the environmental destruction that any feasible solution would entail, with the exception of an unlikely sudden mass conversion to bicycles and public transportation. What cannot be directly seen in the ideal landscape is the absence of a plan of development and the public debate concerning it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The lack of such plan has been reported over and over by Anil Netto, an independent journalist and activist of the NGO Aliran. See, for example, <http://anilnetto.com/economy/development-issues/absence-local-plan-field-day-developers-penang>.

## 2. Real disappearance: *kampung* houses, residential communities

While I became familiar with the touristed landscape of an imagined residential Penang with a vista, my ethnographic environment in Penang was literally disappearing. What I saw and experienced in 1991 is now visible in memories, pictures and a video.

My original research concerned a historical settlement on the outskirts of Georgetown, at the foot of Penang Hill, and the Hindu temple that it referred to and identified with. The village was called Kampung Baharu, “new village” when it was built around the thirties. It was a mainly Indian village as the British railway-employed Indians were given the use of the land in the first place to build their temple and some of their huts. As is usual in Malaysia, traditional Indian environments are also dense with Chinese, and this was the case of this *kampung*. A *kampung*, in Malay, is not necessarily a rural village but what would now be described in a developmental idiom as a community-based residential unit.

No farmed land surrounded the village and people were variously employed. Some of them were civil servants, others petty traders, some had cows and goats, some dealt in street food and in building. A few families of what can be called “good caste” in Malaysia (by no means brahmana)<sup>5</sup> were covering all the main positions in the temple matters and marriages were, on a general rule, arranged so that such social structure be unchanged. The houses were for the most one-floor, small and more and more fractioned among groups of brothers. The richest families had built larger houses and added a first floor to the original building, but there were no enormous differences in wealth and certainly people lead a similar way of life whatever their income. Hardly anybody owned a car and maybe half the families had a telephone in their home. When the main celebrations took place at the Hindu temple, the whole *kampung* – including its Chinese inhabitants – was highly involved.

Let’s make it clear: the neighbourhood was not an idyllic “old time” enchanted world, far from it. Many women were working in factories and the *bas kilang*, the factory b  
uses, were frequently to be seen at the *kampung* day and night according to factories shifts. Younger couples were moving out from the traditional habitat to low cost flats in the neighbouring areas of Padang Tembak or Farlim; child schooling was becoming a complicated struggle through tuitions and sharp calculations on quotas of college scholarships. Women worked, studied, circulated, families changed.

While the whole of Penang was being developed, what used to be a quiet place slightly out of hand began to be seen as an appealing location on the hillslope, peaceful and green while close to the city centre. The promoters arrived on the scene. Like in so many other cases in Penang, the land that the village was built upon was sold by its various owners to a large building company. In fact, most villagers owned a house but not the land it was built upon. In the first years of the economic boom, in the late 1970s, many families had seen no point in trying to buy it and when they started sensing their interest in actually owning the land, they could no longer afford buying it or were withheld by complicated questions of kinship and inheritance. Families were offered a cheap flat as a compensation for their house (the new buildings were never higher than 4 floors so that a lift would not be imposed by law); they received a good mixture of offers and pressure and little by little the *kampung* emptied until, in 2012, it was pulled down.

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<sup>5</sup> About caste in Malaysian Indian society see Rajakrishnan Ramasamy 1982 and Vignato 2006, 2007.

Let me describe briefly what happened to one of Kampung Baharu families and underline the immaterial social and cultural capital that vanishes with the *kampung*.

### **Rajamani: the last solitary drummer after the fire-walk**

*Rajamani was born in Penang from an Indian father in 1930; he married India born Meena and they had 5 sons and 2 daughters. He built his house in the kampung in 1950 and when his sons married between 1978 and 1986, they brought their wives into the house. For various reasons depending on their jobs (two sons got jobs outside Penang) and spouses (two of them were in big trouble staying at their in-laws house) the sons all gradually moved out of the house and of the kampung. One of them rent a low-cost flat in Farlim until he could afford a mortgage and access an entry level property and another one moved to mainland Seberang Perai where property was cheaper. The whole group of brothers gathered when the big yearly celebrations of the temple were held as the family played important roles in them. Rajamani, especially, was to play a tappu drum, that is, a pariah drum, to conclude the main part of the ceremony, after fire-walking, at midnight, when the “spirits of the forest” would eat the rice cooked with the blood of the sacrificed goat<sup>6</sup>. Rajamani’s sons were alternatively in charge of the bulls that would pull the chariot, of the money collections, of the relationships with the priests and of the procession. Over the last 15 years, the latter has become longer and longer as it has to reach all the places significantly inhabited by the Indian devotees – more and more low-cost flats must be included. In spite of such a residential diaspora, the fire-walking ceremony still appeared clearly rooted in the village. In the closing day of the ceremony a playful, carnivalesque game was held within the village itself where buckets of coloured water could be thrown at the most respected people; the boys would inundate the prettiest girls and the women would fiercely and loudly fight back.*

*Rajamani was one of the last to leave the village. As a compensation for his house he was given a flat in Padang Tembak, the closest historical concrete low-cost, gang-ridden block of flats. He said he was happy as the flat was well equipped and he had been able to make some extra money, which he could give to one of his sons. He has died in 2014.*

*In 2014, the ceremony no longer has a solitary tappu drum played by a good-cast patriarch – that was old Rajamani’s thing, I am told, there is no point in replacing him. It no longer features the water games in the ordinary habitat but is just played out on a lower key within the temple premises.*

What does this mean for the Indians in Penang? Why should the whole island worry for the disappearance of a cluster of old houses?

### **Culture and the *kampung***

In the early Nineties, in a remarkable piece of ethnography, Goh Beng-lan described the up-rooting of Kampung Serani in Penang and showed how promoters, local authorities and inhabitants of the *kampung* interacted and crossed personal and larger ambitions with personal and collective resistance (Goh, 2002). The result was the destruction of the traditional habitat but the preservation of a (small) “heritage” building, voided of other function than performing a fixed idea of an ethnic residual (in this case) tradition. Words such as “ethnicity”, “identity”, “culture” were used as a justification for heritage buildings to be saved from destruction.

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<sup>6</sup> I am cutting short on a long, fascinating and ever changing ceremony. For further details see Vignato 2006.

When compared to the case of Kampung Serani, the example of Kampung Baharu I am giving here is somehow more complicated, maybe because it's more recent. It reminds other less remarkable destructions I have witnessed in time (including the ones to build the Seri Tanjung Pinang phase I project) and that are still going on as I am writing (<http://anilnetto.com/society/poverty/residents-string-established-settlements-penang-face- eviction/>).

First, it shows a process which has gone on for years before coming actually to its final point – destruction – but was not felt as destructive or menacing by those who underwent it, like in the case described by Goh. Within it, no dramatic opposition was carried out against the promoters in the name of ethnicity, culture and poor people's rights. There are reasons to that. The Serani people were a tiny minority but for the Tamil and Chinese people of the Kampung Baharu ethnic identity was not menaced, not even at stake. On the contrary, many felt that the life upgrading that a flat would allow them to gain corresponded more to their ideal of life than the crowded, un-serviced *kampung*. Rajamani said he was happy when he finally moved to the flat: the kitchen was more practical for his wife to cook, the bathroom was neat and one didn't feel that someone was always observing him. Similarly, other people who moved out of the Kampung Baharu (his sons, for example) felt they had upgraded their level of life without losing out on other "cultural" (as they themselves phrased it) aspects, whether they had moved to a low-cost flat or, in few successful cases, to a terrace-house.

The second difference between Kampung Serani and Kampung Baharu is that the latter has left behind no heritage buildings or sites. In fact, in Penang, the idea of heritage seems to apply only to a particular type of "old time" buildings in their controlled way to define memories and preserve them from misinterpretation, in the eyes of those who control the representations of what the building stands for. A group of rather poor houses cannot claim to be standing for anything else but for the everyday life of a specific local community. On a symbolic, ethnically connoted level, in fact, that very local community identifies with the temple, not with the village. What is the point to fight for their old houses?

Besides, in line with a devotional attitude typical of Hindu shrines, the temple itself is just seen as what it is – a place where some divinities of a remarkable, acknowledged and well attended "power" (*sakti*) are honoured, fed and pleased by a group of devotees, not a historical token of a specific locality. Whatever changes in the group necessarily changes in the temple too and in its ceremonies. When I enquired about the change that the destruction of the village brought to the ceremony most people found it hard to see what the problem might be: a ceremony always changes, I was told, one tries to make it more beautiful and rich and suited to contemporary Hinduism (Vignato 2006).

The third difference between the two *kampung* is that the Kampung Baharu community is still alive and connected through its temple, unlike the Serani. Certainly, wealth has suddenly taken greater importance in defining people's actual frequentations. Those who have succeeded economically and could buy a terrace house and send their children to college in England no longer daily meet their former neighbours living in low-cost concrete blocks of flats; they see each other once in a while, at the temple. As a general category, their ethnicity, a globalized "Non-resident Indianness"<sup>7</sup>, becomes more and more abstract and ideal; as a specific category, they are

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<sup>7</sup> NRI, as the members of the Indian recent diaspora are usually designated, are such a large world population that they encompass historical migrations such that of the Tamils to Malaysia.

middle-class Malaysian Indians and relate to such an image of themselves. They take pilgrimage tours to India and thus, even from a devotional point of view, shift their practice to a pragmatic globalization of Indianness. Those who have entered a permanent working class status experience the mixed life of a 2-3000-flats condominium; their ethnicity is in their choice to relate to other Indians in the condo, permanently turn on an Indian satellite TV channel and find ways to adhere to the general “Non-resident Indianness” of the middle class by taking (for example) 3 to 6 days-bus pilgrimages to Malaysian Hindu temples.

It is in some menial details that the former inhabitants of Kampung Baharu express their astonishment regarding some deep changes in their environment.

Rajamani’s elder son, Arson, aged 58, has some difficulties in finding the bulls for the ceremony: they are important as they must pull the chariot during all the procession which, as Indians live more and more scattered in blocks of flats, tends to become longer and longer. Bulls and cows were the typical colonial activity of the Indians in Malaysia and a few stables were located not far from the *kampung* ; now the only stables which Rajamani’s son can find in Penang are under an irregular shelter by a building site in Paya Terubung, next to a large area of low-cost flats. “The bulls now live with the foreign migrants in the shade of concrete” comments Arson with a smile; he talks about the fate of the bulls in the same kind of surrendered incredulity that he uses when he explains that he thought he would retire at 55 and now is fixed for 60, or maybe he will be forced to wait even longer. On the other hand, and at the other end of the ceremonial chain, Arson explains, the *tappu* drum bands (formerly groups of untouchables) become every year more expensive. What is the point, he wonders, to have a ceremony where nearly everyone is paid to perform his task? His factory-employed wife adds that nowadays she is less involved in the ceremony because she no longer takes her yearly leave entirely for that. She takes pilgrimage trips, both to Malaysia and, so she hopes, maybe once to India. Besides, she is considering to resign in order to look after her working daughters’ young children.

We can then see how some people’s questionments about class, origins, language and territory can fully deploy only in the language of ritual. I wouldn’t like to open here the debate concerning the revolutionary side of rituals as was described by Victor Turner (1969). What seems evident is that while the ritual is an excellent cognitive organizer for positive transformation (the inclusion of new roads for the chariot, the integration of technologies and of “Indian” aesthetic taste) it does not express its negative sides. Absence is hardly represented in it. The origin and the shelter of the pulling bulls are over-shone by the actual presence of the living animals; the concrete blocks of flats are overwritten by lavish Indian TV series inspired decorations. It seems that nothing cultural, emotional, intangible is missing after the old houses have been pulled down.

### **3. The invisible work and the visible working class: is there a visible culture at work?**

When I lived in the North Coast, between 2006 and 2009, my friends originally from Kampung Baharu then living in Farlim low-cost buildings never came to see me (“So far!”), tired of their daily commuting to the opposite part of the island. Every day many of them would reach the industrial area and spend 8 to 12 hours in a factory, mostly in electronics. They were turned towards the industrial East side of the island, that which was not, until recently, included in the MM2H plan. They were “working class”; in fact, as a social subject, they had been such for no longer than 20

years, since the late Eighties, when an industrial cohort of workers appeared in Malaysia. But what did it mean, actually? Translating cultural concepts helps interpreting and understanding specific situations through a detailed comparison. So what does working class mean in Europe, for example?

Stemming from a Marxist view of society and history, “working class” is a historically and culturally defined notion. In Italy and in France, “classe operaia” and “classe ouvrière” describe industrial factory workers conscious of their strength in the world<sup>8</sup>. The myths going alongside it are, fundamentally, male-centred, imbued with ideas still drawing on a peasant world, informed by political fights and strikes and massively by migration. “Working class culture” and “working class oriented culture” are historical and debated notions. “Working class” has a larger and more actualized meaning for the English. The “working class hero” sung by John Lennon is a low-income, socially oppressed and virtually marginalized man more than a specific kind of worker; his mythologies evoke the urban football-and-beer world described by cinema director Ken Loach. I underline these differences in order to show that country by country, unskilled labour and particularly, industrial sustains and fuels an important part of contemporary culture with specific myths and imageries.

Recently, though, in the whole of Europe the concept of work has taken on meanings which seemed unthinkable in the aftermath of World War 2, when the notion of working class established itself as a political and social value. “Worker”, “employed”, “unemployed” are less clearly defined categories now than they have been between 1950 and 1990. The question of the “working class culture” (does it exist? Is it regional? Is it enough of a culture or a so-called subculture?) seems no longer relevant as more and more often differently educated and raised people are included into the category of those who work hard for little money.

In Malaysia, massive industrialization dates of the early Eighties and never knew the slow passage through wars, crisis and sudden technologization that countries of older industrialization went through. Malaysia never knew the epics of giant Fordist plants but went for textile first and then electronics and rubber. Industrial work never translated into factory-based visions of the future – working class villages, architectural visions like Il Lingotto for Fiat in Turin or the Citroen Island outside Paris.

What did it translated into, then? In a seminal research, Aihwa Ong (1987) discusses whether the fact that in a Japanese plant in the Port Klang area, Malay women factory operators expressed their work-related sufferance through collective possessions on the factory premises could be called resistance. In other words, she questions if there was the embryo of a class awareness in that reaction; she concludes that there was none. The girls were using their ethnic symbolic and ritual resources in order to make sense of their extreme uneasiness in their working place but there was no possible dialogue between the two worlds, theirs and the capitalist ownership, other than the idiom of patriarchal domination which was familiar both to the factory owners and to the girls’ Malay environment.

Ong has given a good key to understand what the 30 following years would be for working people in Malaysia. In spite of the fact that in past times, protestations were successfully held in Penang to claim better working conditions, there is no trace nor idea of “collective” today which is based

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history of industrial workers in Italy see Musso, 2002.

on industrial work communality. Communality is felt and practiced on a mainly ethnic base – therefore, for the dominant ethnic group, the Malays who are Muslim by definition, on a religious divide as well (one can be Indian and not a Hindu, Chinese and atheist but one needs to be a Muslim in order to be considered as a Malay).

Yet, for the Indian women in Kampung Baharu, like for so many others, industrial work since its beginnings has meant daily confrontation with other ethnicities, especially and massively the Malays. Enclosed in a similarly oppressive structure and animated by a similarly entrancing idea of self-empowerment, the women looked to each other for hints, regardless each other's ethnic group. A few Indian friends told me that one didn't in the least feel that the Malays were the privileged lazy ones in a factory as one did in other contexts (school, public offices and so on). On the contrary, they, Indians, admired their Malay colleagues for the self-determination they showed, particularly as far as men-to-women relationships were concerned. That the Malay women were regularly handling the money they earned was inspiring (Vignato 2007).

Nevertheless, in spite of these personal good relationships, factory workers didn't experience what, in Europe, characterized both big and small plants: a common schedule, a common practice of places and spaces often related to patterns of internal migration. Even though heavy internal migration is constitutive of Penang human and physical environment (think of Bayan Baru and all the first flats starting from Jalan Jelutong onwards), factories proved very poorly socialized places. On the one hand, electronic corporations, the basic employers, would have a constant three shifts organization of labour and intentionally change the lines so as to avoid the constitution of permanent teams. On the other hand, permanence in the same job was at a certain time a rare occurrence as frequent changes in ownership or management offered worker plans of "retrenchment" which seemed appealing, especially to women going through pregnancies and young children's care. Work then was not represented as a pivotal symbolic event but as a resource which would necessarily be brought back to an environment otherwise constituted of reworked ethnic relationships. In fact, as we saw, even though it was underplayed in itself, income and the typologies of work meant a lot as far as what kind of ethnicity was being constructed (Vignato 2008).

Industrial work often meant access to real estate. As Rajamani's sons prove, low-cost flats were suddenly seen as more secure and friendly than small, crowded, cluster-family inhabited *kampung* houses. In the case of the former inhabitants of Kampung Baharu, ideas of origin still mattered, if only for the fact that people would buy a flat through networks of family and friends and most people from Kampung Baharu stayed around the area. Some in Padang Tembak, some in Farlim and Paya Terubong. More and more large concrete blocks of low-cost flats appeared around the island. At first, they were built in places that seemed of little appeal to the rising middle class because they were difficult to access (such as Paya Terubong or Farlim, or the primordial Padang Tembak); by now, those large projects in top rated emplacements are a nuisance, a problem to the developers' plans. They are becoming increasingly infamous because of their criminal gangs. They are ugly and even though they sometimes do have a view on the sea, they were never advertised for that.

These places raise a problem also for their high migrants' (often illegal migrants') population. Who wants to live in those places if he is not forced to, but the least wealthy and guaranteed, that is, the illegal migrants? Besides, renting a flat to illegal migrants can often mean asking higher rates.

Here is then one more fundamental experience that the working women from Kampung Baharu made in their factories: starting from the late 1990, migrants appeared in their working places. Migrants were doing their jobs and would accept what they were, by now, reluctant to accept: constraining shifts, uncertainty of salary, little or no right to sickness and maternity leaves. Migrants though, were included in an ethnicized industrial policy too: their double belonging, to a controlled and subordinated status (migrant) and to a specific national and/or ethnic group (the Bangladeshi, the Vietnamese, the Chinese...) kept them separate from the local, Malaysian based self-representation of the operators as workers.

Finally, the massive low-cost flats are the only visible proof of the existence of those thousands of workers, especially women, who have made Penang rich in the first two of the three Mahatir-run decades. Their work itself is hidden and all the more so since the Southeast coast too has been developed and constructed, and the Second Bridge inaugurated. No heritage value is attached to that kind of work: no colonial leftover, no patronal mansion, not even the exotic floating settlements of the Weld Key Chinese coolies. The only times I have ever seen, from my Indian centred observatory, a representation of the working places is during the Thaipusam, a big yearly celebration for the Malaysian Tamils. Then, along the road leading to the core of the feast one can see pilgrims' huts for each of the companies where Indians work: Intel, Fairchild, Bosch, Motorola and so on. Once again the working place takes a meaning through an ethnic, in this case openly religious and ritual, lens. In those huts the manager and the operators alike serve food and drinks; they have raised the money amongst the Indians in their working premises and they exist as a unit only as devoted co-workers, no matter what their salary, qualifications, guarantees and career plans.

### **Conclusion: engineering a touristed landscape, promoting the exclusion of work**

Penang has developed a specific model of success and good life. It has prospered and transformed its environment and is still massively doing it. Because it has become the target of many different kinds of visitors – Malaysian and international tourists, Indian and Chinese pilgrims for the yearly celebrations, medical tourists from Indonesia, industrial migrants from Asia – it becomes a sort of textbook (theory and practice) for developers, traders in tourism, in people and in goods. Its industrial vocation as well as other features reminding its working class, like for instance anything concerning its foreign migrants, are obliterated from the representation that Penang gives of itself. Developers, State agencies, Travel agencies, medical institutions always depict a place which has reasoned its "ethnicity" – folklorised in buildings, religious festivals and food – but shows no signs of those sad, peripheral landscapes of suburbs and of what such landscapes stand for. Workers are excluded from Penang's representation of itself – not only poor workers but in general, workers. All the more so the migrant Indonesians who help building the luxury condominiums. They, who can see the sea as it is (crossing the bridge by motorbike, or watching the mud-tides at Guerny drive or experiencing illegal migration in a speedboat) are cut from the views on the beautiful sea which can only be enjoyed from the luxurious towers; vice versa, they cannot be seen from the sea as while on the island, they are behind the luxury condo line. If workers are excluded from representations, jobless, illegal, irregular persons simply exist in the ideal pictures of thieves, drug addicted marginals, problematic gangs, immoral girls.

As a dedicated charity activist engaged in social actions in a low-cost housing complex in Penang once told me, when she asks for donations there is always someone who is puzzled at the idea that there are ordinary poor in Penang, so successful is Penangites' self-representation as

members of a prosperous society. Yet, those concrete, already rotting buildings are the main, powerful witness of the former *kampung* where many people in Penang come from. Those who have longed for them and conquered them as an upgrading from a landless humble house in a village now realize that they will never be anywhere near getting away from them – if not to move across the bridge on the mainland, where housing is cheaper but jobs far less paid than on the island. If, as Schein writes, “landscape at once constricts and is constructed by individuals who live in a particular place” (1997), a specific landscape can eject some people from a specific place. More than heritage buildings, then, these places need be considered and represented lest those who inhabit them enter or radicalize a condition of exclusion which cannot, in the long run, be erased by a nice sunset on the sea enjoyed from a pre-selected spot. They are an important element of the “worlding” action that the island of Penang is carrying through.

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## **A response to 'A Flat with a View. Real Estate and Industrial Work in Penang'**

Tim Harper (University of Cambridge)

At the heart of Silvia Vignato's evocative and poignant essay is the feeling that 'Penang is losing its islandness, its shape and its views and visions while making ever renewed efforts of self-definition which are grounded in a discourse on its islandness, its shape and its views and visions.' Building on this, I offer a few reflections on how Penang's island past relates to its present place in the world.

In the aftermath of George Town's inscription in 2008 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site there has been a flood of imaginings of Penang's past. These have been proffered by a broad range of actors: by local and international heritage activists, historians and interested citizens, and they have engaged officialdom at a state and national level.

It is important to recognise that the heritage movement in Penang emerged well before Penang's bid for World Heritage status. The Penang Heritage Trust, for example, a key charitable, non-governmental organisation, dates from 1986. It can be seen as part of a deeper tradition of sociability and civic-mindedness, stretching from the port society public sphere of the colonial era, into a period when Penang became the exemplary centre for a pioneering consumers' movement and other non-government organisations in the post-colonial era.

But in recent years, island 'heritage' has involved an increasingly complex web of bodies, some closely linked to state and federal governments: such as the George Town World Heritage Inc (chaired by the Penang Chief Minister); government-related think-tanks such as Penang Institute (founded in 1997-2011 as the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute) and ThinkCity (founded in 2009 as a special project vehicle for Penang of the sovereign wealth fund, Khazanah Nasional Berhad). Flagship restoration projects – the recently opened 'The Star Pitt Street', for example – combine public and private initiative. George Town Heritage Day is now celebrated as state annual holiday.

'Heritage' has a multitude of meanings. As Vignato highlights, it stands for commercial opportunity. It is ubiquitous in the branding of business initiatives, in the naming and branding of 'heritage' hotels, ethnic and neighbourhood heritage trails, food and health tourism, and the sale of retirement properties. Inwardly, for Penang's citizens, 'heritage' seeks to speak in multiple ways to the challenge and promise of multiculturalism and nation-building. Outwardly, it seeks to position Penang within an emergent, global 'new Asia' (Hutchinson and Saravanamuttu 2013).

Penang's World Heritage status rests upon Penang's claims to historical uniqueness: on UNESCO's definition of George Town's singular architectural and cultural townscape. This coveted status bequeaths to Penang what Vignato terms a more universal, 'exemplary role', and subjects Penang to external accountability. UNESCO status is intertwined with that of Melaka, which has its own conservation issues, over which Penang has little sway. This status is constantly at risk: from the mega-developments described in Vignato's essay and their human displacements; but also from micro-level shifts within the urban conversation area. An early scare was caused by the nesting of swifts in unoccupied buildings, as people moved out to the suburbs, which led to commercial birds' nests farming on a problematic scale. Some of what are, on one count, 2,508 sites of

'heritage value' outside the inscribed area are at risk of destruction, or 'reconstruction' to such a degree as they lose all 'integrity' or historical meaning (Speechley 2014). As Vignato notes, 'heritage value' fails encompass the workers' houses of sites such as Kampung Baharu, and much else of islanders' current lives and past experience. This is at the root of her powerful claim that Penang's very 'islandness' is being drained of meaning.

If debates over Penang's future involve so many appeals to its past, what does historical vision provide to stem this loss of meaning? Over the long duration, Penang's positioning in the world, as it were, has been subject to slow but distinct shifts. Perhaps the most constant theme of recent historical re-imaginings of the island, is of Penang's nodal position within an Indian Ocean world. It highlights how, from the colonial period, Penang's Chinese, South Asian diasporas and multiple sojourners from further afield in the Middle East – Arabs, Jews, Armenians – through trade, their religious life, schools and print cultures, located Penang in a world of oceanic circulations. Penang was a gateway between the Indian Ocean and maritime Southeast Asia, the South China Sea and beyond. In recent recountings of this, Penang's history as a colonial entrepôt has been overshadowed by the complex Asian worlds that convened and connected within it. If neighbouring Kedah is included in Penang's orbit these histories of trade and movement can be imagined back to the earliest recorded times (Yeoh et al. 2009)

This has allowed a much richer migrant history to be told than has been previously been the case. It extends beyond the histories of what are conventionally cast as the dominant ethnic groups of the peninsula – Malay, Chinese, Indian – categories which themselves mask a hugely heterogeneous and hybrid reality. Central to the 'Penang Story', as it has emerged in recent years, is the re-emergence of, say, Chula, Arab, Eurasian, even European identities in a Penang context. This has fed into commercial opportunity of 'heritage': by the same branding process, the heritage industry re-inscribes old ethnic identities in the built environment of George Town. But it has also meant that the institutional and built legacies of these communities are now impressively well-documented, and this is largely the achievement of local heritage activists and citizen historians (for a recent, exemplary study, Nasution 2014). As Sunil Amrith and Sumit Mandal reflect from the recent SEATIDE meeting in Penang, these histories should not be seen solely in a diasporic stories, as separate community narratives. The religious shrines, schools, neighbourhoods, cultural investments, of one group were shared by others. They were sites where integration occurred on an everyday basis. In this sense, roots of local integration in Penang lay in its long-distance connections (Amrith and Mandal 2014).

This cosmopolitanism is central, enticing theme. It features in blueprints for the island's future: a 2010 Khazanah Nasional/World Bank report spoke of 'revitalising Penang's heart' through the attraction of 'globally-orientated people', the retention of talent, and the 'leveraging' of Penang's own hugely successful diaspora (Kharas, Zeufack and Majeed 2010). This evokes the open, port-city environment of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who elites had an ecumenical and internationalist outlook, that found expression in English-language newspapers, George Town's mixed schooling, and rich associational life. Cosmopolitan was embraced, as an ideology, as an identity, and not only by the elite (Lewis 2008). It was apparent in the outlook of the emerging local middle classes, and could be sensed, in a rougher-hewn form, in the rich popular culture of the island, in which polyglot vernacular theatre – the evocatively named *Parsi*, *Stamboul* and *Bangswan* – and other performance traditions were central expressions (Tan 1993). If Penang has a claim to an 'exemplary role' it is that, in an increasingly ethnicised world, it exhibits

an historical pedigree for the living of cosmopolitan lives whilst remaining culturally, linguistically distinct.

To imagine an island history is to evoke an archipelagic sense of a stepping-stones to an endless horizon. Yet, also, to be 'islanded' can also point to an historical and geographical rupture where once-lived linkages can be broken and old worlds dissolve (Sivasundaram 2013). This rupture is as much the story of Southeast Asia as a region as any momentum towards integration. In the same way, the experience of being left behind is as much a part of past and present transnationalism as are onward flows and connections.

It is important to remember that Penang too has been subject to this rupture. This might be long-distance links to other Indian Ocean islands – say the Andamans or Sri Lanka – that have, for various reasons, been less visible in the contemporary rhetoric of new Asian connections. Rupture might be nearer to hand: those formed by the working lives described by Vignato, and often absent within the island story – links to Indonesia or along the isthmus of Kra. This connections can resurface in a striking way: old connections between Penang and Rangoon, for example – almost entirely broken in the second half of the twentieth century – have taken on a renewed visibility and salience in recent years.

Penang still lives with the consequences of rupture in time. Much of contemporary writing on Penang's heritage – not unnaturally given the emphasis on the built environment – gravitates to a colonial-era *belle époque*, from the later nineteenth century to the inter-war period. This was a time of relative prosperity, when even as Penang began to lose out to Singapore as a free trade port, it remained central to long-distance cultural, religious and political connections, and this nourished a confident, cosmopolitan sensibility. Scholars have pointed to a similar narrative of rupture in the public memory of Eastern Mediterranean cities – with which Penang was well-connected in this period – of a 'grieving cosmopolitanism' for a lost world, which is for old diasporic communities often a mourning for lost prestige and influence (Hanley 2008). Viewed in this way, the *belle époque* gave way to an intervening time when Penang was subject to a more local, circumscribed history; as an off-shore island of a new nation with a very different vision of its past and future.

If one was looking for a symbolic moment, it might be the ill-fated succession movement, on the eve of the creation of the Federation of Malaya in 1948 when the island's elite – led by Straits Chinese notables who wished to preserve their influence and status, as symbolised by their British citizenship, and by merchants who feared the loss of free trade privileges – mounted a campaign to retain Penang's position within the Straits Settlements. The campaign resurfaced in 1953. Even at the time, it seemed an arcane cause in a nationalist age, and many of those involved soon bowed to the logic of mass politics. The elite's resolve was weakened by the very sense of Penang's unique multiculturalism, of its delicate ethnic balance, that had inspired their resistance to nationalism in the first place (Sopiee 1974). Current visions of Penang's past and future continue to express a city-state ethos that is not always easily accommodated to claims of nationalism and the pressures of globalization (Bell and de-Shalit 2013).

Inclusive as this island story is, it still leaves much else to tell. This is why the panorama drawn by Vignato has such poignancy. Heritage often privileges the well-positioned elite, their historical line-of-sight, their view of the seas. But there were many layers to the distinctive civitas of the island. Alongside the colonial cosmopolitanism and its later echoes, there was the more rugged,

lived cosmopolitanism of the working population. This might not, as Vignato and others, have argued have formed into a class consciousness as understood in classical theories drawn from other culture-specific contexts. But nevertheless in it was the very essence of Immanuel Kant's classic definition of cosmopolis: people 'existing successively side by side who cannot do without associating peacefully and yet cannot avoid constantly offending each other' (Kahn 2006, 168). And this too has a traceable history. Penang was a hub for Chinese radical mobilisation, for anarchism, communism and trade unionism, not least along its municipal labour and in the turbulent politics of the waterfront (Harper, 1999, 133). This takes us back a view of the sea, to an 'islandness' of what Vignato calls 'a moving lot of mud, fish, polluting agents, ships, boats, birds, tidal differences, dead fish, garbage, stink...' As Vignato so powerfully attests, this experience of worldly struggle needs to be reclaimed for a more authentic vision of Penang's past and future.

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