# PENANG MONTHLY

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# THIRD PLACES

## WHERE THE PEOPLE OF PENANG LOVE TO GATHER

FEATURE

A MALL IS NOT A THIRD PLACE— AND KOMTAR IS NOT A MALL

FEATURE

TROPICAL SPICE GARDEN: A SANCTUARY FOR REDISCOVERING NATURE AND PERSONAL PEACE

FEATURE

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1. Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
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3. Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
4. Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
5. Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
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# THIRD PLACES

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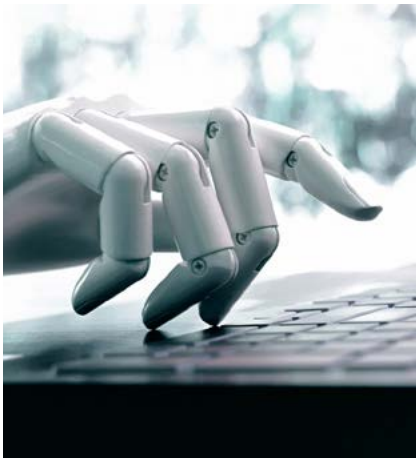
## THIRD PLACES, TROPICAL RULES

### HOW THE PEOPLE OF PENANG GATHER













# EXPANDING COMFORT ZONES AND THIRD PLACES

## BY OOI KEE BENG

**A MAJOR AND** very useful instinct I developed when dabbling in wushu sparring many decades ago was the ability to read movement. This was part and parcel of physical defence, of course. Not only does one have to be fully attentive all the time—and that would be why one tires so quickly during a bout—one has to predict what the opponent is about to do before he does it.

Philosophically, one learns mutualism in the sense that whatever I could do to my opponent, he could do to me as well. That was why one's selected training partner was often someone equally skilled and similar in build. One learns to stand one's ground against reasonable odds, and one learns to be humble in the face of another's agency.

Now, these simple facts have great significance in daily life. Being sensitive to my immediate surroundings meant that I became more conscious of movement in my immediate vicinity, and of what to expect in the next second. For example, I found that walking through a crowd became easier after my training. I began to note where a person or some vehicle was going to go, and not where they were at the present moment.

When interacting with people, I became more and more respectful of another person's space, the area within which they felt comfortable. If and when I entered that personal space, they felt a need to react in some way. They could welcome it or they may not, and their body language would tell me which it was. One could play safe and always stay at a safe distance, or one could be playful with that space as a matter of socialising. All this is basic human behaviour.

### HOMES AWAY FROM HOME

What this sensitivity taught me is the importance of immediate surroundings to the wellbeing of an individual. In a private space, in my own home, I decorate my rooms and walls as I wish. I arrange my furniture as it suits me. I listen to the music I like, and so on and so forth. That is the essence of private space, and we assume this to be vital to an individual's wellbeing. "A room of one's own" is a basic need.

We pity a homeless person because he does not seem to have any right to any space. He has no calm space to call his own. If he has no home, he has no castle, as it were.

Between private and public space are other places where a person has some say, and where his presence is not an intrusion. For a modern urbanite, that would, first of all, be his work place. Beyond that, there are public thoroughfares and concourses where crowds criss-cross in daily life.

Then, there are shops and cafés and boutiques where a person is welcome under certain conditions. Those are, however, not places he controls. He has to manouevre his way through them. These are transactional spaces.

This brings me to an important point. If urban living means that I possess a little space to call home, feel safe in and control, then how much I feel at home in a city would depend very much on how much home-like access I have when out in public. Familiarity with a city, of course, means that I can traverse it comfortably, and I know of places to visit where I feel comfortable, where I may feel welcomed and where I feel at home to a degree.

These are what is described as Third Places, including museums, galleries, shopping malls, etc. They allow access—under certain conditions—to members of the public when these people are away from home. Providing such places is seen as a key consideration in good city management.

But why I began this article by talking about private space and individual movements is that the level of comfort and safety—and homeliness—in a city is not dependent only on city planners and street economics. It is about the inhabitants themselves as well, about how at home they feel in their own skin; how safe or threatened they feel outdoors; how respected they feel being among fellow citizens.

In short, how citizens treat each other in passing is a vital consideration. I tend to think that civic behaviour among citizens is what makes public spaces welcoming—in any city, however well planned.

My point, really, is to note that our comfort zones are determined as much by pleasing and welcoming—albeit passing—social interactions as they are by well-planned physical environments. People managing social spaces in a civilised and mutually respectful way is what renders a city attractive. Our comfort zones are more mobile than we might think.

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# THIRD PLACES, TROPICAL RULES: HOW THE PEOPLE OF PENANG GATHER

## BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

**JUST OFF THE** road leading to the Botanical Gardens stands a landmark familiar to every Penang hiker: Moon Gate. Cheah Chen Eok, the philanthropist who gifted the town its iconic clock tower, once maintained a hill bungalow named Villevue—French for "Town View"—somewhere up the slope, though its precise location is now uncertain. This circular Chinese archway marked its grand entrance. Today, however, it serves a distinctly public role as the trailhead for the ascent up Penang Hill.

Along this popular trail are the numbered "stations". After navigating flights of steep steps punctuated by winding jungle paths, one arrives at Station 5, a place of rest and replenishment set partway up the hillside. Here, amid dense greenery and lingering humidity, weekends bring a lively convergence of Penangites catching their breath, savouring the cooler air, and quenching their thirst with free coffee and water at this community space.

This rest stop, lovingly tended to and stocked by volunteers who are hikers themselves, has evolved into something far more significant than a mere waypoint. It is a "vertical commons", where exercise slips easily into conversation, and solitude into companionship. Amid the steady comings and goings, nature-loving Penangites have, for decades now, paused here in a shared ritual—to breathe, to look outward and to exchange a few words with fellow hikers before returning, unhurried, down the mountain.


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### FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD

What makes Station 5 significant is that it is neither home nor work, it is somewhere else entirely; a place to linger without obligation, and entirely free of charge—a third place. The term was coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book to describe the informal public gathering spots—cafés, pubs, barber shops—that anchor community life. He defined them in contrast to the "first place" (home) and the "second place" (work). Oldenburg was writing against a built environment shaped by postwar zoning and automobility—conditions that make low-cost, walkable, everyday sociability harder to sustain. In one interview, he describes converting his own two-car garage into a bar and hosting neighbours and colleagues: "I created my own third place."

In Penang, by contrast, many third-place functions were historically "baked in" to the everyday city through mixed use and thresholds like the five-foot-ways that blur private and public life.

In fact, the traditional Penang shophouse operates on a different logic, collapsing those places into one. The ground floor is for business (second place), the upper floor is home (first place), and the five-foot-way or *kaki lima*—that recessed public walkway mandated by colonial ordinance—functions as community space (third place). Here, the shopkeeper watches the street while working, the grandmother sits on a rattan chair watching her grandchildren, and the passer-by or customer stops for a chat.

The boundaries here have always been porous, but as Penang modernises, this fluidity is hardening. The question today is not just where we gather, but how the rise of air-conditioning, gentrification and ageing society is reshaping the "Penang shophouse" spirit into new, sometimes unrecognisable forms.

### UNDERSTANDING PENANG'S THIRD PLACES

Part of what distinguishes Penang is the variety of gathering places that sit, often cheek by jowl, within a compact urban fabric. In George Town, independent bookshops double as art galleries, a repurposed bus depot hosts weekend markets and century-old clan *kongsi* halls continue alongside contemporary cafés. This layering has become more apparent since the city's 2008 UNESCO inscription, which lent new momentum to both heritage preservation and creative placemaking.

Yet, proximity does not imply sameness. A deceptively simple question sharpens the view: gathering place for whom? In Penang's social world—collectivist, densely networked, yet stratified by class, ethnicity, education and cultural capital—different places quietly organise different publics.

Universal gathering places are settings where lingering is normal and the cost of entry is low or nil—mamak stalls, *kopitiams*, hawker centres, public spaces and parks (like the Esplanade and Gurney Bay), and public markets. Because participation is priced in time rather than money, they generate the broadest mixing across class and age. Mid-priced cafés, curated bookshops, creative hubs and weekend markets sit here. They can be warm, meaningful and culturally productive, but access is filtered by cost and comfort. A student may visit Hin Bus Depot once for the experience, then return to the hawker centre for weekly socialising. These places build community, but of a particular kind sorted by education, taste and economic capacity.

Enclave gathering places form the most bounded tier. Members-only coworking spaces, ticketed venues and prestigious environments generate community, sometimes intensely, but it stays within its own circle and rarely crosses social boundaries. Access is explicitly controlled.

This tiered reality does not diminish the value of any particular place—it simply names what each does and who it serves.

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### AIR-CONDITIONED SPACE

Next to the historic Penang Free School (PFS) on Jalan Masjid Negeri stands an often-overlooked third place—McDonald's Green Lane. When Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third place" while reflecting on life in American suburbia, he probably did not have a neighbourhood McDonald's in mind. Yet, for some of Penang's students, this outlet is not incidental; it functions as essential infrastructure.

On weekday afternoons, students from PFS and nearby schools drift in and settle at its tables. They come not merely to eat, but to linger—to talk, revise, laugh and occupy the long hours between school and home. In tropical Penang, climate has always been the unspoken co-author of urban sociability.

Mamak stalls and hawker centres, for all their social vitality, are often too hot, humid and clamorous for sustained group work. The public library, cool and orderly, enforces a silence that suppresses collaboration. McDonald's Green Lane occupies the functional middle ground. It offers the anonymity of a shared public space, a sense of safety and cleanliness, and—most crucially in the tropics—reliable air-conditioning. All for the price of a McValue meal.

Within these constraints, distinctions of race and class soften. The primary identity becomes simply "student". The result is a place that permits lingering without scrutiny, where young people can inhabit the in-between hours of the day together. It is an unglamorous but indispensable third place, shaped quietly by heat, humidity and the practical routines of everyday life.

### THE MAINLAND COUNTERPOINT: BUKIT MERTAJAM

Across the bridge, Seberang Perai presents a different arrangement of third places. Rather than mapping the mainland in its entirety, Bukit Mertajam, a major urban centre, serves here as an example. Once an important railway stop, its social life clustered around the station and nearby bus terminal, where hawker centres doubled as everyday gathering places. As transport patterns shifted, these spaces gradually receded, a reminder that gathering places follow the flow of daily life, and are not monuments.

Today, gathering in Bukit Mertajam is more dispersed. Yet, the hawker stalls and *kopitiams* flanking Pek Kong Cheng along Jalan Pasar remain a dependable point of convergence. Farther away, the YMY Food Court in Taman Selamat functions much the same way. These are quintessential universal gathering places: familiar, affordable zones that draw retirees, workers and families into shared, unremarkable routines, where the cost of entry is low and social mixing is broad.

Beyond the town centre, sociability extends into the hills. Bukit Mertajam Hill at Cherok Tokun, D.O. Hill Recreational Park and the Hua Guo Shan—Flower Fruit Hill—are used not only for exercise, but for the small rituals of greeting, resting and recognition that form through repeated use. Even Mengkuang Dam, further away and more exposed to the sun, draws visitors seeking pause as much as activity.

Taken together, these spaces share a quiet logic. They were not planned as third places, yet they have become so through habit and repetition. Like Station 5 on the island, they are places where people pause, exchange a few words and move on—gathering not by design, but by routine.

### THIRD PLACES: PENANG STYLE

Frameworks such as third places offer a useful way of seeing what different places do. Yet, like all analytical tools, they carry the risk of narrowing our vision if applied too rigidly—of mistaking the frame for the picture itself. Imported wholesale, the third place concept can obscure more than it reveals, particularly in a city whose social life developed under very different conditions.

Penang's gathering places were never designed to remedy American suburban isolation. They emerged instead from tropical heat, dense urban living, collectivist social structures and a longstanding

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porosity between public and private life that characterises Southeast Asian urbanism.

Station 5 exists because the hillside offers respite from the heat. The mamak stall operates around the clock because tropical rhythms favour nocturnal sociability, factory shifts demand odd-hour meals and Malaysians relish watching European football together at ungodly hours. McDonald's functions as student infrastructure because air-conditioning matters, and the time between school and home needs occupying. The five-foot-way endures as a gathering place because shophouse architecture was designed for a climate in which inside and outside blur into each other. *Kopitiams* and clan jetties persist because Chinese diaspora institutions never cleanly separated household from community hub.

None of this was planned. Like George Town itself, these places evolved organically—shaped by habit, necessity and repetition rather than design theory.

## PRESERVING CIVIC ECOLOGY

Penang's third places work not because they conform to a definition, but because they have evolved in response to climate, culture, density and the practical realities of how people actually move through the city. Preserving them requires attention to those conditions, rather than the uncritical application of frameworks developed elsewhere.

What deserves careful consideration is not simply the maintenance of gathering places in the abstract, but the continuity of a specific civic ecology—one that allows a factory worker and a shop owner to share a table at Pek Kong Cheng without it registering as remarkable; that permits students to occupy a McDonald's outlet for hours over a single meal; that keeps the five-foot-way functioning as a threshold where domestic life spills naturally into the street. These patterns emerged from Penang's particular circumstances. Lose sight of those circumstances, and the places that enable the broadest social mixing become vulnerable to displacement by venues that resemble third places, but operate according to different logics.

The state's distinctive civic fabric depends on sustaining places where community forms across differences rather than around similarities. These are the places that warrant the greatest care. Moon Gate remains open—the path is steep, but the place at the top belongs to everyone. Whether Penang can preserve this openness as economic pressures mount, and as gentrification and enclosed development reshape the city remains to be seen. The patterns that made broad social mixing possible emerged organically over generations. They can disappear just as quietly.

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**CAPTIONS**

1. Multiple third places at Padang Kota Lama. Sports activities, evening and morning walks, and dining take place around the field, renovated fort moat and hawker centre.

2. Gusto's, a popular neighbourhood cafe in Tanjung Bungah, is an example of a segmented third place. Expats and locals gather here to chat, play mahjong, read and collect their copy of *Penang Monthly.* The minimum price of entry is a cup of coffee roasted on-site.

3. A favourite third place among Penangites and visitors alike—the Esplanade.

4. Moon Gate Station 5 is an example of a universal third place; Penangites gather here to enjoy the cooler mountain air, use free gym equipment and chat.

5. A multi-use third place with a very long communal table, community library and outlets like eateries and a bookshop at COEX. Credit: Eric Yeoh Kok Ming

6. The Pek Kong Cheng hawker centre at Bukit Mertajam's Jalan Pasar is also a universal third place for the residents there. Credit: Eric Yeoh Kok Ming

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**EUGENE QUAH** is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

# PENANG'S BOOKSTORES

## PROVIDE PRECIOUS SPACE FOR CULTURE AND COMPANIONSHIP

BY AQILLA LATIF

**IN CITIES CHARACTERISED** by speed, consumption and constant movement, the simple act of lingering becomes quietly radical. Reading spaces, for example, grant permission to slow down. In Penang, a growing number of such places—bookshops, libraries and hybrid cultural rooms—now function not merely as sites of transaction, but as spaces where people can gather without obligation, where presence matters more than productivity.

Often falling into the category of a third place, these reading environments foster community not through spectacle, but through continuity: repeated visits, shared silences, conversations that unfold slowly over time. From independent bookshops to community libraries, Penang's reading enclaves reveal different interpretations of what it means to hold space for thought, culture and collective life.


天南餘墨
鄉土雲煙
TAMILS
TAMILS
A PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY
PERIMALA LAKSHMAN


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### HIKAYAT BOOKSHOP

Located along Beach Street, one of George Town's busiest historic streets, Hikayat has grown into a nexus for literature, art and cultural exchange since its founding in 2018. Named after the old Malay-Arabic word for story or tale, Hikayat occupies a stretch of the city rich in architectural memory, inserting itself into that lineage as both a physical space and an evolving idea.

At its heart, Hikayat is a bookshop, but it also houses a gallery, a writer's suite and the Blue Room—a dedicated venue for talks, screenings and performances. For its founder, Gareth Richards, independent bookshops are not just retail outlets, but "agents of culture", vital community assets that foster connection, learning and a sense of belonging. Through curated titles, expert advice from fellow booksellers and an active programme of events, Hikayat positions itself as an alternative to digital consumption. It is a place where ideas circulate slowly and meaningful encounters happen in person.

Richards did not begin with a blueprint to create a third place. Instead, he believed that if the space embraced its potential, community connections would develop organically. That belief has borne fruit. From the long-running Kaki Kino film club to book launches, translation symposiums, exhibitions, and collaborations with festivals such as George Town Festival (GTF) and George Town Literary Festival (GTLF), Hikayat enables intersections across disciplines and audiences. It is a space where people come for books and stay for conversations—where stories, quite literally, cross paths.

### ARECA BOOKS

For Areca Books, the idea of a third place is less as a destination than a direction. Fahmi Mustaffa, author, visual artist and sales manager at Areca, describes it as an ongoing act of reflection—understanding what a space stands for and acting upon it with care.

Established over two decades ago with the support of local and international communities, Areca has long been involved in the business of publishing and bookselling. It is committed to two things: curating titles that reflect people, history and place; and creating an environment that allows connections to emerge naturally. Rather than position itself as merely a place to go, Areca has become, as Fahmi puts it, a "place to be".

Within its walls, conversations unfold—about nation-building, literature, art and memory. People come seeking something specific, or sometimes nothing at all. Sometimes, customers walk in to seek refuge from the heat.

"To curate a bookshop," Fahmi reflects, "is to curate the psyche of a human." When readers fall in love with a space, communal feeling blooms—and that, for Areca, is the essence of a third place.

### BOOK ISLAND AND RUANG KONGSI @ COEX

Tucked within COEX, one usually finds Book Island when one wanders away from the loud, boisterous crowd at Hin Bus Depot. While only a few steps away, this space is more secluded and subdued, defined by a softer rhythm and a slower pace of movement.

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Many first-time visitors remark that Book Island feels less like a place that demands action and more like one that allows reflection. Its role, according to founder Chong Lee Choo, is not to produce immediate outcomes, but to give people time—to consider ideas, understand others and engage thoughtfully. In a city increasingly driven by haste, Book Island preserves depth and possibilities.

Beyond book sales, the space has witnessed unplanned yet meaningful uses—reading groups, authors' talks and small-scale exhibitions emphasise dialogue over scale. Book Island positions itself as a stable cultural node, accompanying and witnessing the community rather than leading it.

Right across from it is Ruang Kongsi. Described simply as a community library, Ruang Kongsi is anything but conventional. It began as the Penang office of human rights NGO Suaram before gradually transforming into a semi-public space open to all during operating hours.

The space is small—just 14 seats—but flexible. Visitors read, work, chat, play board games or attend documentary screenings and talks, particularly on human rights, local history and marginalised voices. Over time, Ruang Kongsi has evolved into an informal information hub, a rehearsal space and a meeting point for artists, activists and researchers.

In the pipeline, Ruang Kongsi plans to develop a comprehensive map of Penang's community reading spaces, allowing the public to explore and connect across districts. The ongoing Mapping Jalan Gurdwara project will document oral histories, local businesses and neighbourhood memory, embedding reading spaces within broader social narratives.

### LOTENG

Loteng Bookstore offers perhaps the most understated model of all. An unmanned bookstore sharing space with other art-focused vendors, Loteng operates on trust. Books—mostly in Chinese and English—are sourced from personal collections and donations.

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Here, there is no counter or cashier. Readers select books and pay via QR code, using a simple sticker system. A small corner table with paper allows readers to suggest books for other visitors, fostering connections between strangers who may never meet.

For owner Chung, the bookstore's mission is simple—circulate books. Yet, within that simplicity lies cultural value. A donated book may reveal unexpected historical significance, and Loteng becomes a temporary home for such texts, allowing them to re-enter circulation.

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### HOLDING SPACE, TOGETHER

Across Penang, these reading spaces differ in scale, philosophy and operation. Some host international festivals; others rely on old customers and familiar faces. Some articulate strong positions on culture and society; others simply keep the door and dialogue open. Yet, all share a commitment to something increasingly rare—a space to be.

In a time when public life is often compressed into transactions and timelines, these places insist on another rhythm. They remind us that community forms in places that encourage lingering, inclusivity and shared presence.

**CAPTIONS**

1. (Cover spread) A corner outside Book Island.
2. Hikayat Bookshop. (Photo credit: Gareth Richards)
3. Areca Books.

4 & 5. The interior of Book Island.

6. Loteng Bookstore.

**AQILLA LATIF**
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# TROPICAL SPICE GARDEN

## A SANCTUARY FOR REDISCOVERING NATURE AND PERSONAL PEACE

BY
PAN YI CHIEH

**I LIVE CLOSE** to the Tropical Spice Garden, but it had always just been somewhere I brought friends when they visited Penang. It was not until the middle of last year that I formed a distinct connection to the place. At the time, drained and yearning to recharge, I sought a space to escape the bustle of daily life and the intensity of work. So, when Tropical Spice Garden started offering yoga classes immersed in nature, I signed up.

The set-up of the garden is immediately conducive to quiet contemplation and reconnecting with oneself. Even as the bus I was taking lumbered along the winding road toward Teluk Bahang, my thoughts slowly quietened.

In the garden, well-landscaped hidden nooks and secluded corners encourage exploration. Beyond the more than 500 species of tropical flora preserved here, there is a small pond, an herbal tea kiosk and small, branching paths where you can lose yourself to nature. Occasionally, a small creature scurries over the path or overhead from tree to tree. The weak internet connection there further emphasises the retreat from constant stimulation and digital noise, and instead, promotes mindful presence.

Visiting the garden has become rewarding to me. As I learn more about the garden and spend more time here, I also begin noticing familiar faces—regulars who have shaped a warm, close-knit community at Tropical Spice Garden.

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### THE COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

In the early 2000s, founders David and Rebecca Wilkinson had a vision to transform a neglected rubber plantation into a spice garden.[1] Since then, the approximately five-acre garden has become a much-loved green space in Teluk Bahang. Under the Wilkinsons' care, the garden is now a place for visitors to relax and open up their senses to the sea breeze on their skin, and the sounds of resident critters, rustling tree leaves and waves hitting the shore. There is also the option for guided tours, where visitors can learn more about the varieties of spices and plants in the garden.

During the pandemic, faced with the loss of revenue from limited mobility and restricted travel, Tropical Spice Garden struggled financially. Katharine Chua and her husband, Kenneth Khoo, who have been part of the team since the garden's early days, decided to take over. They appealed to the public for crowdfunding, and the overwhelming response helped tide it through its toughest moments.

While its positioning as a tourist attraction has been essential for its economic viability, Katharine began to reflect on how the garden can be more tailored to the local community. "We are so grateful for the public's generosity… and that experience has taught us so much about how important our communities are. Until now, bringing the community closer remains our core value," Katharine says warmly.

TSG Spice Fam, a subscription-based membership programme, was introduced as a solution. It allows members unlimited access to the garden each month, and also lets them participate in activities offered at the garden at discounted prices. These activities are often designed to promote health, mindful living and food security, such as forest bathing, practicing yoga in nature and community gardening.

Katharine takes care to involve children in some of the activities held at the garden, such as Jungle Gym and Craft for Kids. Occasionally, Tropical Spice Garden also organises nature-related festivals, such as BuMI Fest 2025, which was a two-day festival integrating music, live performances and wellness programmes.


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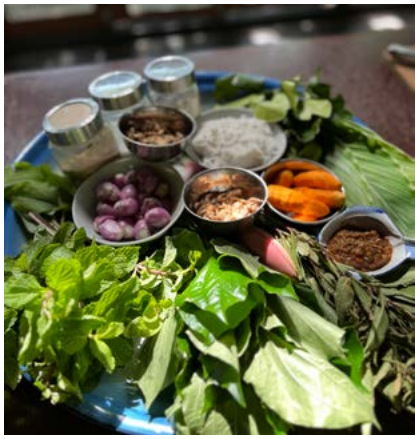
**PAN YI CHIEH** is a research analyst at Penang Institute who was born in Taiwan but now lives in Penang. She is proud to be nurtured by the two beautiful islands she regards as home.



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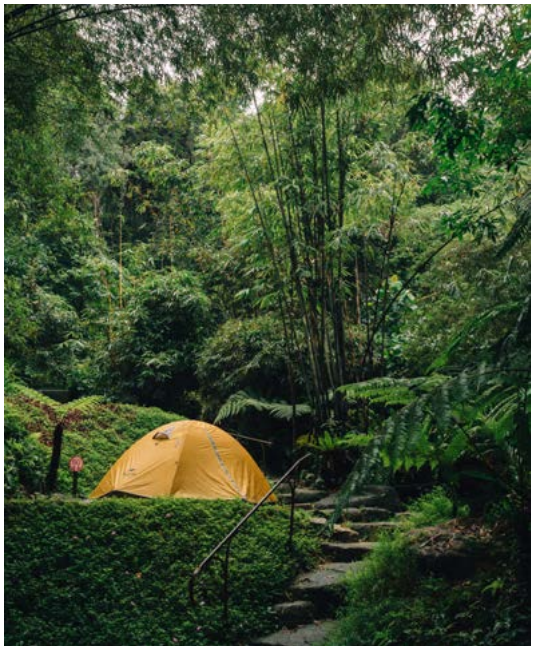


7

## A CHERISHED RETREAT WORTH PRESERVING

Katharine believes that the garden's success in drawing in crowds from both the community and foreign visitors could not have been made possible without a very passionate, 20-strong team. This includes Jonathan Lim, the Chief Storyteller, who had joined before the pandemic and weathered through the garden's most challenging moments. Jonathan's narratives about the place and creative solutions in exploring the best ways to connect with the community have proved greatly helpful.

Working in a garden comes with many perks, one of which is the endless ways nature inspires. Five years since their critical pivot, Katharine is rethinking ways to continually engage and include the community. As memory of the pandemic fades, many people have returned to their old lives. Katharine hopes that Tropical Spice Garden can remain a place that reminds visitors to slow down, reflect and recharge. "I hope to never lose the 'fresh eyes' we had when we first reopened. After the pandemic, we talked about a 'reset' and building back better. It is easy to forget those goals and race ahead, especially as technology moves so fast. I want to stay intentional, living from a place of stillness, simplicity and being close to the earth."

Over time, the garden has grown into a space shaped as much by people as by nature. Away from the pressures of work and home, it offers room for pause, shared experiences and quiet connection. An increasingly rare kind of refuge indeed.

### CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Bamboo Swing. (Credit: Imran Sulaiman)
2. Kanopi Coffee, owned by Jonathan and Vishnu, has become the much-loved spot in the garden for visitors as well as cyclists.
3. Katharine Chua loves every corner of the garden.
4. The natural Shibori dyeing workshop at Bumi Fest 2025. (Credit: Antoine Loncle)
5. Scene in the garden. (Credit: Ash Raja)
6. Malaysian herbs. (Credit: Tropical Spice Garden)
7. Camping at Tropical Spice Garden. (Credit: Imran Sulaiman)
8. The Spice Terraces is a place to discover the world of spices.
9. Singing Bowl & Tea Ceremony at Bumi Fest 2025. (Credit: Antoine Loncle)

### ENDNOTE

1. Time Out Penang, 20 December 2016, https://www.timeout.com/penang/attractions/tropical-spice-garden

8

9

# A MALL IS NOT A THIRD PLACE –AND KOM

# ITAR IS NOT A MALL

BY TJER HONG NGO

**THERE ARE SPACES** we occupy by necessity—home, school, office—and others we gravitate to by choice. The latter are harder to define, yet equally essential. Urban theorists call these "third places": realms beyond domesticity (first) and work (second), where social life unfolds in unpredictable ways.[1] They include the public, but extend beyond the formal. They shelter leisure and play; enable civic encounters; host subcultures and migrants; and allow boredom, resistance and intimacy.

A third place can be a park, a fun fair, a temple courtyard, a hawker centre, a gossip corner in a shopping mall or even just a bench in a transit hub, where strangers become characters in each other's routines. Henri Lefebvre might call it lived space; Homi Bhabha would call it hybridity; Edward Soja names it third place—a site both real and imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, everyday life and unending history, where new social arrangements emerge.[2]

In a country like Malaysia that often operates through a utilitarian lens, has Penang's technocratic governance—sometimes distant, sometimes deeply grounded—ever dabbled in spatial utopias? The existence of KOMTAR—officially known as Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak—suggests that it has. Conceived in 1970 as the Penang New Urban Centre, the infrastructure plan envisioned a whole new sociability: a multi-ethnic vertical city centre that would integrate government offices, telegraph and post services, a bus transportation hub, a "Concourse Rendezvous", a rooftop garden with a swimming pool, a multipurpose hall, an indoor hawker centre, cinemas embedded within the mall, and even residential flats designed for people across income and ethnic groups. These were avant-garde, modern, futuristic spaces and configurations that people at the time could hardly have imagined. It was a controlled heterotopia: a third place crafted through bureaucratic design, yet intended for the multitude. Whether that makes it genuinely a third place for the urban citizen or merely a totalising spatial system disguised as one remains an open question.

For most of us, KOMTAR isn't something we consciously think about. Neither do we recall the Great World Park that was flattened 50 years ago, or the five cinemas, the two century-old Chinese schools, the fire station, the canal or the road older Penangites still refer to as "*kang-a-ki*n" (港仔墘). What used to be the organically evolved heart of the city has now become the building you visit once every five years to renew your passport.

Most of the time, KOMTAR was just a void. You either drove around that cursed Magazine Road in endless traffic, or you waited at the Penang Road split for the light to change. For me, it was the bus terminal on my daily school route, the venue for my drama competitions, and the place with air-con and spotless tiles where I could *lepak* or even take a nap. It sat between my father's shop on Beach Street, my home in Tanjung Bungah and my school in Air Itam—a waystation in my teenage triangulation of escape.

I only began digging into KOMTAR when I was researching on another vanishing third place—Choon Mah Hooi (春满园), known to some as New Wembley Park. That once-overcrowded enclave between Noordin Road and Magazine Road had been alive with cinemas, cabaret, amusement rides, snooker halls, Chinese chess tables, food stalls and informal economies. It was where old Penang-*lang* gathered, performed, argued, gossiped and transacted. What happened to it? How did it go from being George Town's "Western commodity hub" to being its sunset industry, and eventually to forced relocation and demolition?

The answer kept circling back to the same "culprit"—KOMTAR. As the complex rose, it absorbed the surrounding shops and pulled the gravity of downtown inward—even if during its first decade of operation it didn't overtly disrupt the city's commercial and trade patterns—it was enough to dismantle many of the old industries and institutions that had defined the area. It marked Penang's first step into a neoliberal era of mall-driven consumption. It replaced the city's spatial imagination of what a public centre could be.

Before it became KOMTAR, the project was known as "Kompleks Angkasa Perdana".[3] The promotional catalogue was steeped in the techno-optimism of the post-independence era. Penang, having lost its free port status in 1969 and slipping into economic decline, was in desperate need of a milestone. After Gerakan wrested control of the Penang state government that same year, Lim Chong Eu forged unprecedented federal–state collaboration with Tun Abdul Razak. This alignment allowed for a modernist urban centre that could not only physically revitalise the inner city, but also symbolically reorient Penang's—if not Malaysia's[4]—identity toward a new, postcolonial modernity.

The renaming of the project to Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak may have marked more than just a political tribute. Was "Angkasa Perdana"—cosmic and aspirational—too abstract, too utopian, too ungrounded for a nation navigating post-1969 tension? Was it an attempt by Lim Chong Keat to "launch" Penang into a new orbit of Malaysian modernism? Or merely the projection of a generation of American-educated professionals' mid-century architectural ideals? The answer remains elusive, and no formal documentation of the renaming rationale has yet surfaced.[5] If you, reader, know more—please reach out.

Construction delays, fires and budget overruns haunted KOMTAR's rise. More than that, the prime-ministerial transition from Hussein Onn to Mahathir in 1981 arguably shifted development priorities toward the Klang Valley. Thus, only Phases 1 and 2 of KOMTAR were completed. The dome, once imagined as a civic auditorium, now hosts a dinosaur and a tech theme park. The three residential flats[6] morphed into a single luxury hotel. The clubhouse, swimming pool and library? Never materialised. The concourse meant for public rendezvous is today a sterile transition zone for the so-called "vagabonds".

Those displaced by the mega urban redevelopment project still haunt the peripheries—elderly folks loitering in front of UTC, migrant communities resting in different corners, disoriented tourists wandering in. These urban ghosts of KOMTAR's failure may, paradoxically, be the very ones who inhabit it as a living third place today. Though KOMTAR no longer summons Penangites, it remains, for these marginal actors, as a site of routine, idling, refuge.

The modern complex tried to summon a multitude, but couldn't hold them. And in retrospect, even in its 1990s heyday, the crowd had already begun to leave. The arrival of Midlands and Gurney Plaza peeled off the middle class. The old city migrated, elites suburbanised, remnants gentrified and KOMTAR was left suspended—neither ruin nor revival, neither centre nor periphery.

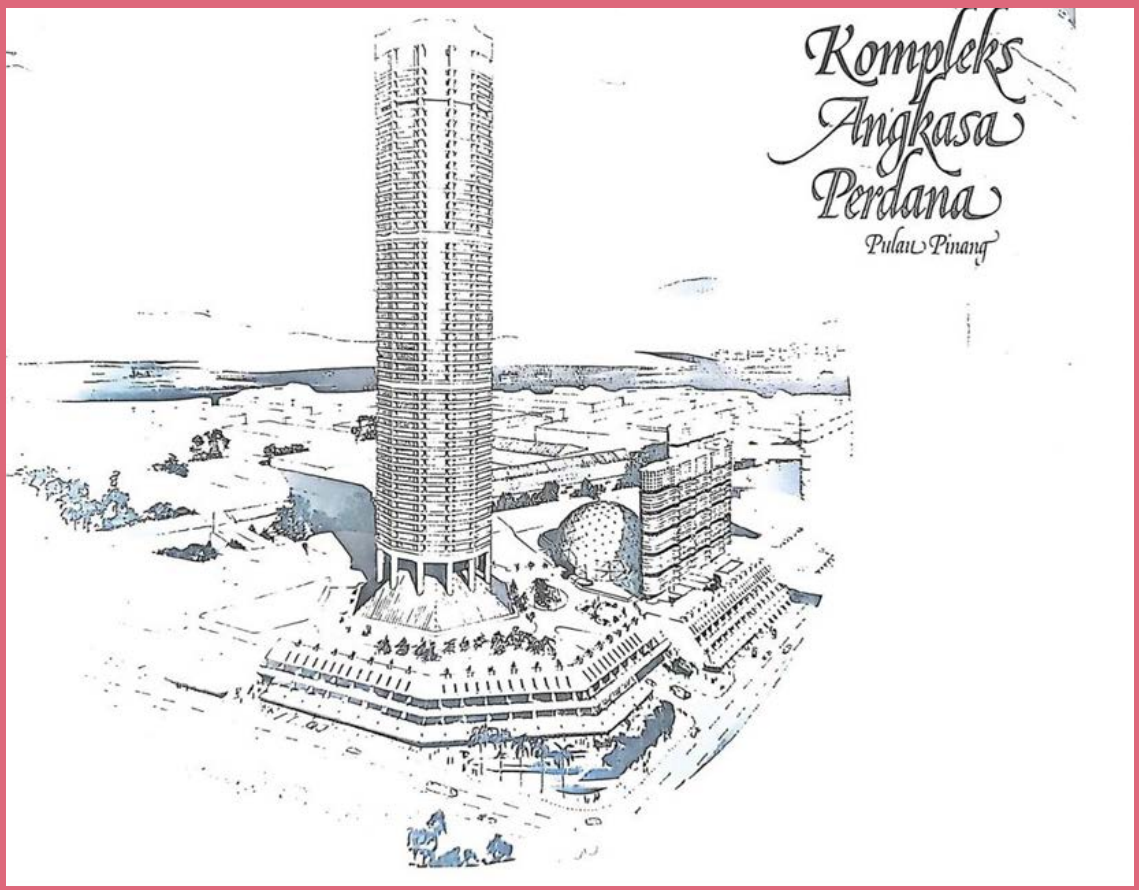
We've long struggled to define what exactly this so-called "complex" is. Was it meant to be a true multi-programmed urban complex—an integrated civic, commercial, residential, transportation and leisure megastructure, in the spirit of Le Corbusier's *unité d'habitation*—or the Metabolist movement's visionary schemes? Or has it simply devolved into what we now casually equate with a "mall"? Therefore, in today's revitalisation discourse, we repeatedly fall back on the

**CAPTIONS**

1. Model of the earlier Kompleks Angkasa Perdana scheme showing three residential blocks and a secondary smaller cylindrical structure. (Source: Soon Tzu Speechley, "KOMTAR: Malaysia's Monument to Failed Modernism" (2016) https://failedarchitecture.com/komtar-malaysias-monument-to-failed-modernism/; original source unknown.)

2. This catalogue is a scanned copy obtained from the Penang Development Corporation (PDC). The officers I talked to were unable to confirm its exact publication date, and there is currently no consolidated or quick accessible database that allows the project's planning and publication timeline to be systematically cross-referenced.


1

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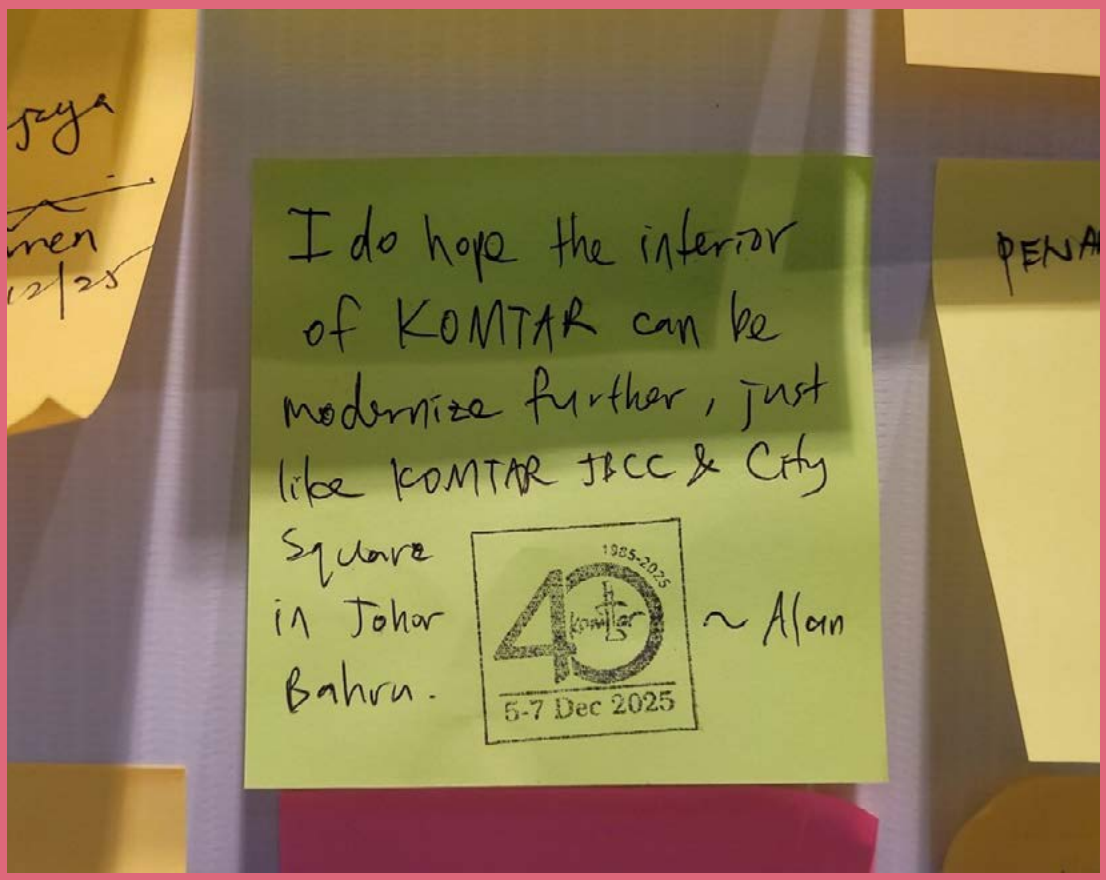
I do hope the interior of KOMTAR can be modernize further, just like KOMTAR JBCC & City Square in Johor Bahru.
~ Alan
1985-2025
40
5-7 Dec 2025

3

4

3. Under the "*Harapan Anda untuk KOMTAR*" wall, a visitor compares KOMTAR Penang to KOMTAR JBCC. To evaluate it today through its Johor Bahru doppelgänger is therefore telling, reflecting how far our spatial imagination has contracted to the point where the only future we can picture for a failed modernist civic project is to remake it as a conventional shopping mall.

4. In this version of the model, the urban centre project appears scaled down: three residential flats become two, and the additional "mini-KOMTAR" cylindrical structure disappears. Why was the plan reduced? When was the decision made, and for what reasons? If you have further information or documentation, please contact me. (Copied from: M+ Archive, Photograph, architectural model, Central Area Redevelopment Plan for Penang (KOMTAR) (1962-1986), George Town, Malaysia, CA29/2/10/2)

same narrow commercial hub playbook: more tenants, more activation, more commerce.

Did KOMTAR fall short of its goal, or our capacity to inhabit such ambitions fell away?

Why has it become such a lifeless, desolate third place today?

Back in 1976, when Phase 1 of KOMTAR opened, followed by the tower's launch in 1985, it was the first shopping mall of its kind in the northern region of Malaysia. The closure of New Wembley Park, Great World Park and eventually New World Park marked the end of Penang's amusement park era and the rise of a neoliberal consumer landscape. KOMTAR, as an all-in-one facility housing cinemas, food centres, department stores, wholesale markets and hawker courts, introduced a new spatial paradigm. Then came Midlands, Gurney Plaza and Queensbay Mall—and we slowly forgot what weekends outside of malls looked like.

Adding to the difficulty, many commercial units were bought during the speculative boom of the 1990s as investment properties. Today, with absentee landlords and PDC unable to reclaim control, the complex remains filled with units left to rot. During the "Karnival Komtar"[7] in December 2025, KOMTAR assemblyman Teh Lai Heng announced a rent waiver incentive for 2026 to help revitalise the podium. At the time of writing, application details remain undisclosed. And if by the time this article is published the plan remains vague, we shouldn't be surprised. After all, ambivalence has always defined official attitudes toward KOMTAR.

The real tragedy is, during my research, I spoke to politicians, archivists and planners only to find that nearly all documents on KOMTAR are either missing, uncatalogued or behind a wall of bureaucratic redirection. I was sent from one department to another, told to write to so-and-so, referred to another name, only to reach another institutional void. For a state-led architectural landmark of national significance, the absence of archival memory is damning.

The absence of archival memory, the reliance on informal networks, the opacity of institutions—these bureaucratic symptoms are also part of KOMTAR's third place. The fact that KOMTAR exists in the civic subconscious more as an infrastructural glitch than a heritage landmark is itself a third place in motion.

It is *real-and-imagined* in Soja's terms: a site where concrete ruins collide with fantasies of revitalisation, where dead paperwork, stalled escalators, eerie yet oddly comforting dark aisles, and air-conditioned, shampoo-scented voids co-exist with the cafeteria where you go for a quick *cicipan* during your break, the small karaoke-church you attend with your Pinay friends on weekends, the sundry shop where you linger to chitchat and exchange news, the tailor you pass by who still quietly stitches garments in a forgotten corner of level 3, and the corridor you wandered into by mistake, trying to figure out what this building even is.

A spectral megastructure suspended between histories we cannot fully access, and futures we do not know how to plan. KOMTAR functions today in this liminality and ambiguity.

Whenever KOMTAR is discussed, we are too quick to retreat into nostalgia—the first A&W, Super KOMTAR, Yaohan, Dalit Cinema…—as if that consumerism modernity was its rightful form. Capitalism's spectacle is not a civic ideal worth mourning, and longing for it only evades the real question. KOMTAR's value today lies precisely in its failure. Let's think and talk seriously about KOMTAR, and confront its unresolved present as a liminal, awkward, lived third place that resists spectacle and easy revival, and demands a different way of imagining Penang's—no longer new—Urban Centre.

**TJER HONG** is a Penang-based performance maker and writer whose practice combines criticism, dramaturgy and site-specific research to examine urban memory, cultural policy and lived experience. His writing appears in *New Straits Times*, ARTSee.net and on Medium (medium.com/@ngoth678).

**ENDNOTES**

1. This reading of third place as the zone between home and work is most closely associated with Ray Oldenburg's concept of "Third Places" (1989), which has influenced later sociological and urbanist frameworks. However, the idea of the third place has also been elaborated across disciplinary contexts—Henri Lefebvre's "lived space" (1974), Edward Soja's spatial trialectics (1996) and Homi Bhabha's theorisation of cultural hybridity (1994)—each offer divergent but overlapping frameworks. This article does not adhere strictly to any single definition, but instead draws on this conceptual plurality to think with and through KOMTAR.

2. Edward Soja's Thirdspace extends Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad by insisting that space cannot be understood solely through material form (Firstspace) or planned representations (Secondspace). Instead, Thirdspace names an abstract yet lived condition where physical reality and mental projection intersect—where social practices, memories, power relations and imagined futures co-exist. It is deliberately indeterminate, resistant to fixed meaning, and attentive to contradiction, multiplicity and becoming rather than resolution. (Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996, pp. 56-57.)

3. Kompleks Angkasa Perdana Catalog (ca. 1975), Penang Development Corporation. Retrieved via NewspaperSG internal archival access: Home>Newspaper Catalogue>New Nation>1975>July>25>Page 10.

4. On 1 January 1974, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak drove in the first pile. In his speech, he expressed the political feeling of his day when he said: "This Project would change the face of the city, discarding the colonial heritage image in favour of one which reflects the identity of Malaysia and its multi-ethnic culture." *cite: Jenkins, G.A. (2003). Contested Space: Heritage and Identity Reconstructions. Doctoral Thesis, University of Hull, p. 91.*

5. I have a scanned copy of the catalogue already renamed Kompleks Tun Abdul Razak, though it has no date. Interestingly, the catalogue's content still refers to it as Kompleks Angkasa Perdana. Based on my deduction, *New Nation*, 25 July 1975, p. 10 still used the name "Kompleks Angkasa Perdana" in publicity. Thus, the name change can be reasonably dated between 25 July 1975 and the catalogue's undated printing.

6. Online images of KOMTAR's model show two versions: one with three residential flats and a separate, smaller cylindrical structure—whose intended function remains unclear—and another with only two flats. Based on currently available documents, the three-flat version corresponds to the earlier Kompleks Angkasa Perdana blueprint. The revised KOMTAR catalogue shows a downsized plan with two flats and no extra cylindrical tower. If anyone has further information, please contact me.

7. *Karnival KOMTAR 2025* comprised three main elements: a small "exhibition" on KOMTAR's development, a cosplay market on Level 4, and a mobile e-sports competition on Level 3. Attendance of the young generation was high due to cosplay and gaming activities, but those kids had no interest in engaging with KOMTAR itself yet alone learn about its history. The exhibition consisted of eight 2×1 panels reproducing publicly available information (largely from Wikipedia), with no curatorial mediation and with staff unable to provide explanations. The event was unfortunately a missed opportunity at public education or spatial re-engagement.

# ROOM TO ROAM

## HOW PETS RESHAPE PUBLIC SPACE

BY AADAH LEE

1

**CAPTION**

1. The interior of Orca Brew. Customers dine in the background, while the owner's cat, Butter, is chilling on a table at the front.

**REFERENCE**

https://standard-insights.com/insights/pet-ownership-in-malaysia/

**AADAH LEE** is currently an intern at Penang Institute. When not writing articles, she is constantly talking about biology and aims to be a researcher in the biomedical field, much to everyone's chagrin.

**IN RECENT YEARS,** the way we talk about pets has shifted noticeably. Once framed as optional companions or accessories to family life, pets—particularly cats and dogs—are now increasingly positioned as emotional anchors, social facilitators and, for some, substitutes for more traditional domestic arrangements. According to a 2023 survey by Standard Insights, Malaysia is seeing a steady rise in pet ownership: 26.4% of the 1,000 respondents say they own multiple pets, while another 26.2% are interested in owning one. Together, these figures suggest not just a trend, but a recalibration of how people imagine companionship and home.

This growing interest does not exist in a vacuum. Firstly, economic pressures have made conventional milestones—home ownership, marriage, raising children—feel increasingly out of reach for many young adults. In this context, pets emerge as a more attainable form of long-term commitment. They offer routine, affection and a sense of responsibility without the financial and emotional weight of sustaining a nuclear family. For some, they also provide a quiet form of security: a presence at home, a reason to return, a living being that structures the day.

Yet, pets do not exist solely within the private sphere. While they may sleep on our beds and wait by the door, their presence inevitably reshapes how we move through the city. Walks must be taken, energy expended, socialisation encouraged. As a result, pet ownership pulls people outward—away from screens and enclosed interiors—into shared environments where other lives, human and animal alike, intersect.

## SHARING SPACES

Besides home and work, these shared environments play a crucial role in everyday life. They are places people drift into without an agenda: to sit, to observe, to chat, to be alone in public. Over time, they become sites of familiarity rather than obligation.

I ventured to the pastures of Straits Green to see what makes such a space a keen spot for pet owners and their furry partners. On most evenings, Straits Green is animated with activity. Dogs tug eagerly at leashes while their owners exchange nods, small talk or pet advice. Children zoom ahead on their little scooters. Joggers pass through without disrupting the scene. It is not a space designed exclusively for pets, but one that accommodates them naturally. This openness is precisely what gives it value.

For pet owners, such environments are essential to an animal's well-being. Dogs, in particular, require exposure—to other dogs, unfamiliar people, different sounds and smells—to develop confidence and restraint. Regular interaction helps prevent anxiety and aggression. At the same time, these routines foster informal networks among owners. Conversations spark easily when a dog pauses to sniff another. Familiar faces begin to recur. What starts as coincidence slowly creates community.

In a rapidly developing Penang, the significance of these green spaces must not be understated. As urban density increases, open land is often the first casualty of progress. The city's rhythm grows faster, more transactional, more enclosed. In contrast, parks and open communal spaces resist efficiency.

For pet owners, this resistance is especially meaningful. Traditional public spaces—offices, malls, public transport—have rarely been welcoming of animals. As a result, outdoor communal areas may be among the few remaining places where people can exist alongside their animals without negotiation or apology.

## PETS AND A CUPPA

Beyond parks, some businesses around Penang have also begun to loosen the boundaries between animals and public life. Cafés, in particular, have become testing grounds for this shift.

Tucked away in a little enclave in George Town, Orca Brew appears nondescript until you peek inside. Within its walls is a cosy café where pet owners and non-pet owners co-mingle. Loh, the owner of the establishment, describes the interactions as casual and largely self-regulating. Animals are allowed to roam freely, and patrons adjust accordingly. While occasional issues arise, these moments are rare, and are usually resolved through conversation.

Interestingly, Orca Brew had never advertised itself as pet-friendly, maintaining its focus as a café first and foremost. The café's identity is not built around animals, but around openness.

Some patrons travel from as far away as KL, often remarking on how natural the arrangement feels. "They are always surprised that Penang is more pet-friendly than KL, since there is also Gurney Paragon, who has its own designated pet-friendly days," Loh adds. For visitors to the city, these experiences leave a strong impression. They encounter Penang not just as a food haven, but as a place where everyday life unfolds at a more human pace.

Within these cafés and parks, something subtle but significant happens. People linger longer. Conversations stretch beyond purpose. Animals act as social lubricants and lower barriers between strangers. Yet, these spaces are increasingly fragile. Parks face redevelopment; independent cafés struggle with rising rents. As cities chase efficiency and profitability, spaces that prioritise lingering over turnover are often the first to disappear.

This makes their preservation all the more urgent. Such environments do not merely accommodate pets; they support a mode of living that values connection, slowness and shared presence. They remind us that life unfolds not only in private homes or productive workplaces, but also in the margins between them.

# PROJECT

# MARS

## GROWING A FOREST TO FEED AND EDUCATE US

BY
**ZOE KUNG**

**AT FIRST GLANCE,** Project Mars does not look like what most people would recognise as a farm. There are no neat rows of vegetables, no mono-cropped plots stretching toward the horizon. Instead, there is a dense layering of plants—bananas, cacao, bamboo, medicinal herbs, trees at different heights and ages—interwoven into something that feels closer to a forest than an agricultural site.

2

That is precisely its point.

Project Mars, located in Balik Pulau, Penang, is a climate action initiative that began nearly a decade ago as a response to something its founders could no longer ignore: the land was changing, and conventional farming was no longer enough.

Chee Hoy Yee and her husband, Pop, are no strangers to farming. Founders of Pop & Chee Healthy Home Farming *(featured in the October 2021 and December 2017 issues)*, they have been active in the sustainable farming scene for over a decade now. Long before Project Mars took shape, the couple had already been advocating for home-scale food production, soil health, and ecological awareness, grounding their work in education and hands-on learning rather than yield alone.

"Along our journey, we became aware that the weather was becoming more and more extreme," Hoy Yee, Project Mars' co-founder explains. "We realised we were no longer able to grow things that used to grow easily."

Crops such as lettuce and radishes, once reliable, began failing under erratic rainfall and rising temperatures. Too much rain caused vegetables to rot; prolonged heat stressed young plants. Some years brought massive crop losses. Other years saw harvests come all at once, collapsing prices because everyone was harvesting the same thing at the same time.

3

"It's either too much or too little," she says. "That's the problem."

Rather than pushing harder against increasingly unpredictable conditions, Project Mars chose another path: learning to read the land, adapt to it, and design a system resilient enough to survive what lies ahead.

## FROM ABANDONED PLANTATION TO FOOD FOREST

Project Mars describes itself as a food forest—an idea that often needs explanation.

"In a forest, nobody fertilises the land," Hoy Yee clarifies. "Nobody tills the soil, but everything grows well."

A food forest applies this principle intentionally. Instead of focusing on single crops, it layers edible plants, medicinal herbs and useful species—like bamboo for building—into a self-supporting ecosystem. Each plant is chosen for multiple functions: food, shelter, soil improvement, shade or habitat.

4

The land that Project Mars now occupies was once an oil palm plantation, abandoned for over 15 years. Flood-prone and degraded, it was hardly ideal farmland. But where others saw exhaustion, Hoy Yee and Pop saw possibility.

Inspired by a visit to a syntropic agroforestry project in Johor—A Little Wild, a 138-acre farm—they saw how degraded land could be revived into a productive ecosystem within a few years. If it could be done there, perhaps it could be done here too.

The method used—syntropic agroforestry—is an approach that considers sunlight needs, growth timelines and plant characteristics together. Fast-growing plants, medium-term crops and long-living trees are planted at the same time, allowing them to support each other as the system matures.

"You plant once," she says. "Then you just manage by pruning. Less labour, less intervention."

5

The result is a largely self-sustaining system that continues producing food without constant replanting or soil disturbance.

Three years ago, Project Mars began restoring the site. Flood mitigation canals were designed first, followed by careful clearing of old oil palms. Some palms were deliberately left standing; others were chopped and composted on-site to return nutrients to the soil.

6

**CAPTIONS**

1. (Cover spread) A lily pond at the far edge of the farm.
2. Hoy Yee, co-founder of Project Mars.
3. Lemon tree.
4. Chopped wood from fruit trees that were sourced from friends.
5. A mud house made entirely from materials sourced from the farm.
6. The Thousand Fingers bananas *(pisang seribu)* are edible when ripe.
7. These mud bricks are used to make the mud house.
8. Project Mars provides mud brick-making workshops.

7

8

Obtaining materials from outside of Balik Pulau was avoided where possible to save costs. Goat dung was sourced from a nearby farm. Building materials came from the surrounding area. Labour came almost entirely from volunteers—children, adults and elderly community members working together.

"This has always been a community-based project," she beams.

## WHY MOST FARMS DON'T WORK THIS WAY

If food forests are so resilient, why aren't they more common?

The answer, according to Hoy Yee, lies in scale and expectations.

Commercial farms are production-focused. They need predictable yields, uniform sizes and specific harvest windows. Markets demand bananas of a certain taste, vegetables of a certain shape and fruit at a certain time.

"Nature doesn't work like that," she says. "The forest fruits when it's ready."

Project Mars does not aim to supply markets at scale. It is intentionally positioned as an educational farm rather than a production one—designed to teach people how food systems can function differently. Food grown here is shared with volunteers, visitors and workshop participants. Excess produce is dried, processed, or occasionally sold in small quantities at nearby farmers' markets.

Instead of fast-growing vegetables that require constant replanting, fertilising and soil tilling, the project emphasises perennial and forest-based foods that regenerate naturally and protect soil health.

"Vegetable farming interrupts the soil again and again," she explains. "We don't do that here."

Walking through Project Mars, visitors are likely to encounter unfamiliar varieties—rare bananas, little-known fruits, medicinal leaves and plants many people have never seen or eaten.

"We prioritise things that people don't want to grow anymore," she quips. "Because they can't sell them."

There are at least 10 varieties of banana on-site, including rare types that are slowly disappearing from cultivation. The same approach applies to fruit trees—durian varieties that are unfashionable, plants few people recognise, species that have quietly slipped out of mainstream diets.

"This is about preservation," she says. "And education."

Education, in fact, funds Project Mars.

Workshops range from mud-brick construction and insect identification to forest

design, off-grid solar systems and community resilience planning. Schools, universities, corporates and community groups book private sessions, often bringing dozens of participants at a time.

"We don't build unless we have the funds," she expands. "And the funds come from teaching or donations."

A solar workshop, for example, paid for the installation of the farm's off-grid solar system. Insect identification sessions contribute to biodiversity monitoring while teaching participants how to observe ecosystems responsibly.

"It's always an exchange—knowledge for support."

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## LEARNING TO LIVE WITH ADVERSE CLIMATE EVENTS

Flooding and heatwaves are no longer a distant threat in Penang and Malaysia—these are already happening. During recent floods in December, water submerged the land for nearly two weeks. Some plants died. Others survived.

Biodiversity, Hoy Yee argues, is real food security. When climate stress affects one species, another may still thrive. Genetic diversity within the same crop—rather than identical clones—means floods or heatwaves are less likely to wipe out everything at once.

Plants at Project Mars are not protected from flooding; they are trained to endure it. Over time, species that survive high water tables, saline conditions and marine clay soils are replanted and their seeds shared.

"If they survive flooding, that resilience becomes part of their genetics," she explains.

Observations—such as about which plants survive at different ages, or how long they can tolerate waterlogged soil—inform future planting decisions. While the project does not have the resources for full scientific trials, it collects practical data through experience, observation and shared learning.

Part of the knowledge Hoy Yee and Pop impart in their workshop participants is also knowing when a forest is becoming self-sustaining.

Hoy Yee says the biodiversity of insects in the food forest is a good predictor. An increase in pollinators, birds and diverse insect life signals balance. If a plant is excessively eaten, it suggests an ecosystem still out of balance. Healthy forests show variety—not just in plants, but in the creatures that depend on them.

Birds, frogs, dragonflies and bees have all returned to the once-barren land Project Mars is built on. Their presence forms a visible food chain—one that visitors learn to recognise through guided observation.

## A MODEL, NOT A SOLUTION

Project Mars does not claim to be the answer to climate change. Hoy Yee is clear about that. "We are not policymakers," she says. "We can only do what we can."

What the project offers is a model—proof that degraded land can be restored, that food systems can adapt and that communities can prepare themselves.

The project's next step is a forest-to-table café concept—introducing people to forest-based foods that are nutritious, resilient and flood-tolerant.

"When floods come, your bok choy is gone," she says. "But the moringa tree is still here."

By reintroducing forgotten and less popular leaves, shoots and perennial foods into our diets, Project Mars hopes to shift how people think about eating—not as something dependent on constant regrowth, but as something already growing around them.

In a future defined by uncertainty, Project Mars is not trying to predict what will happen next. It is simply growing the capacity to endure—and teaching others to do the same.

**CAPTIONS**

9. From the inside of the Malay-style house.

10. A Malay-style house they constructed on the farm.

11. Moringa tree pod and its seeds.

**ZOE KUNG** occasionally dabbles in writing but mostly just wants to stay anonymous.

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# AUTOMATION AND THE MIDDLE-CLASS SQUEEZE

BY NADHIRAH ZAINUDDIN

**WHAT HAPPENS TO** those doing routine work when ChatGPT can create a marketing proposal in seconds, and robots can weld car parts faster than any human?

For over a century, such jobs were the backbone of industrial economics. Clerks who processed forms, accountants who balanced ledgers and factory operators who assembled identical parts formed the stable middle layer of the workforce. Today, these jobs are under threat. Artificial intelligence (AI) and automation are quietly rewriting the rules of the economy. Machines are no longer confined to lifting heavy steel or sorting boxes; they read contracts, approve loans and manage payrolls.

Automation is not new, but now, it is different. The previous wave consisting of mechanisations and industrial robotics replaced muscle power. The current one replaces mental repetition.

### THE SLOW DISAPPEARANCE OF ROUTINE

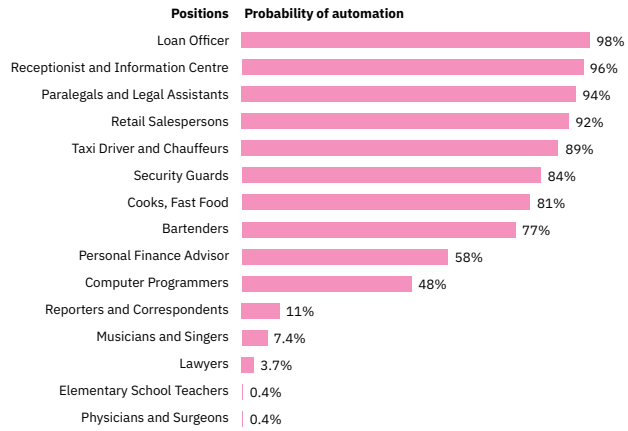
Economists David Autor and Frank Levy defined routine jobs as tasks that follow explicit, rule-based instructions. In the 80s and 90s, this category dominated global employment from factory floors to office cubicles. It was efficient, scalable and trainable.

Then came algorithms. Computers recognise patterns and analyse data. Occupations most at risk are those built on repetitive or standardised tasks—loan officers (98% risk), receptionists (96%), paralegals (94%) and retail salespersons (92%) (see Figure 1).

According to McKinsey Global Institute (2017), nearly 30% of tasks across 60% of occupations can be automated using existing technologies. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2024) found that AI poses a high threat to the ASEAN job market, potentially replacing 57% of positions. The impact is forecasted to be most severe in manufacturing and routine roles like clerical and administrative work.

## FIGURE 1: SELECT OCCUPATIONS RANKED ACCORDING TO THEIR PROFITABILITY OF BECOMING AUTOMATABLE

Source: Bloomberg (2024)




### HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE

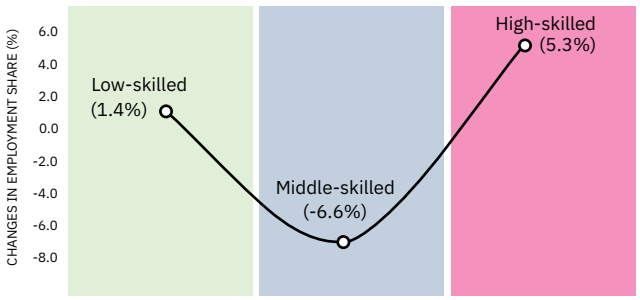
The effect is subtle, but profound. Automation does not create mass unemployment overnight; instead, it reshapes the structure of employment. As shown in Figure 2, methodical middle-skill occupations have steadily declined, while both high-skill and low-skill jobs have expanded—a pattern known as job polarisation.

At the top of the curve, high-skill, high-income jobs that depend on creativity, problem-solving and analytical reasoning are growing rapidly. On the other end, low-skill service jobs such as cleaning, caregiving and delivery remain resilient because they require a human physical presence.

This trend, first observed in the US and Europe, is now accelerating across Asia's middle income economies. In Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, manufacturing once relied on semi-automated assembly lines and clerical support. Now, as AI-powered machines and enterprise software improve, these economies risk losing their comparative advantage in "routine intensive" production. The World Bank (2023) projects that middle-income economies could lose up to 16% of routine employment by 2030, while the World Economic Forum's 2024 Future of Jobs Report expects administrative roles to decline by 26% in the next five years.

## FIGURE 2: CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT SHARE BY SKILL GROUP BETWEEN 2001 AND 2022

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)




Employment in routine middle-skill jobs has declined, while low- and high-skill occupations expanded.

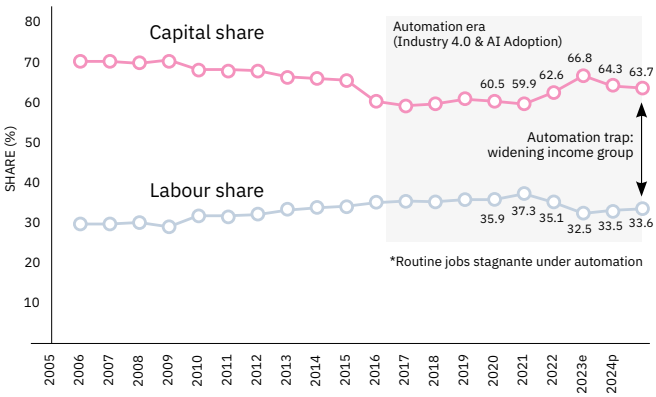
### PRODUCTIVITY PARADOX: GROWTH WITHOUT SHARED GAINS

For decades, technological progress meant benefit to the masses. Higher productivity meant higher wages. Unfortunately, this relationship has weakened. Since the mid-2010s, as Malaysia embraced Industry 4.0, the payoff has become more polarised: labour's share of income has stagnated while capital shares have risen. The same output that once required 10 clerks can now be produced by a single employee aided by software. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2024) reports that labour's share of global income has fallen from 54% in 2000 to 48% in 2022, while capital's share such as profits, dividends and rents continues to rise.

This "productivity paradox" is visible even in advanced economies such as the US, Japan and South Korea, where productivity has surged over the past decade, but median wages remain flat. For developing economies like Malaysia, however, the risk is more structural—exhibiting the so-called "automation trap", where technology adoption boosts national output, but traps workers in stagnant or low-value roles.

## FIGURE 3: LABOUR VS. CAPITAL SHARE OF INCOME (2005-2024)

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)



| Skill | Results from automation | Occupation |
|---|---|---|
| High-skill profession | Gains from automation | • AI engineer<br>• Data scientist<br>• Machine learning engineer |
| Middle-skill profession | Faces the most disruption | • Clerks<br>• Accountant and finance officer<br>• Administrative staff |
| Low-skill profession | Remains protected by the "human touch" | • Food service worker<br>• Cleaner<br>• Personal care assistant |

### WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE AUTOMATION RACE

Automation does not affect everyone equally; instead, its impact creates a clear labour market division.

The danger here is not technological progress itself, but the concentration of its rewards. Large firms that possess the resources to invest heavily in AI and advanced automation gain a more powerful edge in the market. Conversely, smaller enterprises, particularly micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) often struggle to adopt automation efficiently. They lack the necessary capital, technical expertise and scale; this results in a widening of productivity gaps across industries. Automation, therefore, risks reinforcing what economists call the Matthew Effect: "To those who have, more will be given."

Unless addressed through deliberate policy intervention, this effect could hollow out not just the middle class, but the social stability and equitable growth that a strong middle class provides.

### THE POLICY GAP

Governments and educational institutions often lag behind technological change, creating a critical policy gap. Many school systems still train students for disappearing clerical or manufacturing roles. To change this, an immediate approach to reskill and adapt must be done. This requires a multi-pronged approach:

#### ENCOURAGE LIFELONG LEARNING

Prioritise cross-domain skills, critical thinking and creativity, making learning continuous.

#### INCENTIVISE RETRAINING

Create incentives for firms to retrain, not just replace, workers with technology.

#### STRENGTHEN SAFETY NETS

Build robust social security and transitional support for displaced employees.

#### BOOST EQUITABLE EDUCATION

Strengthen the system to ensure its benefits, especially digital skills, reach all citizens, including the economically vulnerable.

#### SEVERAL ECONOMIES IN ASIA OFFER BLUEPRINTS

Singapore's SkillsFuture provides every citizen with credits for continuous learning, while South Korea's Lifelong Learning Account links retraining directly to industrial needs. Malaysia's TVET modernisation and HRD Corp programmes are steps in this direction, but their scale and execution remain challenges due to issues like fragmented governance and funding inadequacies.

The key, economists argue, is not to slow automation, but fundamentally to humanise it, ensuring its rewards are broadly shared.

### REIMAGINING THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE

Even in the age of machines, some jobs remain uniquely human. Being a doctor, teacher, social worker, designer or an entrepreneur require empathy, nuanced judgment, radical creativity and moral reasoning—what economists call non-routine cognitive work. Their value lies in navigating complexity, building trust and generating novel solutions that require an understanding of human context.

Automation is forcing a philosophical reset in the labour market. While "work" historically meant performing routine tasks for pay, the future requires societies to compete with AI on meaning, not speed.

**NADHIRAH** is a Project Researcher at Penang Institute, specialising in education economics, labour market transformation and human capital development.

# HURTING IN SILENCE: A NEED TO FIGHT BULLYING ON ALL FRONTS

## BY KEVIN VIMAL

**KEVIN VIMAL** believes that writing has the power to unfold many amazing things in this world.

**IT OFTEN STARTS** quietly—a child who suddenly refuses to go to school, who once loved art but now no longer paints, who eats dinner without looking up, or who says "nothing" when you ask what is wrong, when something obviously is wrong.

Sometimes, the signs of bullying do not show in bruises or torn uniforms, but silence—a pain left unspoken. Bullying is not just a disciplinary issue—it is a crisis of empathy that cuts across homes, schools and communities.

"You can tell when a child begins to disappear," says an experienced secondary school teacher, who wishes to remain anonymous. The earliest signs of trouble often reveal themselves not in words, but in behaviour. "At home, you will see the change if you are observant—they might not want to eat, they lose interest in what used to make them happy," she adds.

But what is less obvious, she adds, are the signs of the bully.

"Many bullies appear polite or obedient at home. Their aggression only surfaces in school or online. That is why communication between parents, siblings and teachers is crucial. We need to monitor their online expressions and what kind of language they use with their peers."

For this teacher, prevention begins with awareness and compassion.

"Both victims and bullies need help," she stresses. "Sometimes, bullies come from homes where aggression is normalised. They may not even realise they are hurting someone."

Wawasan Open University (WOU) senior lecturer, Brian John Dorai, has spent years studying the emotional and social dimensions of bullying. He explains that most bullies are not born cruel.

"It is a cry for help. Many of them come from environments where love and validation are scarce. They mimic the control or aggression they experience at home, or they act out of deep insecurity. For the victims, the effects can last a lifetime. Bullying creates invisible scars, anxiety, depression and even distrust that follow them into adulthood. For the bully, the damage is equally deep; if not corrected, it becomes a pattern they carry into their relationships, their marriages, their workplaces," he says.

Brian recalls one student whose story still haunts him—a quiet boy bullied for dressing differently. His classmates mocked him online, and even his own father used hurtful labels.

"He once told me, 'I thought I was the problem.' That broke me. He had internalised all those cruel words. It took months before he could see that he was not the cause of his own pain."

Bullying does not end at the school gate. For parents, the fight often begins at home, in the way they listen, the way they respond and the way they show up.

One mother shared how her daughter's reluctance to go to school became the first red flag. "She did not want to join activities or talk about her friends. At first, we thought it was just mood swings, but when I finally spoke to her teachers, they realised something was wrong."

Support from her teachers made all the difference.

"Once the teachers knew, they watched over her closely. With time, love and patience, she recovered," she says.

Another parent describes her son's ordeal with senior students who teased him during break time. "He became afraid to go to school. When I reported it, the response was slow, just a warning to the bullies. That was not enough," she adds.

But through consistent emotional support at home, her son began to regain confidence.

"He opened up eventually. I learned that the most important thing is to listen without judgment. Handle it calmly because your child is already shaken," she further emphasises.

Retired principal, Gurjeet Kaur Kabal Singh, who led SMK Convent Green Lane for many years, has seen generations of students, and the changing nature of discipline. She sees bullying today as a symptom of something much deeper: the erosion of empathy. We have raised a generation that is digitally connected, but emotionally distant.

"Children are growing up with technology, but without reflection. They learn reactions, not relationships," she says, adding that the foundation of discipline and compassion begins at home, but teachers remain the next vital pillar in a child's life.

"Teachers have one of the most sacred responsibilities in society. We are not just teaching subjects, we are moulding lives. Every word we speak, every action we take shapes who our students become."

Gurjeet emphasises that while academic performance is often prioritised, the true success of education lies in building character, resilience and empathy—character-building must be intentional. "Our role as educators is to mould not only their minds, but their hearts."

She also criticises the culture of indifference that sometimes exists in schools.

"When a bullying case happens, there must be a clear, staged intervention, from the class teacher to the counsellor to the principal. Everyone must be accountable. It is not enough to just say 'don't do it'; children must understand why. We need to bring back values-based education, and teach courtesy, respect and empathy. If we only chase grades, we will raise clever minds but empty hearts," she says.

Technology, she warns, has worsened the problem.

"Online gaming and social media have desensitised our youth. Words are thrown carelessly, emotions are numbed. But in the real world, those words can kill. We must bring back human connection, real conversations, not just emojis," says Gurjeet.

Her message is simple but profound: "Discipline is not punishment; it is love expressed through boundaries. When children understand that, they flourish. When teachers see themselves as moulders of character, not just keepers of classrooms, that is when true education happens."

The question remains, where do we draw the line? When does teasing become verbal bullying? Educators say it is about intent and impact. Some may joke easily, but for others, the same words can pierce deeply. As Brian puts it, "If it hurts someone, it is bullying, whether you meant it or not."

Physical bullying, meanwhile, should be reported immediately, especially if it involves harm or repeated intimidation. "Even one incident should not be brushed aside. Students must be empowered to report, even anonymously. Schools must create a culture where speaking up is safe, and not seen as snitching, but as caring. That culture starts with students themselves. Every child has a role—not just to avoid bullying, but to stop it when they see it. "If you witness bullying, speak up or report it. Be the friend who helps. Silence is what keeps bullying alive," Brian urges.

Bullying can be prevented, but it takes the whole village, as it were, to do that.

It takes parents who listen, teachers who care and friends who defend. It takes schools that treat every report seriously and communities that remember that kindness is not weakness. As one teacher put it, "We must teach children to say no boldly, to fight against bullying with courage. Every act of kindness is an act of defiance against cruelty."

The tragic loss of Zara Qairina[1], the culmination of a systemic bullying culture, where a "High Council" of seniors and abusive confrontations over theft accusations preceded her fatal fall, is a painful reminder that silence can kill. Her story has ignited a national reckoning, forcing us to confront the systemic failures that allow bullying to flourish in the shadows of our schools.

**ENDNOTE**

1. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/09/13/zara-qairina-inquest-what-we-know-so-far/190957

# ANTARA DETIK: ALLOWING THE COMMUNITY TO RECOGNISE ITSELF

## BY NURUL NATASHA AMIR

*"What is this life if, full of care,*
*We have no time to stand and stare."*
*— Leisure, William Henry Davies*

**IN A CITY** calibrated for productivity and consumption, moments of pause feel increasingly rare. Yet, it is often in these unstructured in-between spaces that community quietly takes shape. Antara Detik, held on the evening of 21 September, was one such moment—not quite an event to be consumed, but a space to inhabit.

Conceived as part of the Hin Between Festival, whose theme this year was "Time", Antara Detik translates loosely as "between moments". Hosted at Baie Café, the gathering brought together poetry, music, conversations and surprise, but more importantly, it offered something harder to programme: presence—informal, porous and shaped as much by the people in the room as by the programme itself.

"We came up with the name 'Antara Detik' because the programme is punctuated by moments of surprise," Aq'illa Latif, who co-conceptualised the title with Fatin, owner of Baie, explains.

Rather than a tightly curated lineup, the night unfolded with a deliberate looseness. Poetry readings gave way to magic tricks; quiet listening shifted into collective laughter. This unpredictability wasn't a flaw but the point. It resisted the polished efficiency of most cultural programming, allowing the evening to breathe and stretch. In doing so, it felt less like a programmed event and more like a gathering of friends, shaped by shared attention and unplanned interaction.

People sat close together, listening without the usual distractions. Some read poems they loved; others shared their own work. There was no clear hierarchy between "performer" and "audience". The café lighting softened the room, but it was the attentiveness—the willingness to stay with each moment—that made the space feel intimate. Words lingered not because they were amplified, but because they were held.

One moment captured this sensibility particularly well. A poet, Nisa, presented her poem alongside her painting. As she recited her piece—centered on the theme of patience—she slowly tore strips of tape off the canvas, before finally revealing the full piece of art. This act of unveiling became part of the poem itself—a quiet meditation on patience and restraint. The room fell silent, not out of obligation, but because everyone seemed to understand that rushing the moment would break it.

This attentiveness carried through the rest of the night. A *sapek*—a traditional Bornean lute—performance by Nickku Chan from Sada, Borneo drew listeners into a near-trance, its repetitive plucking grounding the room in a shared rhythm. Later, karaoke dissolved whatever separation remained between contributors and spectators. People sang together, laughter spilling across the café as the night gave way to communal joy.

"Previously, we focused more on Malay literature, which drew in more locals," Fatin says of the art events she used to host at her former café, Langit Senja Kopi. "This time, we had performers from the Philippines as well."

What made Antara Detik resonate was not scale or novelty, but intention. For Aq'illa and Fatin, the evening was less about showcasing talent than about creating a space where people could gather without needing to justify their presence.

"This is also part of my journey, you know, sharing my interests," Aq'illa says. "It's mainly about community—to create a space for people to connect through the arts."

In a creative ecosystem often shaped by funding cycles and visibility metrics, this kind of space is both fragile and essential.

There were practical challenges, of course—limited resources, reliance on goodwill, the quiet labour of organisers and performers who showed up largely out of passion. But that, too, is part of the story. Third places are rarely efficient or profitable. They persist because people believe in them, because they answer a social need that cannot be met elsewhere.

Antara Detik did not attempt to define Penang's creative community, nor did it try to brand it. Instead, it allowed that community to recognise itself—through listening, participation and shared time. In doing so, it reminded us that culture is not only produced on stages or pages, but also in the simple act of gathering, lingering and being present together.

Sometimes, what a city needs most is not another event, but a moment—held open just long enough for connection to take root.

**NURUL NATASHA** is an intern at *Penang Monthly* with a passion for writing and graphic design. She enjoys crocheting, singing and occasionally making music—a ukulele is never too far from her reach.

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# A TASTE OF PENANG'S OWN COFFEE

## BY MARCO FERRARESE

**"SEE?"** says Tiger, dropping even more coffee inside his saucer and then lifting it and using it as a bowl to drink. "This is how we drink coffee when we think it's too hot."

The coffee is thick, almost liquor-like, and velvety on the tongue. It comes in vintage-looking cups adorned with flowers, filled to the brim and spilling over, turning the saucer into a dark swimming pool for microbes. On the table is a breakfast spread of dim sum, rice cakes and, obviously, a cup of local coffee from 118 Coffee Stall—it is as barebones and traditional as the old Rifle Range Market we are sitting in.

"When the Chinese here started to become the real crazy rich Asians, they wanted to follow Western trends. And of course, having seen many foreigners enjoying their coffee, the Chinese wanted to try too."

I am sitting in an old school food court covered by a metallic gable roof and listening attentively to the charismatic Teoh Shan Tatt, better known as "Tiger"—he acquired this nickname partly because of his exuberance and partly because of his Chinese zodiac.

"You know, the Chinese never liked English coffee because it was too sour… that's why they experimented with adjusting the flavour to their liking, and that's how the Nanyang—which means Southeast Asia—variety was born," explains Tiger. And because the Chinese were used to stir frying everything, they put coffee beans inside a wok and then added butter to them to make them smoother to fry. Nanyang coffee is traditionally made from Robusta beans grown in Java.

A little booklet Tiger handed out to us explains the differences between northern, central and southern coffee ordering methods—it is a dictionary of sorts. Flipping through it, I learn that even after 15 years in Penang, I didn't know that ice cubes are served with hot coffee in the saucer to act as "aircond"—a way to cool down the brew without making it "*kopi ais*".

The coffee experience that Tiger curates is part of a Penang Hidden Gems programme, and is part degustation, part ethnography and part family storytelling. He pairs Nanyang coffee's curious history with an exploration of his neighbourhood—the Rifle Range flats, market and food court.

We met just half an hour earlier in Padang Tembak, or Rifle Range, an area sandwiched between the southeastern slopes of Penang Hill, adjacent to the more famous Air Itam. Tourist itineraries entirely overlook this area, but it holds great significance for Penang Island's history.

"It still has a bad reputation because it was kind of a bad neighbourhood with gangsters, a bit like Hong Kong's Kowloon," says Tiger with a hint of pride, "but in fact,

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it was and still is a very tight-knit community here, where everything—even the cemetery—is in walking distance." He points at a line of Chinese graves strung on the foothills next to the flats. "You can be born, live and die all within a few minutes' walk," says Tiger before cracking into a hearty laughter.

Shortly after Penang lost its free port status in 1967 and many jobs with it, the island entered a period of severe recession. The federal government then decided to mass build affordable housing units quickly and cheaply using a novel French prefabricated housing system imported by a German company, Hot Chief, which worked with a local company, Chee Seng. These affordable housing units were called the Rifle Range flats. The whole nine blocks were completed in less than three years using the current PBA (Penang Water Supply Corporation) building as a factory for the production of building materials. Upon completion in 1969, the 17-storied flats were the tallest buildings in Malaysia.

Tiger continues telling us stories as he takes us inside the Rifle Range flats. He shows us the iconic art-deco-like staircase between the rows of facing balconies as we go up the second floor. We enter a 300ft$^2$ apartment that Tiger's family owns and uses as a showpiece lab to explain and demonstrate how the roasting process begins—this forms the bulk of the experience.

This, Tiger clarifies, is a very different culture and process of making coffee that would probably make Melbourne's Lygon Street baristas want to commit suicide—but again, the only science here is to make coffee the way Malaysians like it. This happens by adding many unorthodox steps that entirely distort the taste of beans, which, remember, are necessarily unrefined.

It's our turn to learn the art of making Nanyang Coffee. Tiger puts butter, sugar and flaxseeds—not necessary, but good to make the beans taste nuttier—on the side, warms a deep frying pan and pours in half a kilo of beans.

"Stir up," he says to me and a visitor from New York City before leaving us to spin the beans in a circle, always in the same direction. We add butter until it melts into a blackish sauce, then it gets absorbed into the beans, turning them sticky like molasses. After the coffee is roasted, we set it aside for a while, then smash it to smithereens with a hammer and grind it into the powder that will be brewed into coffee.

We are to bring our mixture to try and please Teoh Sing Kong, aka Ah Kwang or Pek Moh Kwang—Tiger's father. Hailing from a family of coffee makers who began the trade by peddling *kopi* on the streets of Kuala Kurau in Perak, Ah Kwang has owned Kwang Coffee Stall since 1982. Kwang Coffee Stall sits right at the ground floor of the Rifle Range's block F and G, and is a rickety assemblage of metal tables, an awning and stacked furniture to hold cups and hot water tanks together.

When Ah Kwang tests our concoction while preparing some drinks, I must admit I am nervous, thinking I might fail. "Good job," says Tiger as he serves us some cold *hor ka sai*, which means "tiger eats lion" in Hokkien (a misunderstanding of "you're great" in Cantonese, he explains). It is a rich mix of Milo and Nanyang coffee. "Dad says you all passed."

The knot in my stomach relaxes as the friendly Kwang comes over to serve us his special Deities Coffee—a mix of milk, coffee and barley that cannot be found anywhere else island-wide. With the master's quiet approval, delivered in the form of this drink, I can almost believe I've learned to make *kopi*—or at least understand that in Malaysia, coffee is a simple pleasure, and no less delicious than coffee made anywhere else.

**CAPTIONS**

1. Teoh Sing Kong, aka Ah Kwang, Tiger's father. (Photo by Chan Kit Yeng)
2. The iconic staircase inside the Rifle Range flats, standing since 1969. (Photo by Chan Kit Yeng)
3. Mixing beans and butter. (Photo by Chan Kit Yeng)

**"MALACCA,** formerly a powerful and glorious city," observed Captain Auguste-Nicolas Vaillant, "has passed through many vicissitudes… Of her ancient splendour there remain only ruins; of her past glory only… the debris of fortifications behind which her inhabitants sustained so many memorable sieges… she was no longer a powerful city. Pulo-Pinang and Sincapour [sic] have taken this from her."[1]

# A SEA OF A THOUSAND FIRES: THE VISIT OF *LA BONITE* TO PENANG

## BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

Thus did the French captain reflect on the faded fortunes of the once-legendary emporium as he encountered it in early 1837. Vaillant's remarks appeared in the official account of his circumnavigation of the world aboard the 800-tonne corvette, *La Bonite*—a voyage that had begun more than a year earlier, on 6 February 1836, when the ship departed Toulon and rounded Cape Horn, before proceeding up the Pacific coast of Chile and Peru, crossed the vast ocean to the Hawaiian Islands, and onward to China.

The narrative of this high-seas expedition, however, was not written by Vaillant himself. The French government had originally intended Abel Aubert du Petit-Thouars—later Vice-Admiral—to write the published account, but when he proved unable to undertake the task, the responsibility fell to Achille-Étienne Gigault de la Salle, a senior clerk in the Ministry of the Navy. De la Salle, who had never visited the Straits of Malacca, compiled the text from journals and documents provided to him. The French-born New Zealand historian John Dunmore aptly described his prose as "in keeping with his occupation, somewhat pedestrian".

Nonetheless, the resulting trilogy, *Voyage autour du monde exécuté pendant les années 1836 et 1837 sur la corvette "La Bonite"*, forms the heart of a larger, multi-volume scientific compendium that remains a major 19th-century record of global geography, natural history and imperial observation. Crucially, Vaillant appears frequently via extensive quotations—his vivid voice preserved even if not his pen.

From these sources, it is clear that Vaillant looked forward to visiting Penang, partly for strategic reasons. The island, he noted, "has played, as is known, an important role in the late wars", referring to the Napoleonic campaigns in which he had served. His instructions from Admiral Guy-Victor Duperré, the Minister of the Navy (*Ministre de la Marine*), dated 28 December 1835, were explicit: "you will stop, if the occasion presents itself… especially at the beautiful English settlement of Pulo Penang." And so, although anchored briefly in Melaka, Vaillant did not intend to remain there beyond 48 hours.

**EUGENE QUAH** is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

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### NATURE'S LIGHT SHOW AT SEA

On Sunday, 26 February, at the break of day, *La Bonite* set sail for Penang Island. By sunset on 1 March, the corvette had passed Pulo-Dinding (Pulau Pangkor). The next day, Vaillant finally sighted Penang and its lofty, forested peaks. Not wanting to enter port via the harder-to-navigate South Channel, *La Bonite* instead sailed up the island's west coast, passing the plains of Balik Pulau. By 8pm, they neared Tanjung Puchat Muka (Muka Head), where "the calm and the currents forced her to anchor".

It was there that the crew witnessed one of the great spectacles of tropical seas: bioluminescence on an astonishing scale. Here, Vaillant's direct voice breaks through De la Salle's bureaucratic compilation, offering a description that is nothing short of rapturous:

*"the sea alone shone with a thousand fires… [like] an immense silver sheet, where scintillated innumerable stars… a myriad of small luminous bodies crossed in all directions with prodigious rapidity, tracing in the wave brilliant furrows. The hull of the corvette was lit up and the keels of the boats suspended on the davits above the bulwarks stood out dazzling on the black background of the sky."*

"Never," he added, "in the twenty-nine years that I have been at sea, have I seen a spectacle so imposing and so beautiful."

This otherworldly glow can still, on rare nights, be seen along the coast of Penang National Park. I, too, had the good fortune to witness this sight at Teluk Duyung near Muka Head many years ago—the sea swirling with electric-blue light, just as Vaillant described. Today, we know that this phenomenon is caused by innumerable microscopic plankton called *dinoflagellates*, but the sense of wonder has not diminished.

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## ARRIVAL AT PULO-PINANG

On the morning of 3 March, *La Bonite* sailed along the North Channel towards George Town. The British formally named Penang the Prince of Wales Island, but it was more commonly referred to as Penang by visitors and locals alike. As they sailed along the coast, the crew admired "the fresh landscapes of Pulo-Pinang and the picturesque aspect of its numerous Malay villages, which lay half hidden in the woods of coconut and [pinang] trees." The ship finally anchored a mile and a half from Fort Cornwallis, to the "great satisfaction" of all on board.

Coming ashore, Vaillant was informed that Resident-Councillor James William Salmond was not in town. The governor of the settlement, it seems, ordinarily inhabited a country house, at three leagues' distance, on one of the highest mountains of the island. From there, he communicated his orders to the authorities established in town by means of telegraphic signals. That residence, Government House—Bel Retiro—was later rebuilt in stone in the late 19th century, and remains today as one of the official residences of the Governor of Penang.

The officers of *La Bonite* were instead received by the Harbour Master, George Dawson, for whom, according to De la Salle, Captain Vaillant had high praise:

*"[Monsieur] Dawson conducted himself... with perfect obligingness and received the voyagers so cordially that not one of them, without doubt, has lost the memory of his excellent conduct... anticipated their wants, and their desires ... Thanks to... the captain of the port, all the works interesting the diverse branches of science were thus set in train."*

Dawson also gave them use of "a residence for the admirals and captains of the Royal Navy who come to Pulo-Pinang", which was "situated on the shore of the sea" with "a garden most conveniently placed for making observations". Captain Vaillant, according to his custom, did not use it himself, but he accepted it for his fellow voyagers, who established themselves there the next morning.

Once the formalities were completed, Vaillant, accompanied by Dawson, made his visits to the principal authorities of the town, where he was well received. However, the captain had "other persons whom he especially wished to see"—namely the French missionaries who had established themselves in this town.

He would go on to visit the College General, run by the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP)—Paris Foreign Missions—numerous times during his short stay. The priest in charge, Monsignor Jean-Baptiste Boucho, Vicar Apostolic of Melaka-Singapore, was by Vaillant's account, "a man most distinguished and a worthy ecclesiastic, of an enlightened faith, of an ardent zeal". He was moved to learn that the MEP had set up a seminary to train local priests, a school for boys—the Catholic Free School (the precursor to St. Xavier's Institution)—and an orphanage for girls. Among his many reports was this impassioned paragraph:

*"I avow that I experienced a feeling of satisfaction, to which was mingled a little national pride, on seeing the immense results obtained by the children of France, without support on a foreign soil, thousands of leagues from their country, and reduced to such feeble resources. What respect and what sympathies such examples should they not inspire for the French name, amongst the populations who are witnesses thereof!"*

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Despite his extensive travels, Vaillant was impressed by the island's beauty and the quality of its infrastructure:

*"One communicates from the capital to all the inhabited parts of the island by magnificent roads… which are perfectly maintained and very wide. These roads are shaded by coconut, areca [pinang] and other trees, and you could believe you were going along the lanes of a beautiful park… They have been made and are maintained by the convicts sent from the establishments of India."*

Vaillant's first day in Penang proved to be a busy one. According to De la Salle, the captain "was too occupied… to be able to go that same day to make his visit to the governor" up in the hills. However, he made it a point the following day, 4 March, to meet Salmond, which was "not only a duty of courtesy, but also an occasion to see the interior aspect of the country".

## UP THE GREAT HILL

Among *La Bonite*'s crew were two artists: the younger, Théodore-Auguste Fisquet, was a 24-year-old naval officer, whose exquisite draughtsmanship shaped many of the images reproduced in the official volumes; the other, slightly older Barthélemy Lauvergne, was already a seasoned voyager, having circumnavigated the world before and had likely glimpsed Penang as early as 1830, when the captain of *La Favorite* recorded: "we espied the English flag waving above the fortifications of the beautiful Isle of Prince of Wales."

Fisquet, to his delight, was chosen by the captain to accompany him up the hill. His account of the excursion gives us an intimate glimpse of what both men saw:

*"We set out by carriage, before sunrise, and we took the road which leads to the mountain: it is a charming route, smooth, paved, maintained with the same care as a garden alley… From stage to stage, we arrived at the foot of the mountain. The carriage could take us no further. Here the route changes aspect. Rapid and winding, it is nevertheless well enough traced for one to travel it on horseback."*

Vaillant and Fisquet then mounted steeds sent ahead for them, likely some hardy Deli ponies from Sumatra, and commenced their ascent up Penang Hill. There, Fisquet records with poetic beauty:

*"Silent and absorbed in a respectful meditation, we pursued our route through the thick shade of the forest, when suddenly, at the turn of the path, a dazzling light came to dazzle us. We arrived at a small plateau recently cleared to establish a plantation of nutmeg trees.*

*At the very moment when we reached it, the sun was rising behind the mountains of the continent. Its orb, still invisible to us, coloured with fiery reflections the bluish vapours of the horizon, and its light softened by that transparent veil glided over the immense plains which we saw extending at our feet. The thick curtain which until then had robbed us of the view of the countryside could no longer rise. I stopped seized with admiration: never had so brilliant a spectacle been offered to me in all the course of our voyage."*

## THE ART OF EXPEDITION

Undoubtedly, some of these rare, hand-coloured aquatints reproduced here were drawn by Fisquet that day, and some other Penang scenes by his colleague, Lauvergne. These images offer us something precious: a

visual record of the island as it appeared nearly two centuries ago, seen through French eyes with fresh wonder. The cascading waterfalls, the winding roads carved through jungle, the meeting of mountain and sea—all rendered with the careful attention of expedition artists who understood they were documenting a world most of their countrymen would never see.

The *La Bonite* departed Penang on Tuesday, 7 March 1837.

Today, standing in front of the entrance of Bel Retiro, where Valliant and Fisquet were once entertained by Salmond, and looking across the Penang Strait from this high vantage point, one can still catch glimpses of their vision. In these aquatints, Penang endures as Captain Vaillant found it: a beautiful park suspended between sea and sky; its roads shaded by towering trees; its waters still capable, on the rarest of nights, of setting the darkness ablaze with a thousand living fires.

Some things, it seems, outlast empires.

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**REFERENCES**


1. Achille-Étienne Gigault de la Salle (1852), *Voyage autour du monde exécuté pendant les années 1836 et 1837 sur la corvette La Bonite, commandée par M. Vaillant, capitaine de vaisseau. Relation du voyage, par A. de La Salle.* Volume 3.

2. David W. Forbes (2000), *Hawaiian National Bibliography, 1780-1900*, Volume 2: 1831-1850, pg. 456-459

3. John Dunmore (1965), *French Explorers in the Pacific*, Volume 2, pg. 270–5, 278–82.

4. Colin Dyer (2017), *Penang in 1837, as seen by the French explorer Captain Auguste Vaillant*, *JMBRAS*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (313), pp. 98–108.


**ENDNOTE**

1. Translator's Note: This is a completely new translation. In contrast to Colin Dyer's partial 2017 translation, this edition seeks to evoke the style of mid-19th-century English travel writing while remaining faithful to the original French text.

**CAPTIONS**

1. (Cover page) *Cascade à Pulo-Pinang* (Waterfall at Pulo-Pinang) by Théodore-Auguste Fisquet. This plate captures the grandeur of the Great Waterfall, a favourite subject of visiting artists to Penang.

2. *Vue de la Rade de Pulo-Pinang* (View of the Pulo-Pinang Roadstead) by Barthélemy Lauvergne.

3. *Vue prise à Pulo-Pinang* (View taken at Pulo-Pinang) by Barthélemy Lauvergne. This scene depicts the crew of La Bonite coming ashore.

4. *Torren à Pulo-Pinang* (Torrent at Pulo-Pinang) by Barthélemy Lauvergne.

5. *Vue prise à Pulo-Pinang* (View taken at Pulo-Pinang). This scene depicts the beginning of the path up Penang Hill. Although officially credited to Barthélemy Lauvergne, it was likely sketched by Théodore-Auguste Fisquet, who is recorded as having accompanied Captain Vaillant on the ascent to up to the Government House to visit Salmond.

6. *Vue prise à Pulo-Pinang* (View taken at Pulo-Pinang). A depiction of the winding road leading toward the Great Hill. Like the previous plate, this is attributed to Lauvergne, but aligns more closely with Fisquet's itinerary during the visit.

7. *Amiral Auguste-Nicolas Vaillant, ministre de la Marine (1846)* by Clothilde Gerard-Juillerat. This portrait depicts Captain Vaillant nine years after his visit to Penang, by which time he had been promoted to Vice-Admiral.

8. *Cascade aux environs de George's Town* (Waterfall in the vicinity of George Town) by Théodore-Auguste Fisquet. A sublime scene capturing the beauty of the lush tropical jungle near one of the island's many cascades.

*Note: this imaged has been upscaled.

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# SKETCHING ACROSS BORDERS

## CH'NG KIAH KIEAN'S ARTISTIC JOURNEY

**IYLIA DE SILVA** is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

**CH'NG KIAH KIEAN** is a Penang-born urban sketcher and painter whose work is rooted in close observation, expressive lines and a deep appreciation for place. Over the decades, his practice has taken him from school art rooms and community sketch circles to international symposiums and teaching platforms around the world; yet, his artistic compass remains grounded in Penang.

## BY IYLIA DE SILVA

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### EARLY LESSONS AND INSPIRATIONS

Ch'ng first encountered art in the most ordinary of places. As a child, he attended neighbourhood art classes taught by Tan Chiang Kiong and Tan Lye Hoe at different stages of his upbringing. In those early years, Ch'ng often found himself drawing popular cartoon characters such as Ne Zha. The classes balanced structure with freedom; each student had an easel, and they were encouraged to explore and express themselves.

Watercolour shaped much of his early training, but it was the ideas behind the lessons that mattered most. He learned that colours were rarely straightforward—a road, for instance, was not simply grey or black, but a surface made up of reflected tones: light, shadow, dust and age. White, meanwhile, was achieved by leaving areas of the page untouched. This approach, grounded in observation rather than imitation, would continue to guide his work into adulthood, later expanding alongside his growing interest in Chinese ink painting.

During his secondary school years at Chung Ling High School, Ch'ng joined the school's long-established art society, which has been active since 1917 and which is still integral to the school. The society operated on a strong tradition of peer learning—seniors passed on practical skills to juniors, exhibitions were organised collectively and mounting boards were cut by hand at precise angles, long before machines made the process easier.

Tucked within the school's iconic clock tower, the art society room was a lively space filled with art books, magazines and laughter. At times, the noise carried far enough to earn a summon from the headmaster downstairs, yet it remained a place of friendship, encouragement and shared purpose.

Ch'ng recalls weekends spent on outdoor sketching trips, often followed by visits to the cinema, with memorable film scenes later finding their way into his sketchbooks. Many of the friendships formed there have endured well beyond his school years, remaining among the most meaningful connections in his life.

### TRIAL AND PERSISTENCE

Ch'ng drew inspiration from artists he admired, including Tan Choon Ghee, Vincent van Gogh, Winslow Homer and William Russell Flint, studying their works through books and printed reproductions. In the pre-Internet era, these publications were more than references; they opened doors to wider worlds of art, technique and possibility.

One of his earliest artistic challenges emerged from attempting to copy a favourite comic character, only to realise that no matter how hard he tried, the drawing never looked quite the same. Over time, he came

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to understand that a personal style does not arise from perfect imitation, but from years of experimentation, failed attempts and persistent questioning of what makes one's work distinct.

Motivation, he says, rarely emerges in isolation. Support from friends and peers matters, not only for encouragement, but also for critique. "The scariest thing is when an artist cannot see their own problem, or believes they are already the best," he observes.

His approach to tools has also evolved over time. Beginning with pencils, he gradually experimented with bamboo sticks, ink-loaded rigs, twigs and even chopsticks. A friend later showed him how to insert a gauge into an ink bottle to better control the flow, reinforcing his preference for simple tools that foreground the raw honesty of the line.

For Ch'ng, it is often through failure that a personal style begins to take shape. Lines remain his primary language, while Chinese brushes step in when tone is needed. Rice paper, watercolour paper and other experimental surfaces each lend a different temperament to the same subject.

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## TRAVELLING WITH LINES

Ch'ng first encountered Urban Sketchers through a chance online search. The movement began as a Flickr group created by Spanish illustrator, Gabriel Campanario, and grew into a global community dedicated to on-site drawing. Its emphasis on documenting places through art resonated with him, and the platform soon opened doors he had never anticipated.

When Urban Sketchers began organising international symposiums, Ch'ng applied, and in 2013, he found himself in Barcelona, teaching and sketching in Europe for the first time. Experiencing other cities allowed him to return to Penang with fresh eyes. He came to realise that Penang was not behind or lesser, but uniquely positioned at the meeting point of East and West. Rather than forcing the two to merge, he chose to go with the flow, allowing multicultural sensibilities to coexist organically within his work.

Travelling only deepens his awareness of where he stands—geographically, culturally and artistically. He occupies a space shaped by multiple histories, languages and visual traditions, and his work continues to negotiate that terrain without forcing synthesis. Among the techniques he values most is the use of oriental aesthetics, particularly the meaningful employment of blank space, which offers a quiet counter-


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point to the fullness often associated with oil painting. In his work, emptiness is not absence; it is breath.

At times, he experiments outdoors under unforgiving conditions—fog, glare or sudden shifts in temperature. During a recent trip to Switzerland, he spent an entire day sketching at an aquarium. Such situations, he says, are not obstacles, but creative challenges. He describes himself as an impressionist of sorts, drawn to working outdoors because natural light is never static.

## A GENEROUS APPROACH TO LEGACY

Unlike many artists who are fiercely protective of reproduction rights, Ch'ng takes a notably open approach. He does not mind if people download his drawings from his website. The reason, he explains, is twofold: he is confident that his work cannot be easily replicated, and he sees digital circulation as a way of ensuring continuity. If his drawings survive somewhere—on a hard drive, in a folder or bookmarked by a stranger—then his efforts have not vanished.

"If 100 years pass, and someone keeps and looks at one of my drawings, then it is worth it," he shares.

Over the years, Ch'ng has published several sketchbooks, including *Sketchers of Pulo Pinang* (2009) and *Line-line Journey* (2011), and later collections such as *Sketches Diary of Penang* and *Sketches of Asia-Pacific,* which continue to document his evolving practice.

A graduate in Housing, Building & Planning and Architecture, Ch'ng believes that letting go—in this case, of that career path—can sometimes open doors that would otherwise remain hidden. Choosing art gave him confidence, and that confidence, in turn, brought mobility—opportunities to travel, teach and meet people across cultures who understand the world through lines, textures and scenes observed in real time.

"A decade or two into the journey, a sense of rightness begins to settle. I know I did the right thing by being an artist," he confirms.

"If you do what you like, every day will feel like a holiday," he reflects. "Not an idle one, but a purposeful and absorbing one."

***Note:** The author would like to thank Ch'ng Kiah Kiean for sharing his story. Readers who wish to explore more of his work or support his practice may visit his website at kiahkiean.com, where donations are welcome.*

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**CAPTIONS**

1. Ch'ng Kiah Kiean.
2. Sketch at LungShan Temple, Taipei.
3. Kiah Kiean sketching on location in Taiwan.
4. Group photo after a sketching demonstration at Suwon, South Korea during the AsiaLink Sketchwalk Suwon 2022.
5. King Street, George Town, Penang (21 Feb 2016).
6. Kapitan Keling Mosque, George Town, Penang (3 Aug 2024).
7. Kiah Kiean's studio.
8. Boon San Tong Khoo Kongsi, Victoria Street, Penang.
9. Back Lane of Cannon Street, Penang.

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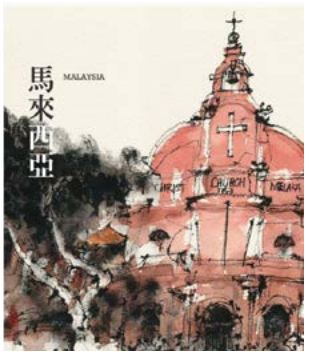

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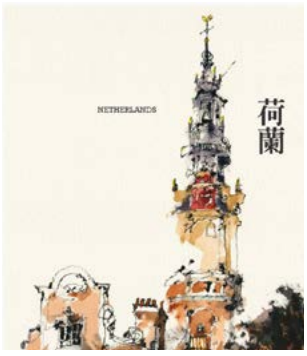

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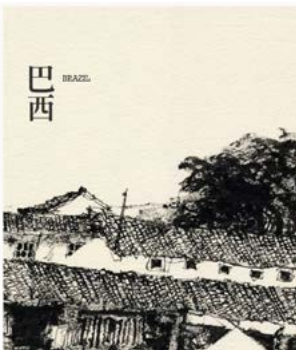

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**CAPTIONS**

10–17. Travel series.

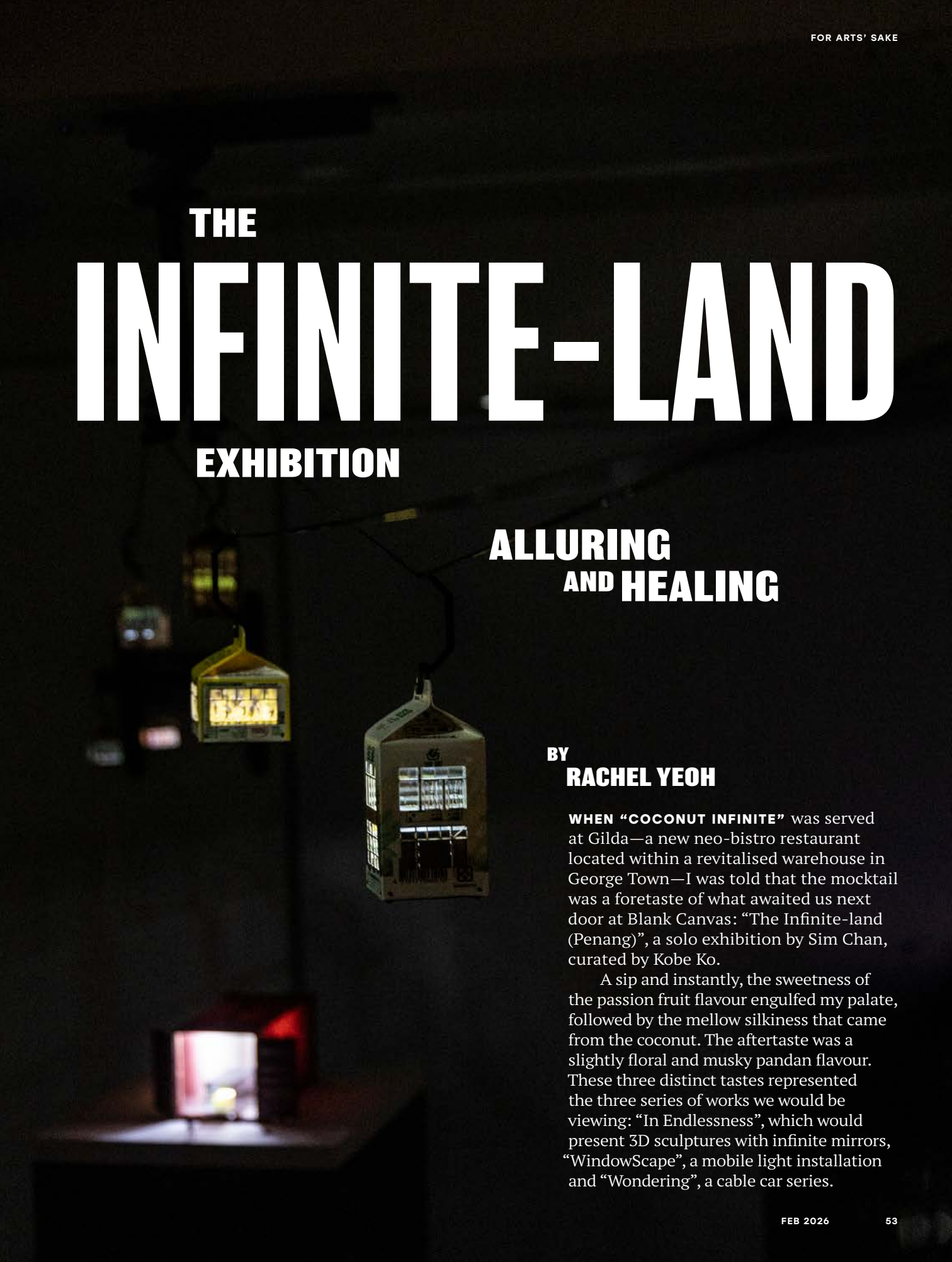
18. Chop Yew Lee, Beach Street, George Town, Penang (14 May 2017).

19. Goddess of Mercy Temple, Pitt Street, George Town, Penang (9 Sep 2018).

20. Penang Institute, Brown Road, George Town, Penang (28 Feb 2016).

# THE INFINITE-LAND EXHIBITION

## ALLURING AND HEALING



BY
**RACHEL YEOH**

**WHEN "COCONUT INFINITE"** was served at Gilda—a new neo-bistro restaurant located within a revitalised warehouse in George Town—I was told that the mocktail was a foretaste of what awaited us next door at Blank Canvas: "The Infinite-land (Penang)", a solo exhibition by Sim Chan, curated by Kobe Ko.

A sip and instantly, the sweetness of the passion fruit flavour engulfed my palate, followed by the mellow silkiness that came from the coconut. The aftertaste was a slightly floral and musky pandan flavour. These three distinct tastes represented the three series of works we would be viewing: "In Endlessness", which would present 3D sculptures with infinite mirrors, "WindowScape", a mobile light installation and "Wondering", a cable car series.

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**CAPTIONS**

1. (Cover page) Cable cars made from familiar beverage packaging travel from one end of the gallery to the other.

2. "In Endlessness" series: *Expanding.*

3. "In Endlessness" series: *Recycling.*

4. Monkeys going bananas in one of the cable cars in "Wandering."

5. "In Endlessness" series: *Expanding.*

6. Sim Chan.

7. Kobe Ko.

8. "In Endlessness" series: *Melting.*

9. "In Endlessness" series: *Conquering (Pinang Tree)* is set in a claw machine.

The Infinite-Land (Penang) exhibition is currently running until 23 February 2026 at Blank Canvas. Admission: RM15 (6 years old and above).

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### ENTERING INFINITE

The gallery is dark, with light emitting from the tops of pillars of varying heights. A cable car mechanism glides diagonally from one end of the room to the other, and at the corner stands a life-sized hawker push cart. The group with me melts into the spaces between the pillars, and I hear one gasp after another.

On top of these pillars are boxes—salvaged, intricately cut and filled with miniature dioramas of daily life. I chuckle at the piece that portrays male and female restrooms. While there is a long line of tiny female figurines waiting to enter the ladies' room, the men's is clear of any backlog.

Naturally, I hover towards the cable car installation made up of 11 to 13 units that look like glowing lanterns. These units are made using drink cartons—each cut with geometric precision, mimicking the intricate window grills and bat-shaped air vents found in many of the pre-war houses around George Town. I tiptoe to peer inside, shuffling forward, following the pull of the miniature cable. Inside a "former" orange juice box is an orange orchard, and inside a mixed fruit juice box is a fruit store with baskets displaying different types of fruit.

Just then, several generated fireworks catch the corner of my eye. The mobile light installation is a window to a bigger world outside, and reduces me to one of those figurines that I had been chuckling at a few minutes ago. I did a mini-reorientation because it reminds me of the ending scene in Men in Black II, where their entire world is revealed to be inside a locker of another world—and that was when it clicks. The three layers of flavours from the mocktail I enjoyed over dinner was foreshadowing the three worlds I would experience inside Infinite-Land.

"I need to have a word with the artist and curator," I decide.

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### CULTURAL IMMERSION

Sim Chan is a Hong Kong artist famed for crafting detailed miniature worlds and paintings on urban landscapes. When the founder of Blank Canvas, Leong Kwong Yee (better known as KY), visited Sim's studio in Hong Kong in March 2025, he had the opportunity to see several of Sim's works from The Infinite-land series he did in Tainan the year before. KY felt immediately that this was a strong exhibition and thought, quite simply, that Penang audiences must see it. It would, KY thought, open up conversations around place, perception, and the ways we inhabit and imagine landscapes.

Quickly, they set to make that vision a reality. That same year, Sim visited Penang three times, amounting to a stay of one month, prior to the exhibition. However, he admitted that his understanding of the city remains quite limited. "During my time here, I walked around the city, observing and gathering materials and impressions, which I then brought back to the studio to continue developing," he said.

Although time was limited, the richness and vibrancy of Penang's culture and heritage oozing from its architecture, events and nature inspired Sim. "What left the deepest impression on me was the coexistence of different cultures[…] as well as many identities that exist in between. In this exhibition, there are two new works to which I feel particularly attached: *Conquering (Pinang Tree)*, which centres on the Pinang tree, and *Vanishing*, which revolves around the tram. As I

observed the city, feelings related to memory, disappearance and urban transformation continually surfaced, naturally prompting me to reflect on Hong Kong."

As one who didn't know of the existence of Penang trams until my late teens, I did not feel the void created when trams were scrapped from George Town. According to Kobe, Sim started looking at the historic black and white photographs of the tram when he heard about its glory days. He recreated it with 3D modelling. He then placed it inside a rotating structure with moving light, allowing it to "travel" between the past and the present within the work.

"As the curator, I love the entire exhibition as a whole. If I must choose, then it will be the *Vanishing*. Since the starting point of the *In Endlessness* series is a piece about the Hong Kong tram—that was the very first time Sim worked on mirror reflection—personally, I feel like this is the most meaningful piece in the growth in his artist career."

Other culturally inspired works include *Blessing* that depicts Thaipusam, *Dropping (Durian)* which obviously refers to the fruit that is equally loved and despised by many, but instead of it falling from the tree, it floats. *Conquering (Pinang Tree)* grew out of the artists' observations of urban symbols.

### MINI EXPERIENCES

When curating this exhibition, Kobe referenced theme parks. Tokens can be purchased outside the exhibition space and can be used on *Conquering (Pinang Tree)*, where Pinang trees are placed inside a modified claw machine.

I later discussed this work with an artist and curator friend, Ivan Gabriel, who shared how deeply engrossed he was by the piece. "I spent almost all my tokens on that machine, and not only that, I was completely absorbed by it," he said. Down to his last tokens and surrounded by fallen trees, he finally managed to snag one. He inadvertently dragged along other toppled trees. "I don't know if the artist intended for the participatory logic of the work to unfold in this way," he reflected, "but it spoke strongly to me about destruction and the greed that fuels it. I was determined to walk away with at least one tree, yet in the process, I destroyed and took more than one, far beyond my original intention." As it turns out, the artist did mean for it to symbolise land development and destruction through the act of grabbing and removing.

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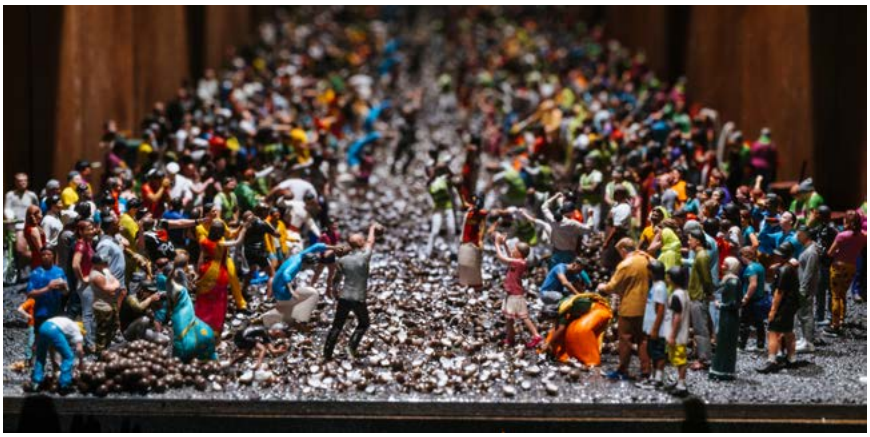

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Visitors can also obtain a floating "durian" from a Gachapon machine. With a token, they can redeem an item. If it happens to be the "durian", they can open it, inflate it with helium and tie it, allowing it to slowly float upwards. "A fruit covered in spikes, both loved and loathed, becomes soft, light and even elusive through inflation. In this process, gravity is reversed," Sim explained. "As visitors take the balloon out of the exhibition space, the work disperses and enters different corners of the city."

The machine is placed on a pushcart, which the Blank Canvas team got from a Koay Teow Th'ng hawker who was closing down his stall. At this space, visitors can purchase postcards and merchandise as well.

### LURED INTO BOXES

Curious to know why Sim created worlds in boxes, I asked if he thought people (in general) lived in self-imposed boxes. He replied that most people do not really have a choice, as systems and environments dictate and draw these boundaries. "We are not trapped from the beginning; rather, without noticing, we gradually turn the infinite into the finite."

In Sim's works that depict "scenes of everyday life," he wanted to create contrast using distance and scale. "By adopting different points of view, the perspectives of tiny figures, animals, objects, cable cars, nature and giants, everyday life is re-examined, and things once taken for granted begin to open themselves up to reconsideration. I hope to make these frames visible, and in the moment they are seen, to open up other possibilities for understanding and imagination."

One of the most surprising responses to his work was from a visitor's Instagram story that read, "This exhibition healed me in some ways I didn't realise." "That made me feel curious, and also strangely moved. The works were never intended to heal anyone, yet in certain unnoticed moments, they had quietly kept someone company."

**CAPTIONS**

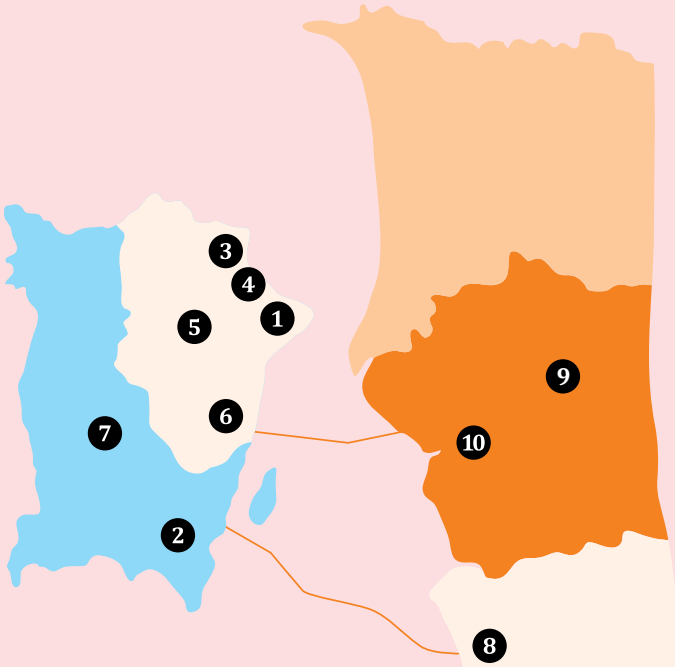
10. Penang's old tram reimagined in the "In Endlessness" series: *Vanishing*.

11. "In Endlessness" series: *Blessing* (zoomed in).

12. "In Endlessness" series: *Blessing* (zoomed out).

**RACHEL YEOH** is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

# HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY




## PICK-UP SPOTS
KL/SELANGOR

### Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara
The Godown Arts Centre

### Petaling Jaya
Temu House
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café

### Subang Jaya
Sunway University
(Students Study Area)

## PICK-UP SPOTS
PENANG

### 1 George Town
Areca Books
Book Island @ COEX
Infinity 8
Black Kettle
BookXcess Gurney Paragon
ChinaHouse
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion
(Blue Mansion)
Gerakbudaya Bookshop
@ Hikayat
Gurney Plaza
(Information Counter)
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre
Huey & Wah Café
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang Institute
Penang Island City Council
(Komtar Level 3)
Pusat Harmoni
(Harmonico)—Reception
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery
Tourist Information Centre
32 Mansion

### 2 Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee
InvestPenang
Penang Development
Corporation (PDC)
Penang Skills
Development Centre (PSDC)
Urban Republic

### 3 Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Café
Straits Mini Mart
Tenby International School
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory
(Lembah Permai)

### 4 Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay

### 5 Air Itam
Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station

### 6 Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk
located at the building's
middle span)
Penang Youth
Development Corporation
(PYDC)
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

### 8 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

### 9 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council

### 10 Juru
AUTO CITY
Shop-In D'Park

## READING SPOTS
PENANG

### 1 George Town
Bricklin Café Bar
Consumers' Association
of Penang
Forward College
G Hotel
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Café
Narrow Marrow
Penang Public Library
USM Library
Wheeler's Café

### 4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

### 7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

### 8 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

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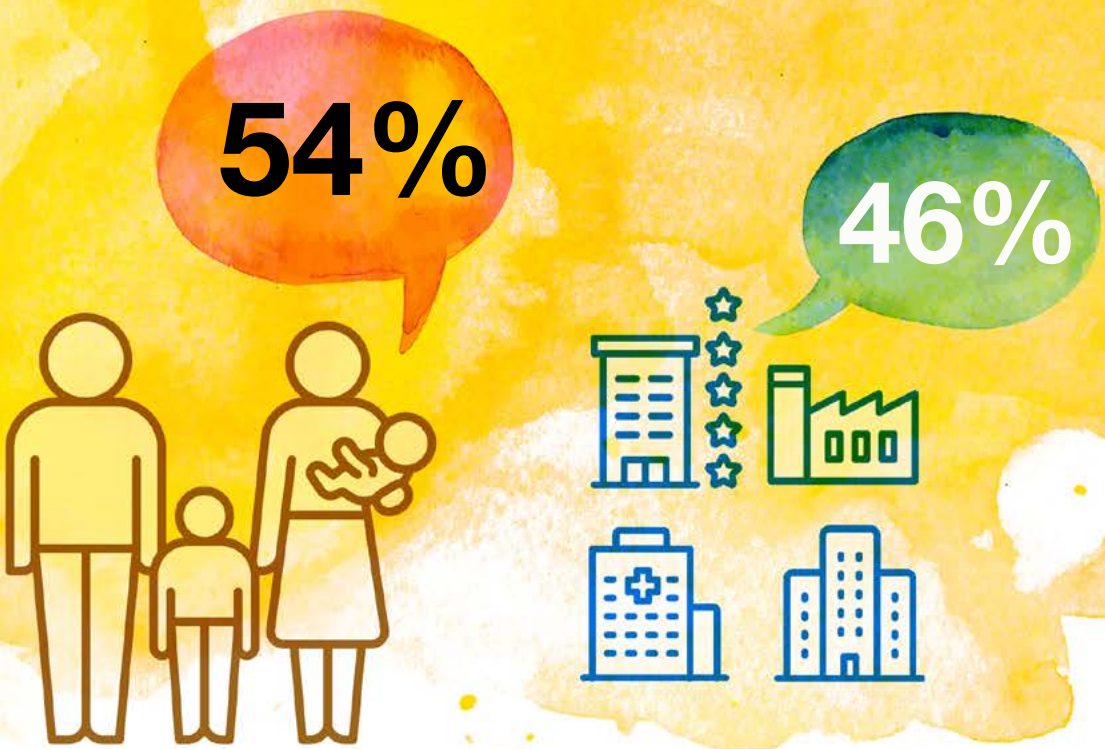
# "WHO USES MORE WATER IN PENANG: COMPANIES OR HOUSEHOLDS?"




In 2024, **604,976 domestic consumers in Penang consumed about 54%** (470 MLD) of the state's total water consumption of 870 MLD in 2024. **100,522 non-domestic consumers accounted for the remaining 46%** (400 MLD).

In other words, households use more water than all the factories, hotels, offices, shopping malls, F&B outlets, hospitals and government premises in Penang.

Penang's per capita domestic consumption was **261 litres/capita/day (LCD) in 2024**. The national average (as published by the National Water Services Commission or SPAN) was 225 LCD in 2024. This shows that an average household in Penang used **16% more water than the national average**.

Please conserve water at home, just like you conserve electricity and fuel. For water saving tips, please visit www.pba.com.my.

**Penang has unlimited potential. However, as a "small state", our water resources are naturally limited. Please use water wisely.**

**Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd.** Level 32, KOMTAR, Jalan Penang, 10000 Penang, Malaysia.
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