

**WALKING THROUGH NIGHT MARKETS:
A STUDY ON EXPERIENCING EVERYDAY URBAN CULTURE**

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Walking through Night Markets: A Study on Experiencing Everyday Urban Culture

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Temporary markets can be considered as everyday spaces in the city. There is something unpretentious about walking through a night market or a weekly bazaar, and yet, there is also something spectacular and festive about experiencing these informal, temporary event spaces. They are often a common feature in guide books for cities, enticing visitors to engage and experience the local life. Temporary markets may look similar at a glance or through photographs, but a conscious experience through them generates a richer and more complex understanding of their similarities and differences, how they operate as part of the city, and how places in the city are interconnected. This paper presents a collection of walking experiences through different temporary markets in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, ranging from less formal to more formal ones, while exploring their qualities and senses. The study employs an ethnographic approach through my own personal walking experience, engaging in the experiences of others, observations and conversations with vendors and visitors, mapping, and photo-documentation. The discussion from the findings challenges us to rethink the complexities of temporary markets as both ordinary and extra-ordinary spaces, and shares how we can engage with a rich phenomenon.

Keywords: night market, urban, culture, tourism, experience, sense of place

INTRODUCTION

In January 2009, I visited the Saturday night market in Kuala Lumpur for the purpose of conducting a field work for my PhD research. As a Malaysian, this Saturday night market located at the back lane, Lorong Tuanku Abdul Rahman (Lorong TAR), is not an unfamiliar place for me. I used to visit it at least every other month during my undergraduate years. The 2009 visit was different because this time, I was visiting the night market as a visitor and a researcher. The 'visitor' in me was 'revisiting' the market, but the 'researcher' was 'discovering' it for the first time. I was equipped with my field work gear: camera, field notes, keen eyes and alertness; accompanied by my spouse as the unofficial photographer and a visitor himself; and helped by five female Malaysian landscape architecture students who assisted me in interacting with the visitors and vendors guided by questions for conversations. The students started their night market field work as my research assistants, but afterwards, they were asked to write about their own experiences at the markets. Hence, they too, like me, were researchers and visitors simultaneously. This first field work was about re-discovering, re-familiarizing, and getting re-acquainted with a place which is familiar, and a part of our Malaysian urban culture. One year later, in February 2010, I returned to the same Saturday night market to conduct the second phase of my field work. This time around I wanted to map a rather unfamiliar experience of the night market, which was through the experience of a night market vendor. With the consent of the vendor, I followed him to five different market locations for five days where he operates weekly, and engaged with the night market from 'behind-the-scenes' with the vendor, in contrast to the previous year where I was a visitor walking in front of the stalls. This particular experience then expanded my field work into documenting how the temporary markets operate as a larger system.

Taking these field works as a project in understanding how temporary markets are experienced, in this article I discuss descriptively how a collection of experiences by different people explores the qualities and sensuality of the markets whilst appreciating temporary markets as a rich source of urban culture. This work employed an ethnographic approach through my own personal walking experiences, engaging in the experience of others, observations and conversations with vendors and visitors, and through mapping and photo-documentation. Ethnography is a common approach used to understand a social phenomenon by focusing on ordinary, everyday behaviour, and this approach prioritizes the collective experience of perspective participants in the study (Holloway, Brown et al. 2010). I suggest that by triangulating the experiences of the different users of the night markets as part of a design practice we can generate the realization of how the actors of the night market interact with the market as a place. This can open up a way for us to configure how the night market operates in the urban space and what it means as a part of urban culture; which then could re-inform us how to engage with them and the city. Studies on visitor experience at places or destinations are not new in the field of tourism. The conceptual developments on tourist experiences have been widely researched and been a key research issue since the 1960s. Tourist experience has been described as the ability of the tourist to tolerate behaviour of others, their patterns of activities that is influenced by their motivation and the destination attributes, and the degree of satisfaction of the tourist generated by their expectation and the nature of their experience in the real setting (Ryan 1995; Hall and Page 1999). Current tourist experience research are conducted mostly through a quantitative approach (Lekagul 2002; Beerli and Martin 2004). However, in order to know how we can engage with places that are ordinary, everyday places which are visited by both the locals and the visitors like a city's temporary markets, it is pertinent to get into more descriptive findings on how the different actors of temporary markets experience the place. Descriptive and exploratory research can complement studies on visitor experiences and add to the existing body of quantitative research findings in this area. On the other hand, research on temporary markets in tourism are still lacking compared to the other more common tourist attractions like resorts, parks, attractions with heritage and cultural values; but this area has started to receive attention by recent researchers (Hsieh and Chang 2006). Nonetheless, in the fields of urban and cultural studies, there has been a growing interest in studying temporary markets and street vending, as these temporary activities are regarded as adding liveliness to urban places (Edensor 1998; Lekagul 2002; Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim and Soh Kok Leng 2003; Duruz 2004; Arif Budi Sholihah 2005; Deguchi 2005).

Since 2008, I have been researching temporary markets in the contemporary city, particularly in the Malaysian context. I find them to play heterogeneous roles: as public space, social space, commercial space and cultural space. Temporary markets like the night market, weekend market, farmer's market, flea market and other emerging markets are amongst the city's visible urban cultures that possess rich source of everyday life. This can be regarded to be an important part in establishing a city's cultural identities and senses of localness that fuse both local cultures and the adopted or adapted external influences within the same place. At the same time, market activities generate a vibrant and lively city atmosphere, while also acting as catalysts for the city's informal and micro economies. When 'local places' are discussed in the context of tourism or geography, there is the tendency to talk about its sense of place and what makes it unique or different from other places. The difficulty with discussing 'local' place and 'sense of place', particularly for places that have tourism potential, is the inclination towards either a less progressive approach where traditional markets are expected to retain or re-create their vernacular forms and practices for the sake of culture; or a more modernizing approach of gentrification, where themes and symbols are adorned through ornaments aimed at bringing out the physical and visual identity of the place (Mazumdar, Mazumdar et al. 2000). In *Genius loci*, Norburg-Schultz (1979) discusses phenomenology as a way of 'understanding the basic properties of place', where 'characters' of a place 'denotes a general comprehensive atmosphere' and 'the concrete form and substance of the space-defining elements'. He writes, "When we visit a foreign city, we are usually struck by its particular characters, which becomes

an important part of experience.” In recent writings on ‘sense of place’ (Foote and Azaryahu 2009), with reference to scholars such as Relph, Tuan and Noburg-Schultz, sense of place still constantly refers back to ‘a unique character of a place’ that makes them ‘distinct from other places’. As Foote and Azaryahu summarize, sense of place is ‘the emotive bonds and attachments, both positive and negative, that people develop or experience in particular locations and environments’, or what people feel about a place. Since the 1960s and 1970s, sense of place is defined with emphasis on ‘the individuality of place in terms of unique personality or distinct character, that suggests particular feel and a specific character that makes place stand out’ among other places. It is very common that as visitors, we would sense difference and unfamiliarity perhaps quicker than noticing similarities. However, the singularity of the existing definitions of place poses a problem when engaging with places that are dynamic, multicultural and collective. How can a place have only ‘a’ specific character when it is the interactions of different elements that make up what they are in totality? If we think of a place like a plate of food, where different ingredients blend in together to create certain tastes, which is then tasted by an individual that may have specific palette to his or her liking, how can we understand a place in different ways? The findings from this project aim to reveal how an array of characters of a market collectively make up what the place is and hence influence the experiences of visitors and vendors. The significance of this field work is that the study was not conducted just within the boundaries of the temporary markets, but was extended to places outside of the markets that become part of the trajectories of the visitor and vendor experience. In this paper, I demonstrate how sense of place are comprised of diverse elements interacting together which contribute to the creation of atmosphere and image of the markets, and how the markets’ identities are also made up of places outside of their boundaries.

METHODOLOGY

In *Walkscapes* (2002), Francesco Careri discusses walking as a ‘critical tool and a way of looking at landscape’. Walking is an ordinary activity that is used by people to navigate through the city. It is temporal and it allows people to read the spaces around them. Michel de Certeau (1984) appropriated walking as a ‘spatial acting-out of the place, while artists like Sophie Calle (Hoffman and Irmas 1989; Calle and Auster 1999), Situationist International (Sadler 1998) and the Stalker (Wiley 2008), use walking as an agent of experience and as a critical practice in understanding cities, places, people and phenomena around us. In my field works, I have employed an ethnographic approach by walking and experiencing the temporary markets myself, and through collecting the experiences of others. The mapping, drawings and texts that are produced from these projects become an important contribution to the scarcity of qualitative-based approaches on urban and tourism studies, mainly in the area of studying temporary markets. The approach of ethnography as a method is discussed clearly and convincingly by Holloway, Brown and Shipway (2010) in their paper about using ethnography to understand the experience of participants at festivals and events. The findings on visitor and host experiences are significant in assisting designers and planners of ways to engage with the markets in the future, they would allow documentation of some specific experiences, perceptions and feelings, which might otherwise be generalized or dismissed in quantitative surveys. The projects extracted from the field works presented in this paper were completed in three ways: 1) my own experience as the researcher in *Walking Across Temporary Markets*, where I visited seven temporary markets in and around Kuala Lumpur, ranging from the more informal to the more formal types; 2) a collection of visitor experiences that in *Urban Diaries*; and 3) my journey following a night market vendor which was mapped in *Vendor Journey Map*.

Walking Across Temporary Markets

Thirteen temporary markets were visited during the whole field works, and seven are chosen for this paper, as examples of the range of temporary market typologies that currently operate

around Kuala Lumpur. The markets were chosen based on my personal knowledge of existing markets, together with the recommendation from the City of Kuala Lumpur and from the markets where the night market vendor in this study operates. Two temporary markets were visited in the 2009 field work (Lorong TAR Night Market and Jalan Masjid India Bazaar), while five were visited in the 2010 field work (Jalan Kuching Night Market, Danau Kota 'Uptown' Midnight Market, Bazarena Shah Alam Sunday Market, Putrajaya Night Market, and the Curve Flea Market). From my experiences within these markets, I was conscious of the research tasks that I had, which were to observe how the markets are physically set up, to document how vendors and visitors utilize and appropriate the market spaces, the surrounding context of the markets, facilities and infrastructures provided at the market, and the sense that the market brings, whether visually, auditory, olfactory and emotional. I was also aware that my experiences could be influenced by my excitement or tiredness, or other preconceived notions about the market, which makes my experience a subjective one. However, I regard these external and internal influences as an inevitable part of any person's experience, as experience is subjective and shaped by factors other than the place itself. *Walking Across Temporary Markets* illustrates one part of the documentation of my walks across the seven markets. In this map, I depict the locations of the temporary markets in relation to familiar landmarks as contextual points of reference. Photographs of the market scenes are complemented with cross-sectional graphic diagrams of each place to show the different and similar spatial contexts across the markets, highlighting adjacent buildings, spaces and surfaces (refer Figure 1).

Urban Diaries

The first phase of field work was assisted by five Malay-Malaysian female undergraduate landscape architecture students from Malaysia. They assisted me to engage in conversations with visitors and vendors at four street markets in Kuala Lumpur, they were guided by semi-structured questions and tasks operation that I drafted. Each of them was conducting specific tasks, like observing how vendors and visitors appropriated their market spaces, photographing the market scenes, documenting access in and out of the markets, and talking to people. With these tasks, they were required to visit all four street markets. This particular task was conducted over a period of three weeks, where they had the opportunities to come back to the site at their own convenience. The findings from the photographs and written descriptions composed the markets into static moments; while conversations gave insights into the experience of visitors in terms of their reasons for visiting the street markets, the frequency of their visits and their opinions on the markets; as well as the experience of vendors in terms of how long they have conducted their businesses at the markets, and the challenges and potentials of the markets from vendors' views. After the field work finished, the students were asked to write about their own experiences visiting the market. Other than the findings about the street market visitors and vendors, I find the *Urban Diaries* by the students to be equally compelling in understanding a more descriptive experience that is conveyed through texts. *Urban Diaries* is a compendium of their words which are supplemented by images from each market as a way of mapping their experience, through juxtaposing static and silent images, with their own writings (refer Figure 2).

Vendor Journey Map

In the second phase of field work, I had the opportunity to follow a night market vendor by the name of Mr. J for five days, to experience his market journeys around the city and as an alternative way for me to read the city differently. My acquaintance with Mr. J was a result of my interview sessions with an officer at Kuala Lumpur City Hall, who then recommended me to get in touch with the president of the Vendor Association for Lorong TAR Night Market. The president of the vendor association supported my interest in researching about temporary markets and my intention of wanting to follow a vendor for a week, which he later introduced me to Mr. J. Mr. J is a cake and *kaftan* (cotton *batik* night wear) vendor that operates at seven

different temporary markets in a week, which means that he vends everyday at different locations. I was fortunate to have Mr. J as a volunteer in a part of my research project, and consequently, I followed his journeys to five different market sites out of his total seven market sites. I informed Mr. J that my research would not interfere with his daily routines. My role in this was to follow behind him from a different car, going to all the places that he goes at the start of his daily journey until he reaches the market locations, and asking conversations as we go along. Other than documenting the journeys on camera and through field drawings, I had utilized a GPS tracking tool to document the routes, accurately, that we took, as the journey covered different areas of the city. *Vendor Journey Map* presents the activities of the vendor which starts at his own home, then to places where he picks up his supply of goods, and ends at his stall lot at the market (refer to Figure 3). The aim of this project was to understand the markets as a larger system that operates through out the city and beyond the market boundaries.

FINDINGS

Walking Across Temporary Markets

My walks across the seven markets discovered and documented the evolution of temporary markets around Kuala Lumpur (refer Figure 1). Market 1 (Jalan Kuching Night Market) is a typical neighbourhood night market that operates near residential areas. This type of market exists in most neighbourhoods and suburbs in Malaysia, usually once or twice a week at the same location. They sell food, clothing and grocery goods like vegetables, meat and fish. The stalls are located on a main street that was designated by the City to be closed from 6 pm to 12 midnight. Market 2 (Lorong TAR Night Market) is a city-scale night market. Different from a neighbourhood night market, the city night market sells mostly food, drinks, clothing and accessories, and does not sell any grocery goods. The major visitors for this night market are city visitors and tourists, as it acts as one of the key features for a weekend activity in the city. This market operates at a back lane, surrounded by fabric and textile shops, cafes and accessory shops on both sides. The back lane is also designated to be closed from 6 pm to 12 midnight every Saturday. During the field works and from my conversation with the vendor association, I found the adjacent shops have created rear entrances as a result of having the night market operating at the back lane, which demonstrates the catalytic relationship between the market and its host surroundings. The shop owners realized the potentials of customers that come to the back lane for the market on Saturdays. Back doors now become a second entrance into their shops, where clothes and scarves are hung and displayed at the shop openings along Lorong TAR. On market days, several shop owners also sell their products at the night market stalls. Market 3 (Danau Kota 'Uptown' Midnight Market) is an emerging market operating at the commercial centre of an outer city suburb. This market is different from the usual night market because it sells more clothing and accessories, and no food products. It operates nightly from 11 pm to 4 am, except on Thursdays, and attracts younger crowds more than families. The existence of the midnight market encouraged adjacent café owners to extend their business hours, while creating a food order and delivery service to the midnight market vendors. Market 4 (Bazarena Shah Alam Sunday Market) is a weekend market that operates at a city-scale at the parking lot of the state stadium. The stalls at the market are similar to that of a neighbourhood night market, but this weekend market was larger in terms of scale. The market is a combination of three market organizations, which are the night market, farmer's market and the weekend bazaar. Visitors can find products ranging from vegetables and fish, to cooked food and traditional delicacies, to clothes, toys and accessories, and on some weekends, new cars on promotion. Market 5 (Putrajaya Night Market) is another neighbourhood market typology, but this market operates at the government precinct of the planned city of Putrajaya. Generally, the market is similar to other typical night markets, but physically, it is more organized. The market operates on a vacant lot that is situated among office buildings, while having the availability of spacious parking lots around it. Within the market, vendors park their vehicles at either end of the market rather than behind their stalls, which creates wider spaces between two

fronting stalls. Products are also arranged according to groups of rows, separating clothes, cooked food and raw products. Market 6 (Jalan Masjid India Bazaar) is another city-scale street market that operates daily, which was initially a temporary market that has been made more permanent in 2006. Jalan Masjid India is well-known for its traditional Malay and Indian apparel, and the street market extended the similar products by selling scarves, clothes and accessories for women. A translucent roof was built over the pedestrianized street, and vendors can now store and leave their stalls and products on the site overnight. The market opens daily from 10 am until 8 pm, and the street has been permanently designated by the City for its daily operation. Market 7 (The Curve Flea Market) is a more up-scale temporary market because it is located at the thoroughfare of a shopping mall at the more affluent area of the city. Physically, the arrangement of the market is different from a typical temporary market, because here, the market is located in the middle of the thoroughfare where each stall has two frontages. On both sides of the market stalls are more modern and Western-influenced cafes such as Starbucks, Marche restaurant, O'Briens and others. Products sold at this flea market include clothing and accessories.

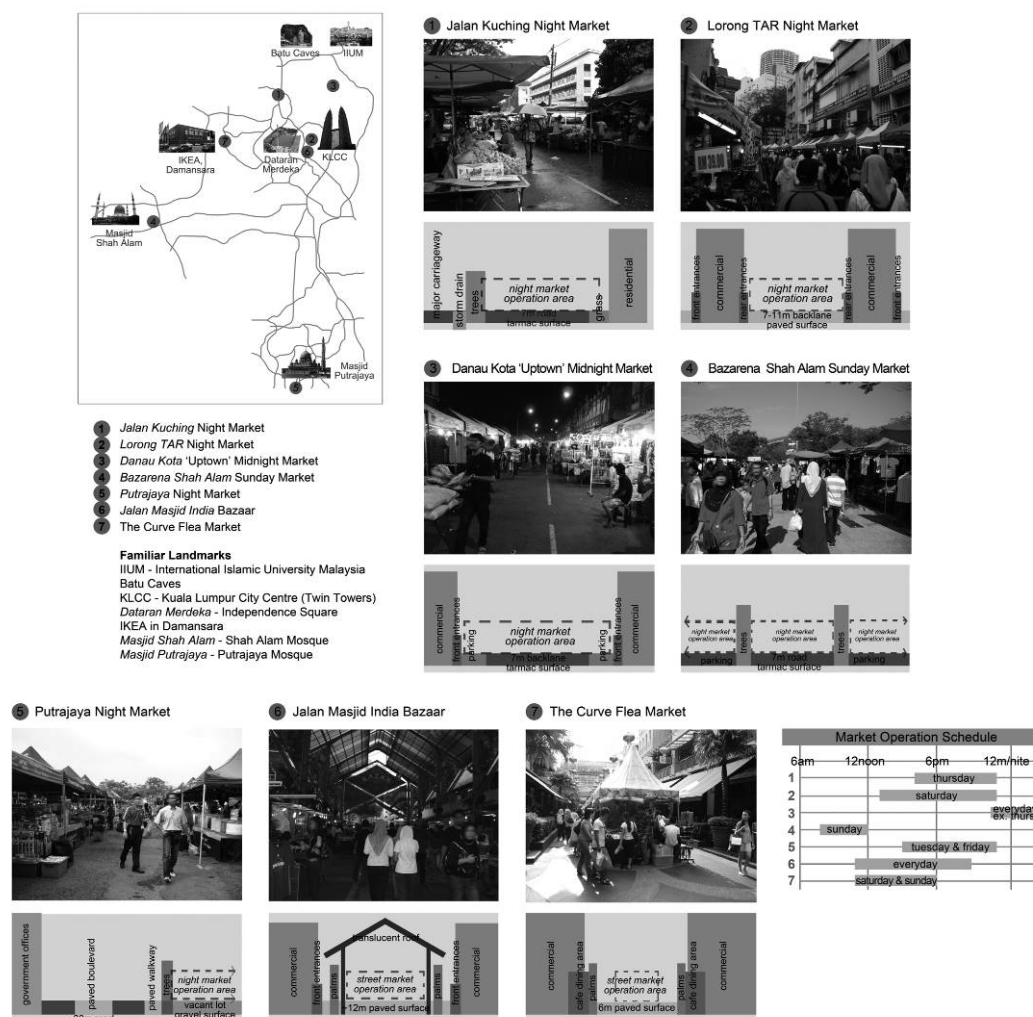


Figure 1: *Walking Across Temporary Markets*

These seven temporary market typologies illustrate the range of markets in the city that come in different spatial forms, atmosphere and roles. The existence of the markets in both informal and formal form, as well as traditional to modern form, demonstrate how temporary markets have been assimilated significantly as a part of the urban culture in Malaysia. Their different locations, contexts, clients, products, themes and operating systems contribute their characters and individualities, although if seen superficially they are all temporary markets. These walks

show how temporary markets have been accommodated in different ways to continuously make them as active social, commercial and cultural spaces, regardless of the modernization or urbanization that is progressing around it. The flexibility of the markets makes them resilient and adaptable to their surroundings; and thus, enables them to continue progressing.

Urban Diaries

The *Urban Diaries* (Figure 2) reveals the experiences of the five female students walking through four street markets, where excerpts from two of which are presented here. In this collection, I regard the texts and descriptions of their experiences as insightful, as these types of in-depth elaboration gives a more detailed imagery and sense of their visits. Their texts are juxtaposed with the images of the sites, which without their written experience, would have given a more generic or less specific account on what the visitors feel when they were there. Their experiences were not similar among each other, which elucidate the influences of expectations, perceptions, encounters and the role of actors and elements from the markets that shape their actual experience.



Figure 2: *Urban Diaries*

Some excerpts from the diaries include their experiences walking through markets which were ethnically more familiar and less familiar. Petaling Street, or more famously known as Chinatown, was described by one participant as “a unique street market and most of the vendors found here are mostly Chinese” and while another participant regarded the street market to be “so scary and frightening at night; [but] the situation of this street market is totally different during morning and in the evening.” One of the female visitors acknowledged that “even though Petaling Street lacks sense of security, but when it comes to space organization the spaces in between the stalls are quite neat and clean”; whereas the other female visitor regarded that “the street is wide compared to other places; it gives comfort while walking on the street.” These descriptions reveal how an unfamiliar discomfort is compensated by the spatial arrangement of the street market, which gives the visitors a sense of their own space while negotiating through the street market and how they perceive the market.

In the case of Bazaar Jalan Masjid India, a street market which would typically be more familiar to Malay-Muslim females around Kuala Lumpur, one participant wrote, *“Walking through the bazaar, this area is likely ideal to Muslim women as most of the items sold there are women headgear, blouse and fabrics. That is why every woman in Kuala Lumpur would not miss this place even for once. Apart from that, the area is definitely conquered by Malay people, either as the seller or the buyer. Thus, I feel comfortable with the surrounding although it’s quite full with people.”* Another participant’s writing corresponded with the same opinion when she stated, *“I feel more comfortable at this bazaar as I am not afraid of any suspicious people.”* Interestingly, although the female students felt familiar with the market ethnically, physical spaces of the market still shaped part of their experiences. One student noted, *“The arrangement of the stalls are organized but at some parts of the bazaar the path is too narrow and make us hard to pass through as many people concentrated at certain stall. As the area is already upgraded, it is really comfortable to walk around with covered rooftop”*; while another student remarked, *“Because of the very limited space, the vendors at the front site make use of the pedestrian walkway to lay their stall. Even though the space is too narrow to be walked through, I still use it even the space is very hectic and full of people.”*

The extractions from these two street markets reveal how the different elements of the market contribute in shaping the experience of the visitors. Those elements that can be unpicked from their texts are the actors of the markets like the vendors and other visitors, and the spatial qualities of the markets, such as the distances between one stall to another, the width of the walkway, the elements of shelter and comfort, and the products which assume the perceived identity of the market. These accounts start to expose the degree of complexities and richness of the markets. They demonstrate how specific spatial structure like order and disorder of the stalls, as well as the narrowing and widening of the walkways play a role in shaping the overall senses of the markets.

Vendor Journey Map

In *Vendor Journey Map* (Figure 3), I documented the trips taken by a night market vendor on his daily routes to his night market sites. The map reveals one layer of the invisible systems which exist as part of the city night market operation. This layer consists of three points of distribution where the vendor obtains his products before selling them at the night markets, which are the fish cracker wholesaler, a cake bakery and a cake factory. These suppliers are between 4 km to 15 km from his home, and they become a part of his daily journey before he reaches his seven weekly market sites. This journey map has exposed another side the market and the city through expanding this everyday urban culture beyond the market boundaries. From the vendor’s behind-the-scene experience, we can begin to understand how an ordinary night market is facilitated by larger systems – as demonstrated here, the systems of production and distribution. Additionally, the map reveals the role of transportation and mobility which contributes to the temporal and travelling nature of the night markets. For Mr. J, his night market products are purchased from the suppliers’ shop and factories, and then sold to the customers in a night market setting. The products themselves subsequently become part of the elements which give the markets their senses of place. However, without revealing these invisible systems that operate outside of the fabric of the market, we could easily fall into thinking that a place like the everyday market is made up of things bounded just within the market, when in the wider perspective they actually work at various scales. Through unfolding the relationship of the products, the night market and the city, we can understand the market more openly rather than what is only visible on the site. These external systems and infrastructures, whether they are visible or invisible, all play specific roles in determining the operation of a market. Hence, a change in one point of the system may cause a change on other parts of the system.

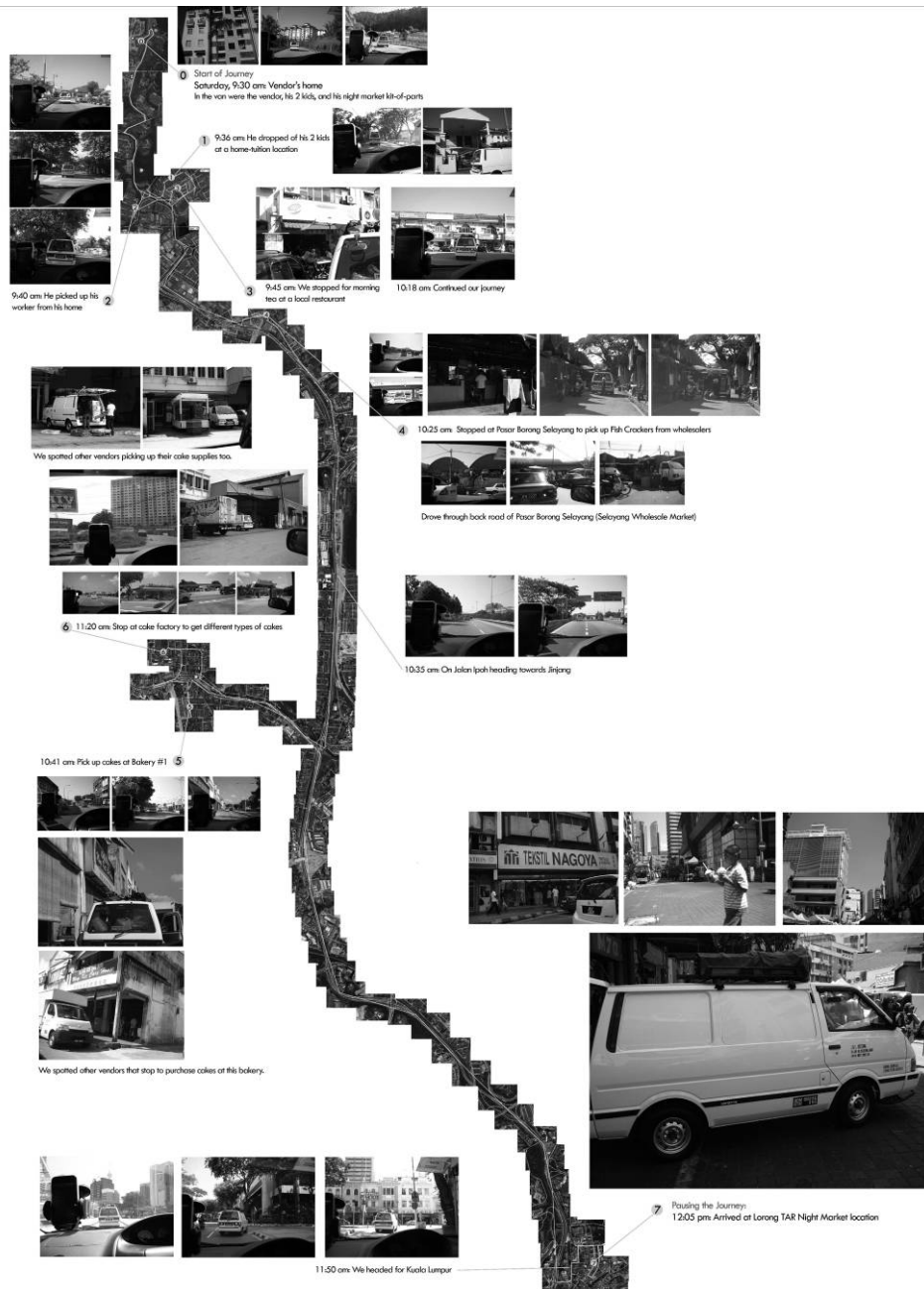


Figure 3: *Vendor Journey Map*

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The three projects presented in this paper are correlated. While the first project *Walking Across Temporary Markets* discusses my personal account on experiencing seven different spatial and commercial typologies of the markets, the second project *Urban Diaries* exposes a more descriptive experience of visitors walking inside the markets. The third project, *Vendor Journey Map*, then opens up another layer of the markets which are through the vendor's operational experiences. These projects probe *across*, *through* and *behind* the temporary markets as a place and as a city system. When these projects are analysed side by side, they open up a richer and more complex idea about temporary markets. The seven temporary market typologies illustrate how the markets as everyday urban culture progress and adapt to modernization and urbanization. Their resilience and flexibility allow them to progress with their informal characteristic, while simultaneously assimilating the degrees of formality, standardization and gentrification imposed upon them. In the first project, the seven markets

show how cultural spaces do not have to be subjected to mere preservation of the vernacular model in order for them to sustain as a rich source of urban space. However, there are other criteria that determine how the market's atmosphere is created, as further explained by the second and third project. The walks of the five female participants through the four markets then begin to give a deeper understanding on the phenomenology of a visitor experience. Their texts express how the 'ingredients' of the markets altogether shape their own idea of the market. Hence, this project displays the elements that take part in choreographing one's walk through the markets, where people, products, architecture, street elements, the time of day, arrangements, scales and human senses like the visual, sounds and smell fuse with one another to create the atmosphere. Such details are vital in understanding the components of what makes a temporary market what it is. Subsequently, the third project unfolds the markets into the scale of the city by creating links and networks with other points of distribution. In this project, the markets represented itself as a larger system, rather than a single individual system. Since markets are comprised of different units of vendors that sell a range of products, the product distribution system in the city and the mobility of the vendors are indispensable components in the operation of the markets. Rich cultural spaces like the city's temporary markets can no longer be seen as enclosed and singular, but rather, they act as extension cords of other places in the city. Through three projects discussed in this paper, temporary markets in cities like Kuala Lumpur are more than just places. They are a phenomenon. To engage with a phenomenon like this, we must learn to understand temporary markets as ordinary places with extra-ordinary qualities.

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