

KL – A Thick Crust of Time

The city as strata and substrata. To be explored and unearthed like a geologist searching for cultural, social and historical meaning. The city as encrustations. As layers. As...layer cake? *Ngiom* reflects on KL; what we see, and what lies just beneath the surface

There are three popular types of indigenous cakes: The monolithic light brown cake mixed with brown sugar (*gula Melaka*) and strands of coconut; the second is the dual layer cake made up of an upper layer of green pandan leaves and a lower layer of white rice and sago, and thirdly, there is the *Kueh Lapis*, which literally means “layered cake” – made up of a variety of ingredients in different layers, each with its own visually delicious color, alternating between red and white. There are also layered cakes that come in various shades of brown.

KL is the acronym for both Kuala Lumpur and *Kueh Lapis*, and both are metaphors of one another. At “non-linear” time in KL, the city stays at the upper layer, made up of events that bustle with life and everyday happenings – the

layer the populace more or less takes for granted as it lives, and where spaces morph around the events. Time on this upper layer is noted from one event to another rather than by linear time.

In the lower layers the city is encrusted in historical time: Its uppermost layer is the daily events that make the city alive, and when recent events are concretized, they are encapsulated at the second tier into memories. Together, the concretized memories affect collective behavior to become the local culture. Even lower are the tiers of urban forms – the uppermost of these tiers house transient events such as the activities of wet markets, roadside stalls and sidewalk cafes.





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The tier below is made up of forms of

permanence, such as restaurants, bookstores, cafes and convenience stores. The layer below comprises the larger-scale urban forms, such as the rows of shophouses, rising to residences, hotels and offices. The lowest and the thickest layer is an independent layer, which forms the base for the *Kueh Lapis*: it is the dead, fossilized, thick prehistoric layer which has no life.

Consumption of KL, the layer cake is like the consumption of time. Surface observation and the participation of daily events mean that we are consuming only the upper layer. Awareness of the history of places and the layers of meanings that are eventually concretized into the urban forms enable us to "consume the whole cake," as it were.

Tourists participate only at the upper layer of the *Kueh Lapis* as they drop in at the cafes, bars and restaurants and then move on, not to be seen again. There are also the nomads of the city – the buskers, and the street vendors who move from one part to another. They slither along the upper layer of events and then dip into the lower layer as they are encapsulated into memories.

Then there are the various idiosyncratic events that make KL memorable – the bad drivers, the buzzing motorcycles that meander in and out between cars, the constant battle between pedestrians and traffic, the skimpy-dressed dolls who walk alongside covered-up women.

The city, as an observation demonstrates the 20th century proposition that time is not linear although most of the time it seems so – if anything in our lives seems constant, it is the flow of time. Through the layers of time encrusted in the *Kueh Lapis* metaphor, relative time is encountered as we compare one encapsulated layer with another. What the theory of relativity tells us is that the flow of time at a location of high, or intense events ("high velocity") is slower than at another locations with a lower intensity of events ("lower velocity").

That is also the way we perceive time outside the clock. That time flies when we are busy is axiomatic. By perception, this means that the duration between the ticks of a clock in the high-E (or high events) is longer than the duration between ticks of a clock at low-E (or low events). These perceived differences in time's passage are as valid as astrophysical time dilation.

The concept of time being constant flow is only recent. Time used to be cyclical, dependent on harvest cycles, the rhythm of sunrise and sunset, the movement of the constellations, the cycles of life and death. With the invention of writing, things began to