

# Public Spaces in Melaka's Historic City Centre: A Fight Against Privatisation

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**Abstract.** This study examines the historical evolution and contemporary transformation of open public spaces in the historic city centre of Melaka, Malaysia. Tracing their development from the Melaka Sultanate through colonial and post-independence periods, it reveals how spaces like the Dutch Square, streetscapes, and green open areas have shifted from communal and civic use toward tourism, commercialisation, and privatisation. Through case studies of Padang Pahlawan, Bukit China, and Jonker Street, the thesis highlights how open public spaces in Melaka serve as contested terrains of memory, identity, and urban change.

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**Keywords:** Melaka, Public space, Urban transformation, Heritage, Privatisation, Colonial urbanism, Streetscape, Dutch Square, Padang Pahlawan, Bukit China, Urban development

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## Introduction

This thesis investigates the evolution and significance of public spaces in the historic city of Melaka, Malaysia. Recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2008, Melaka's city centre is valued for its rich cultural landscape, layered history, and unique blend of architectural and urban forms shaped by centuries of trade and colonial influence (Hao, 2016). However, according to the *Conservation Management Plan* submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO (Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture [GM-MICC], 2011), the city faces ongoing challenges related to public space. These include narrow streets, a lack of expansive open or green areas, and limited flexibility to accommodate the needs of the community. Additionally, development pressures continue to threaten these spaces.

One of the focal points in Melaka's public realm is the Dutch Square, a central and iconic space within the historic core. The UNESCO report highlights the Dutch Square as a model of the city's historic identity and proposes replicating similar spaces to improve the public realm. However, this approach reflects a selective interpretation of heritage, emphasizing public spaces that align with a tourism-oriented narrative. For instance, the report overlooks other historically significant spaces such as the Padang, a central open field that once served important functions but has since been largely erased by commercial development. As Goh (2014) argues, heritage in Melaka is often treated as a cultural commodity shaped to serve both international tourism and the domestic cultural market.

This thesis asserts that it is insufficient to simply advocate for "more spaces like Dutch Square" without a deeper understanding of what gives such spaces meaning and value. Rather than assuming their significance, it is necessary to examine the historical development of public spaces in Melaka in order to identify the specific social, political, and spatial roles they have played across time. This study, therefore, seeks to address the following questions: What are the historical forms and functions of public spaces in Melaka? How have these spaces evolved over time? And to what extent have they been transformed, diminished, or privatized in the face of urban change?

While there is literature on Melaka's urban morphology, discussions of public space are often fragmented or treated as secondary. Government reports provide some factual data but tend to frame public spaces primarily as promotional assets, emphasizing their touristic appeal. Some academic works have explored specific sites, such as the Padang or Bukit China, offering valuable insights into their localized histories. Broader studies that examine the urban structure of Melaka occasionally reference streets as spaces of public life, but rather briefly. By synthesizing these multiple sources, this thesis aims to construct a more comprehensive account of the significance and transformation of public spaces within Melaka's historic city centre.

To accomplish this, the research adopts a multidisciplinary approach that combines historical and spatial analysis. Primary sources include academic literature, government documents, historical maps, paintings, and archival images. Visual material is used not only for illustration but as a means of spatial interpretation. Mapping serves as a method for bridging visual evidence with historical context, allowing for a clearer understanding of how public spaces have changed over time and what meanings they have accrued.

The thesis is structured thematically. It begins by situating Melaka as a historic trading city. The second chapter centres on the Dutch Square, examining its form and evolving role in the city's urban identity. The third chapter focuses on streets and shophouses as fundamental elements of the public realm. The final chapter addresses open green spaces, including the Padang and Bukit China, exploring their historical significance, transformations, and how they both met different outcomes after commercialisation threats.

## Chapter 1: Melaka, a trading city

To understand the public spaces of the historic city centre of Melaka, it is essential to consider the city's commercial significance. Melaka became a leading trading centre due to its strategic location at one of the narrowest points of the Straits of Malacca. The Melaka Sultanate (c.1400-1511) chose this site to establish its settlement, allowing it to control a key segment of the lucrative spice trade route (Goh, 2014). Additionally, being situated at a river estuary provided access to inland trade routes (Hao, 2016).

Melaka quickly developed into a thriving trading port, with a busy marketplace (FDTCP, 2005). Due to its strategic position overseeing trade along the Straits and the river, Melaka became highly valued by colonial powers. The Portuguese were the first to seize control in 1511 (Lawless, 2015). In response, both sedentary and migratory merchant communities shifted their activities to other regional ports that offered similar trade opportunities. Nevertheless, Melaka continued to attract enough merchants to remain a significant port in the region (Hao, 2016).

The Dutch took over Melaka in 1641, attracted to its strategic location. The Company's priority was to regulate the economic space and to focus on the generation of profit (Hao, 2016). Commerce remained a key feature of daily life, situated in the Dutch Square and newly established streets named after specific trades, such as Visstraat (Fish Street), Goudsmidstraat (Goldsmith Street), and Blacksmith Street (Weebers & Ahmad, 2007; Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). Dutch merchants settled near the waterfront to closely monitor trade activities (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004).

Eventually, Melaka was ceded to the British Empire. With the founding of Penang and later Singapore in 1819, Melaka's importance as a primary port declined (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). Trading activities gradually shifted inland, with most retail taking place in shophouses along the main streets. Street trading also became common, including petty commerce, traditional medicine vendors, and hawkers (Said & Harun, 2010).

After Malaysia's independence, the government aimed to restore Melaka to its pre-colonial status as a major trading city, leading to a rapid urban development in the area (Goh, 2014). The country began its modernisation efforts in the late 1970s. As living standards and lifestyles improved, development increased quickly. However, this growth also caused the gradual loss of important elements like open spaces, traditional streets, and everyday local activities, features that give a city its character and help people feel connected to their community (Harun & Said, 2008).

## Chapter 2: Dutch square

The earliest surviving open space of Malaysia is situated in Melaka: the Dutch Square. (Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, Peninsular Malaysia [FDTCP], 2005). The square was already present during the Portuguese occupation. It was the centre of the *A Famosa* fortress, constructed around St. Paul's Hill. Next to the square was the house of the governor. (Weebers & Ahmad, 2007).

### a. Dutch era

After the Dutch siege of 1641, the square was kept and further solidified as the city centre of Melaka. The former Governor's residence was badly damaged and reconstructed as the *Stadthuys*, in the first years of the Dutch occupation (Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture [GM-MICC], 2011; Weebers & Ahmad, 2007). In the later years of the Dutch occupation, in 1753, the Dutch Reformed Church was built, completing the square (FDTCP, 2005; GM-MICC, 2011; Weebers & Ahmad, 2007).

In Figure I, one can observe the triangular-shaped Dutch Square during the Dutch era. It is situated inside the fortified city, close to the bridge connecting to the residential area, on the other side of the river. South, at the centre, is the *Stadthuys*, and east is the Dutch Reformed Church. Figure II depicts its close relation to those two buildings: on the right, the *Stadthuys*, and centred at the back, the Dutch Reformed Church.

According to Weebers and Ahmad (2007), the urban layout of Melaka is organised according to the principles of Simon Stevin's *Castrametatio* treatise from 1617. He laid plans for colonial cities, in which the centre of towns should have two squares: *de Grote Markt* (Big Market) and *de Beurse* (the Exchange), both of them related to trade. Surrounding the big market, for the social and public aspects, one should find the *Groote Kerck* (Main Church), the *Stadthuijs* (Town Hall), the *Vangenis* (Prison), and the *Tuchthuijs* (Reformatory School). The *Dutch Square* was indeed surrounded by the city hall, the church, and



Figure I: Dutch Square during the Dutch era, late 18th century.

Map by the author.

Base map: Master Plan of the city and Castle of Melaka, made according to the meeting, in the order of H. H. Vaillant, Ver-Huell and Graevesteyn, Commissioners Military etc. 18th century. Retrieved from: Hao, L. W. (2016). *The History of Melaka's Urban Morphology*. Brisbane: The University of Queensland.



Figure II: Dutch square during the 18th century.

Source: Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, Peninsular Malaysia. (2005). *Open Spaces in Urban Malaysia*.

administrative buildings, and was used for official congregations and Sunday gatherings (FDTCP, 2005).

#### b. British era

During the British occupation, starting from 1824, the use of the square became more leisurely. A Clock Tower was erected in the late 1880s, and a fountain was added in the early 1900s as a memorial for Queen Victoria. Raintrees were also introduced during this period (FDTCP, 2005). Figure III, a photograph dating from 1890, shows those new features.

Starting in 1795, the fortified walls of the city were taken down (GM-MICC, 2011). This increased the space of the Dutch Square and allowed it to gain access to the riverside, as can be observed on the left side of Figure V.

During the 19th century, with the rise of private cars, the streets had to become larger (GM-MICC, 2011). The Dutch square consequently lost a part of its surface to circulation exclusively. Figure IV attempts to reconstitute the form of the Dutch Square during the British era, before and after the space was taken over by roads.



Figure IV: Map of the Dutch square as it might have been during the British era, before and after the space was taken over by roads.

Map by the author, making assumptions according to Figure III.

Base map: Federal Malay State Survey. (1936). 1936 F. M. S. Map of Portuguese and Dutch fortifications, Malacca. Geographicus Rare Antique Maps.

<https://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/malacca-fms-1936>



Figure III: Dutch square, 1890, featuring the new clock Tower.

Source: Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture. (2011, January 21). *Conservation Management Plan (CMP) & Special Area Plan (SAP): Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. Submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223/documents/>



Figure V: Dutch Square in 1910.

Source: Great Malaysian Railway Journey. (n.d.). *Malacca - then & now*. Great Malaysian Railway Journeys. <https://great-railway-journeys-malaysia.weebly.com/malacca.html>



### c. A change of function

St. Paul's Hill Civic Zone, which includes the Dutch square, has always been the location of governing bodies, from the founding of Melaka to recent times. It was from the beginning the seat of power of the Sultans from the Malay Sultanate era, then during the colonial era, the Dutch Square and its surrounding buildings maintained this role. It was only in the 1980s that the administrative centre was relocated (GM-MICC, 2011).

The Dutch square, now stripped of its administrative function, is mostly used as a tourist destination. It contains souvenir shops and eateries, and is a nice picture place (FDTCP, 2005). Jie and Ja'afar (2019) confirm its main purpose as a tourist attraction with its historical landmarks. As shown in Figure VI, the square now serves as the departure point for touristic bicycle cart rides.



Figure VI: Bicycle Carts at the Dutch square

Source: Author, 2025



Figure VII: Dutch square in 2025, with the adjacent roads being pedestrian zones.

Map by the author.

Base map: Land use survey, 2010 ; AJM Planning & Urban Design Group Sdn Bhd. Retrieved from Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture. (2011, January 21). *Conservation Management Plan (CMP) & Special Area Plan (SAP): Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. Submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223/documents/>

Although parts of the area have been designated as pedestrian zones due to their importance as a tourist destination (Zubier & Sulaiman, 2004), traffic disturbances, especially noise pollution, remain a significant issue (Jie & Ja'afar, 2019). Figure VII illustrates the Dutch Square in 2025, highlighting the adjacent southern and eastern roads that have been converted into pedestrian pathways, effectively expanding the square.

Despite being recognised as the 'most accessible and utilised open space in the city' (FDTCP, 2005) and continuing to draw large numbers of tourists as a prominent historic landmark, the Dutch Square has experienced a decline in its broader significance. While it remains highly visible and frequented, its role as a civic space for the local community has faded. The relocation of administrative functions, coupled with the dominance of tourist-oriented activities, has transformed it into a space that caters almost exclusively to visitors, rather than serving the needs of residents.

In terms of its form, the Dutch Square has undergone several transformations over time. It initially began as a triangular space, expanded following the demolition of the fortified walls, and was later

reduced in size due to the rise of private vehicles. More recently, however, increased tourist activity has led to the pedestrianisation of adjacent roads, allowing the square to reclaim some of its original space and grow slightly in size. Figure VIII summarises those changes.

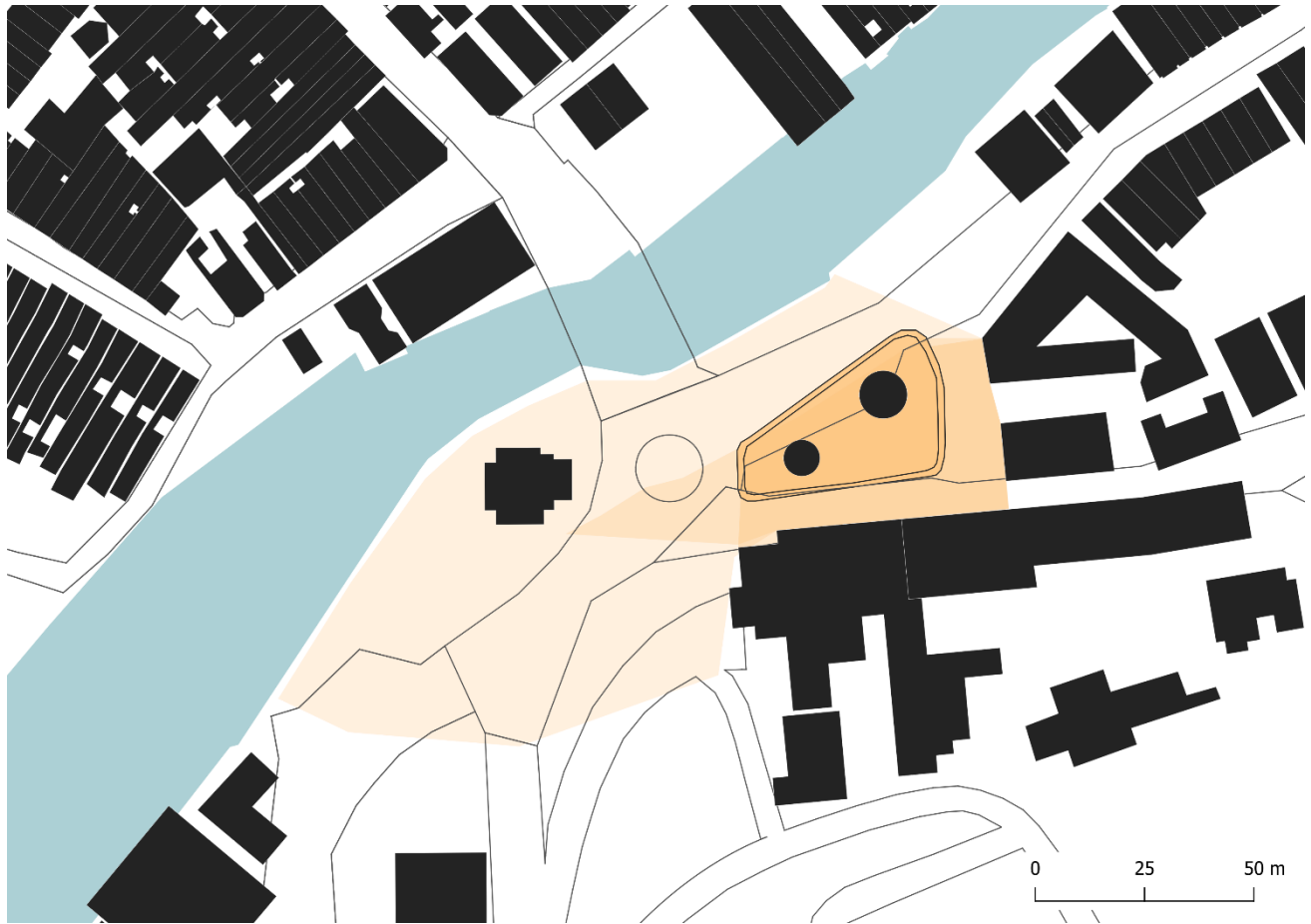


Figure VIII: Form Evolution of the Dutch Square.

Map by author, on the basis of Figures I, IV, and VII.

## Chapter 3: Streetscape

Building on the city's role as a thriving trade centre, the following sections turn to the street and the shophouse frontage on the right bank of the river, spaces that have become vital extensions of public life. As commerce animates the city, these zones emerged as key sites of exchange, interaction, and everyday activity.

### a. Streets

The streets within the heritage site have traditionally been shared spaces, characterised by changing patterns of activities. Figure IX illustrates the multifunctional and culturally rich streetscape of George Town, an ex-British colonial town located a few hundred kilometres north of Melaka, with which it shares common history and UNESCO World Heritage status.



Figure IX: The street of George Town as a multi-use, cultural space. Illustration by Tan Yeow Wooi.

Source: Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture. (2011, January 21). *Conservation Management Plan (CMP) & Special Area Plan (SAP): Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. Submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223/documents/>

Streets became a planned urban feature during the Dutch era (GM-MICC, 2011). While the foundational urban morphology established by the Portuguese was preserved (Goh, 2014; Weebers & Ahmad, 2007), new streets were added as the city expanded. The street network became more regular, and street widths were standardised to accommodate bullock carts (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). These streets were typically 50 Dutch feet wide, or approximately 14 metres, following the guidelines of Simon Stevin's 1617 *Castrametatio treatise* (Weebers & Ahmad, 2007). Moreover, they hosted all pedestrian movement (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). As mentioned earlier, these streets served as hubs of commerce, and it was this very commercial activity that transformed them into dynamic, living public spaces.

In the British colonial period, housing and road conditions were improved. Plans focused on reducing congestion and introducing new street alignments (Harun et al., 2008). These developments served the broader goal of reinforcing colonial political power through administrative regulation, architectural advancements, and community organisation (Hao, 2016). From the 1820s, covered walkways were constructed in front of buildings, offering shelter from the sun and rain (Den Teuling, 2010). These walkways enhanced the public nature of the street by creating a transitional zone between the shops and the roadway, encouraging pedestrian movement and social interaction.



In Figures X, photographs from 1910 and 1930 capture the vibrant street life, with people pausing at stalls and circulating between the shophouses. The streets are bustling with activity, clearly fulfilling their commercial role while also functioning as lively public spaces.



*Heren street - Malacca 1910*



*Kampung Pantai Road - Malacca 1930*

Figure X: Heren Street 1910, and Jalan Kampung Pantai, 1930.

Source: Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture. (2011, January 21). *Conservation Management Plan (CMP) & Special Area Plan (SAP): Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. Submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223/documents/>

As Melaka rapidly expanded during the early 20th century, its streets had to cater to the increasing use of private vehicles while remaining the same width (GM-MICC, 2011). Figure XI illustrates how the street network has remained largely unchanged since the Dutch era. Eventually, the vibrancy of the streets diminished, as activity was relegated to their sides. Today, the city centre faces numerous challenges, including traffic congestion, surface parking encroaching on pedestrian paths, and unclear pedestrian crossings and bicycle lanes (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). These issues contribute to a general sense of discomfort for people navigating the streets (Ismail, 2017).

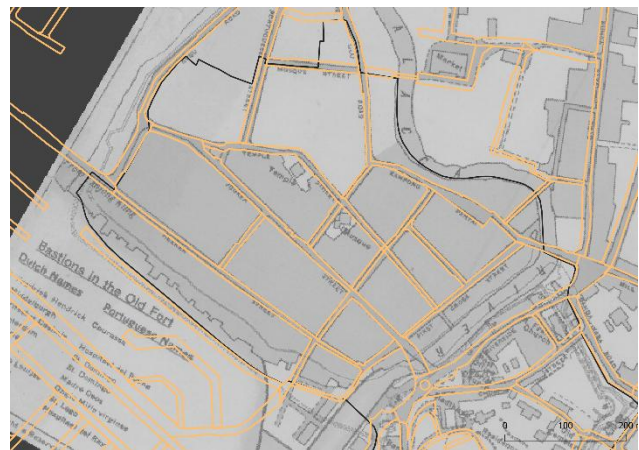


Figure XI: Unchanged Street Network in the historic city centre on the right bank of the river. On the left: Dutch era, late 18th century. On the right: British era, 1936. Both overlap with the current street network.

Map by the author.

Base map on the left: Master Plan of the city and Castle of Melaka, made according to the meeting, in the order of H. H. Vaillant, Ver-Huell and Graevesteyn, Commissioners Military etc. 18th century. Retrieved from: Hao, L. W. (2016). *The History of Melaka's Urban Morphology*. Brisbane: The University of Queensland.

Base map on the right: Federal Malay State Survey. (1936). 1936 F. M. S. Map of Portuguese and Dutch fortifications, Malacca. Geographicus Rare Antique Maps. <https://www.geographicus.com/P/AntiqueMap/malacca-fms-1936>

## b. Shophouses

Integral to the function and character of these streets are the shophouses that line them, structures whose architectural design and semi-public frontages have long shaped Melaka's urban life.

Shophouses are a traditional type of house that can be found in Melaka. They typically serve dual functions: they operate as both residences and commercial spaces. The ground floor is generally used for commercial activities, while the upper floor(s) serve residential purposes (GM-MICC, 2011). Figure XII shows its long and narrow composition, succession of rooms, and air wells. At the front, one can observe the "five-foot way", a covered walkway linking shophouses to each other. Due to their commercial purpose and public front, the shophouses are a key element of public space. Over time, various

styles of shophouses emerged, each with distinctive architectural features and tied to specific historical periods (Den Teuling, 2010). These stylistic shifts were not just aesthetic, but influenced how buildings engaged with public space, especially through the evolution and formalisation of the five-foot way.

During the Dutch colonial period, property taxes were levied based on the width of the building's frontage facing the street (GM-MICC, 2011): a window tax was introduced, taxing the number of windows on street-facing façades. To reduce tax liabilities, shophouses were narrowed in width and extended in depth. As a result, the standard width of shophouse plots was between 4 to 5 metres (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). Most Dutch-era shophouses were primarily residential. The ground floor often served as a living space, and the walkway in front of the house was not connected to neighboring buildings, creating a more private entrance (Den Teuling, 2010). This Dutch Style prevailed throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Another notable style from the Dutch era is the Southern China Style, which emerged in the 18th and early 19th centuries. This variation introduced the use of the ground floor as a commercial shop (Den Teuling, 2010).

Shophouses continued to develop under British colonial rule. As Melaka experienced an influx of immigrants in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the city saw a rapid increase in shophouse construction and population density (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). Shophouses evolved into linear series of rooms interspersed with courtyards, offering security and ventilation (Hao, 2016). The Early Shophouse Style emerged between 1800 and 1850. These buildings featured a recessed ground

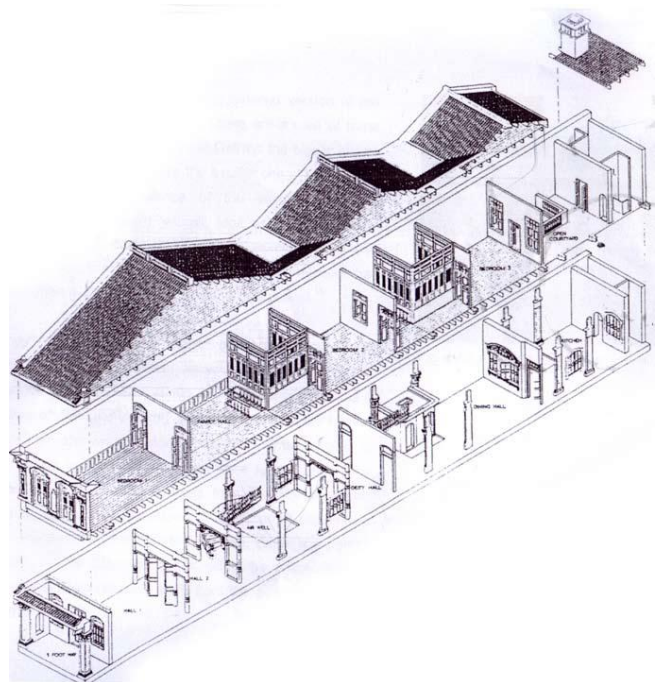


Figure XII: Axonometric view of the shophouse.

Source: you seen antique gallery, Faculty of Built Environment, University Malaya, Department of Architecture. Retrieved from Den Teuling, M. (2010). *Rebirth of the Malacca Shophouse, a typological research* [Master Thesis]. Technische Universiteit Delft



floor, creating a covered pedestrian walkway (Den Teuling, 2010). In 1822, the Straits Settlements Ordinances mandated that these walkways be five feet wide, approximately one and a half metres, giving rise to the term "five-foot way" (Den Teuling, 2010; GM-MICC, 2011; Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). By the 1840s and 1850s, the Early Transitional Style developed, following these standards for the covered walkways (den Teuling, 2010).

Because of their commercial function and open frontage, shophouses serve as a vital component of public space. The five-foot ways in front of them create a transitional zone between the street and the shops, softening the boundary between private and public realms. Figure XII attempts to reconstitute the location of these walkways during the British era. It draws from the land use map by AJM Planning & Urban Design Group Sdn Bhd (2010), retrieved from GM-MICC (2011), which maps the building styles of the core zone, and from the typology study of shophouses in Melaka by den Teuling (2010). The first image maps the location of current shophouses (in orange) that correspond to the styles providing a passageway at its front: Early Shophouse Style (1800 – 1850), Early Transitional Style (1840 – 1900), Early Straits Eclectic Style (1890 – 1920), Late Straits Eclectic Style (1920 – 1940), Neo-Classical Style (19th – early 20th century), and Art-Deco Style (1930 – 1950). However, on the assumption that some of the shophouses originally built might have been replaced, the second image map (in black) the shophouses currently present in Melaka's urban fabric that are from an earlier style that does not feature a covered walkway: Dutch Style (17th – 18th century) and Southern China Style (18th – early 19th century). To resume, the left image represents in orange the shophouses that had a covered walkway, and the right image shows in orange the shophouse that potentially had a covered walkway. The reality lies somewhere between the two maps, though the prominent presence of the five-foot ways remains evident in both.



*Figure XIII: Map of the five-foot way presence during the British era. On the left in orange, the presence of building styles that feature a covered walkway. On the right in black, the presence in the current urban fabric of building styles anterior to the integration of the covered walkways.*

*Map by the author. It draws from the land use map by AJM Planning & Urban Design Group Sdn Bhd (2010), retrieved from GM-MICC (2011), which maps the building styles of the core zone, and from the typology study of shophouses in Melaka by den Teuling (2010).*

Today, these passageways are often obstructed. Their comfort and convenience have led to the privatization of some sections by property owners (Kusumo, 2023). Unregulated street furniture and unauthorized business activities often obstruct these walkways (Zubir & Sulaiman, 2004). Despite

these challenges, five-foot ways have significant potential. In many developing countries, sidewalks like these support the informal economy. They offer space not only for trading but also as a low-barrier public space to which everyone has access (Kusumo, 2023).

### c. Jonker Street

These spatial dynamics are especially noticeable along Jonker Street, one of Melaka's most iconic streets, which serves as a microcosm of the city's changing public-private interaction. Figure XIV juxtaposes a photograph from 1890, which vividly captures the street's dynamic movement and activity, with a 2008 image of the same street, highlighting how the space had since been dominated by traffic.



Figure XIV: Jonker Street in 1890 and 2010.

Source: Government of Malaysia, Ministry of Information Communications and Culture. (2011, January 21). *Conservation Management Plan (CMP) & Special Area Plan (SAP): Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. Submitted to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223/documents/>

This contrast is further illustrated in Figure XV, which depicts the change in spaces allocated to pedestrians in Jonker Street. On the left, one can see the street as a whole during the Dutch era, when only catering for bullock carts and pedestrians. On the right is the remaining space that pedestrians can use, with cars being the main users. The two parts of the street in the right image seem disconnected. Moreover, the remaining space, being a relatively narrow sidewalk, can not be used to gather but only as a circulation space.



Figure XV: Mapping representing the space allocated to pedestrians on Jonker Street. On the left, during the Dutch era, late 18th century. On the right, the current use of the street.

Map by the author.

Base map on the left: Master Plan of the city and Castle of Melaka, made according to the meeting, in the order of H. H. Vaillant, Ver-Huell and Graevesteyn, Commissioners Military etc. 18th century. Retrieved from: Hao, L. W. (2016). *The History of Melaka's Urban Morphology*. Brisbane: The University of Queensland.



The five-foot ways along Jonker Street during the British colonial period, as mapped in Figure XVI, once extended the street's usable width. Currently, as previously mentioned, many of these spaces have been privatised or blocked, reducing their accessibility and limiting pedestrian use.



*Figure XVI: Five-foot ways during the British era.  
Map by the author. On the basis of Figure XIII.*

Today, Jonker Street is gradually reclaiming its vibrant atmosphere. It now serves a dual function: during weekdays and daytime hours, it accommodates vehicular traffic, with pedestrians limited to the edges. However, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, the street is closed to cars and transforms into a lively night market, drawing crowds and restoring its dynamic street life (goMelaka, 2014).

In Melaka, the streetscape has long been a stage for public life, shaped by commerce. From the shared streets of the Dutch era to the privatised sidewalks of today, the transformation of both streets and shophouses reflects a broader tension between heritage and modern urban pressures. While recent efforts like Jonker Street's night market hint at a return to more vibrant, people-centred spaces, the challenge remains: to reclaim and reimagine these historical streets as inclusive public realms once more.

## Chapter 4: Green open space

According to the Federal Department of Town and Country Planning, Peninsular Malaysia [FDTCP] (2005), it was during the British era that green public open spaces began to be an integral part of the city's environment. The town planning system had a symbolic role to reflect the greatness of the British Empire. (Harun et al., 2008). It first started with the improvement of housing and roads, and when the basic infrastructures were laid, there were growing demands for spaces for recreation and sporting activities. Since the late 19th a range of open spaces were introduced, including gardens and parks, hill resorts, recreational lakes, and esplanades (Harun et al., 2008). In Melaka, one of those public open spaces emerged in 1937: Padang Pahlawan

Green open spaces have since suffered from privatisation and commercial development. It is interesting to follow the evolution of two of them that faced those threats. The first one failed to survive: the padang. The second one managed to be preserved, thanks to protestations from the local population: Bukit China.

### a. Padang Pahlawan

Padang is a Malay word which means a large field turfed with grass. A padang is a simple piece of green lawn that serves multiple functions. It was created as a military ground for the police and army in British colonial towns. It housed army barracks, a church, and the town hall, and acted as a civic square. Later on, it became a centre for sports and recreation. (FDTCP, 2005; Harun et al., 2008)

In Melaka, as the Dutch Square already hosted the civic functions, the padang was mainly used for the police and as a sports centre. The Padang of Melaka, Padang Pahlawan, was built in 1937, in front of the Melaka Sports Club (see step 2 of Figure XVII). Around the Padang, one could also find banks, the Anglican church, and the police training centre. As town planning during colonial times was mainly designed for the British settlers, the padang was made to accommodate English games like tennis, cricket, and football. In addition to its recreational function, Padang Pahlawan became the setting for ceremonies and rituals that legitimized British rule (Harun et al., 2008).

Padang Pahlawan soon became a place of national importance, as it hosted the first proclamation for the future independence of Malaya in 1956. Melaka was chosen for its symbolic meaning, as it was the first state to be colonized in 1511. The Melaka Club was later transformed into a memorial to the Proclamation of Independence (Harun et al., 2008).

Due to land reclamation projects and privatisation, the Padang lost its connection to the sea and had to be fenced, limiting public access (Cartier, 1993)(see step 3 of Figure XVII). Eventually, despite its rich historical significance, it was actively promoted and demolished for commercial development (Harun et al., 2008)(see step 4 of Figure XVII). The construction process raised concerns. It started in 2001 and was directly subject to a rescue mission by the Malaysian Department of Museums and Antiquities to salvage significant historic artefacts. In mid-2003, the remains of the Santiago bastion, dating from the Portuguese colonial era, were uncovered. The 'Save the Padang' campaign to preserve the Padang as one of the most important archaeological and historical sites in Melaka failed,

and the construction work continued (Choe Choe, 2006, Said & Harun, 2010). Padang Pahlawan became Dataran Pahlawan Melaka Megamall, offering 800,000 square feet of space with 1,045 shop lots. (Hatten Group, n.d.)

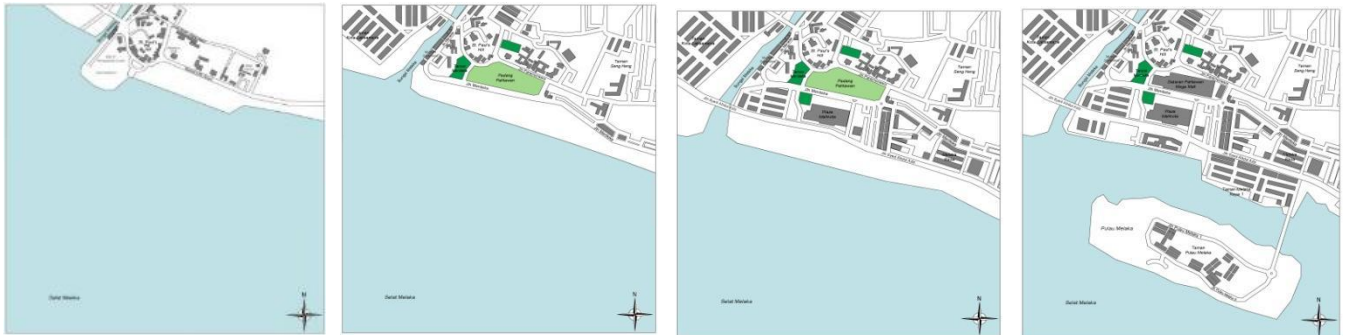


Figure XVII: Evolution of Padang Pahlawan.

Source: Said, I., & Harun, N. Z. (2010). *The morphological transformation of public place in historic town of Melaka*. South-east Asian Technical University Consortium 4, 25th-26th February 2010

The loss of the Padang was deeply felt by the residents of Melaka. Multiple reasons were cited during interviews conducted by Harun et al. (2015). The padang was missed for its relaxing qualities: openness, fresh air, and huge green turf. Moreover, people praised its social role: they described it as a place for social interaction, where daily experiences and local culture could be enjoyed, and they also associated it with positive childhood memories. Additionally, the Padang held a symbolic role for the state and the city's history, which is missed by the residents. In a general manner, all interviewed people expressed regret that the padang could not be enjoyed and preserved.



Figure XVIII: Map of the evolution of the Padang.

Map by the author, on the basis of Figure XVII.

b. Bukit China

Bukit China is a hill located northeast of the historic inner city of Melaka. It is one of the oldest and largest Chinese burial grounds outside of mainland China, and therefore part of the buffer zone of the UNESCO site.

The oldest written trace of Bukit China comes from the Malay Annals. It is said that a sultan of Melaka married a Chinese princess, and that they were given a hill, Bukit China. The hill was then bought in 1622 by Kapitan China Lee Wei King, who donated the hill to the Chinese of Melaka for their burial ground. (GM-MICC, 2011) Bukit China has been, since the Malay Sultanate era, used as a burial ground. During the Portuguese colonial era, a church, monastic quarters, and a surrounding garden were built on the Hill. The garden was described as the “healthiest and most beautiful spot in all Melaka” (Hao, 2016). Later on, they stationed a garrison, but the structures and gardens did not survive the Dutch siege of 1641 (Hao, 2016; Cartier, 1993). During the Dutch era, plans were made for a fortified Bukit China, but the lack of funding prevented it from happening. During the British rule, the authorities tried to limit the expansion of land available for burial ground: a road was constructed at the border to prevent the expansion in the late 1850s, and an ordinance forbade development of the burial ground in 1949. (Cartier, 1993)

Cartier (1993) retraces the likely former extent of Bukit China (see Figure XIX). He notes that one of the graves is outside of the current perimeter, and claims that during the middle of the British colonial era, Bukit China was approximately twice its current size. However, when considering the *Kaart van Malacca en omgeving* [Map of Melaka area] realised by Reimer c. 1770, one can notice that the shape of the hill corresponds to the current shape of Bukit China, and that the location of the excluded grave mentioned earlier is situated in what was considered agricultural land (see Figure XXI). If the cemetery had indeed been twice its current size, its reduction must have already begun during the Dutch period.

Bukit China was, as well as Padang Pahlawan, threatened by commercial development. In April 1984, the Melaka state government announced its development plan that would grade the hill and use the excavated earth to fill the Melaka waterfront for a reclamation project. After a national, politically inflamed debate, the Melaka state government finally cancelled the development ten months later (Cartier, 1993).

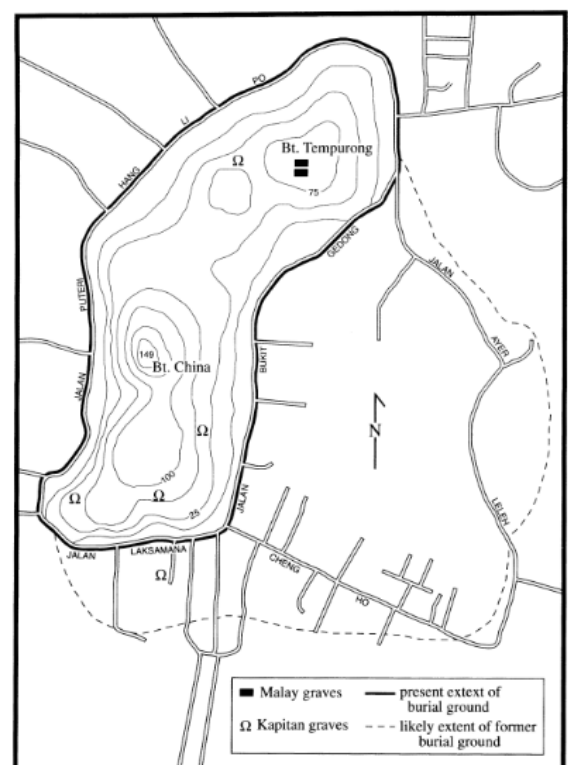


FIG. 1—Bukit China in Melaka.

Figure XIX: Bukit China and its likely extent.

Source: Cartier, C. L. (1993). *Creating Historic Open Space in Melaka*. *Geographical Review*, 83(4), 359–373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/215820>



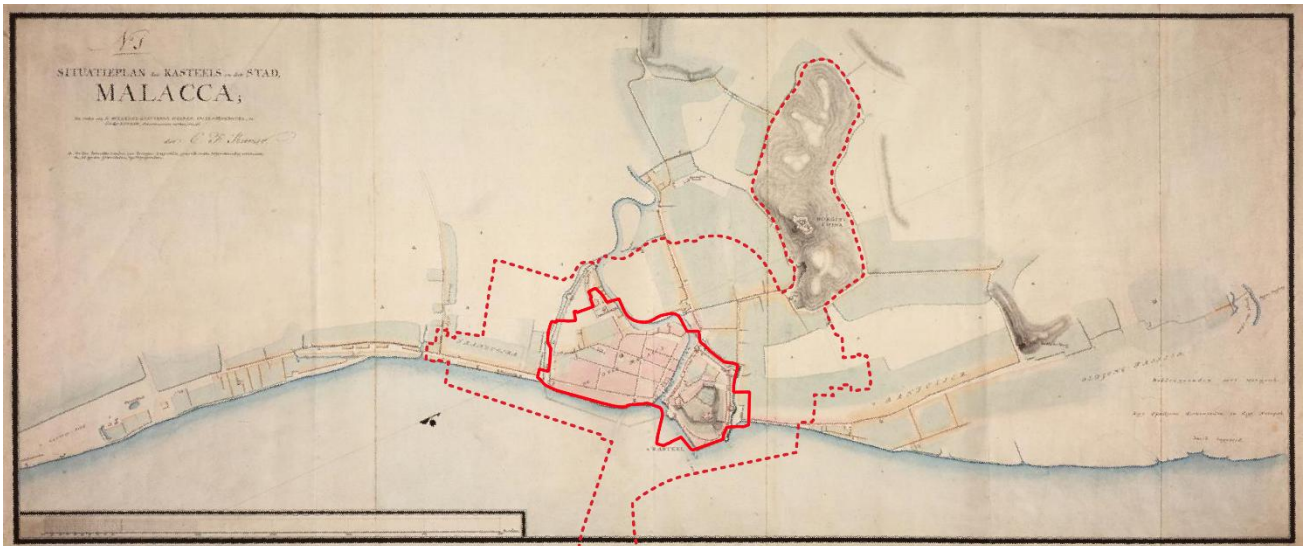


Figure XXI: Map of the Melaka area, showing Bukit China with a shape consistent with its present-day form.

Source: Carl Friedrich Reimer 1750-1796 Kaart van Malacca en omgeving [Map of Melaka area]. (Reimer c. 1770). Retrieved from Hao, L. W. (2016). *The History of Melaka's Urban Morphology*. Brisbane: The University of Queensland.

The hill was then part of a “beautification” program to make it a multiple-use open public space. The goal was to combine the significance of a historic public space and the need for open space. A place to connect with family and community, and a “green lung” for the city (Cartier, 1993).

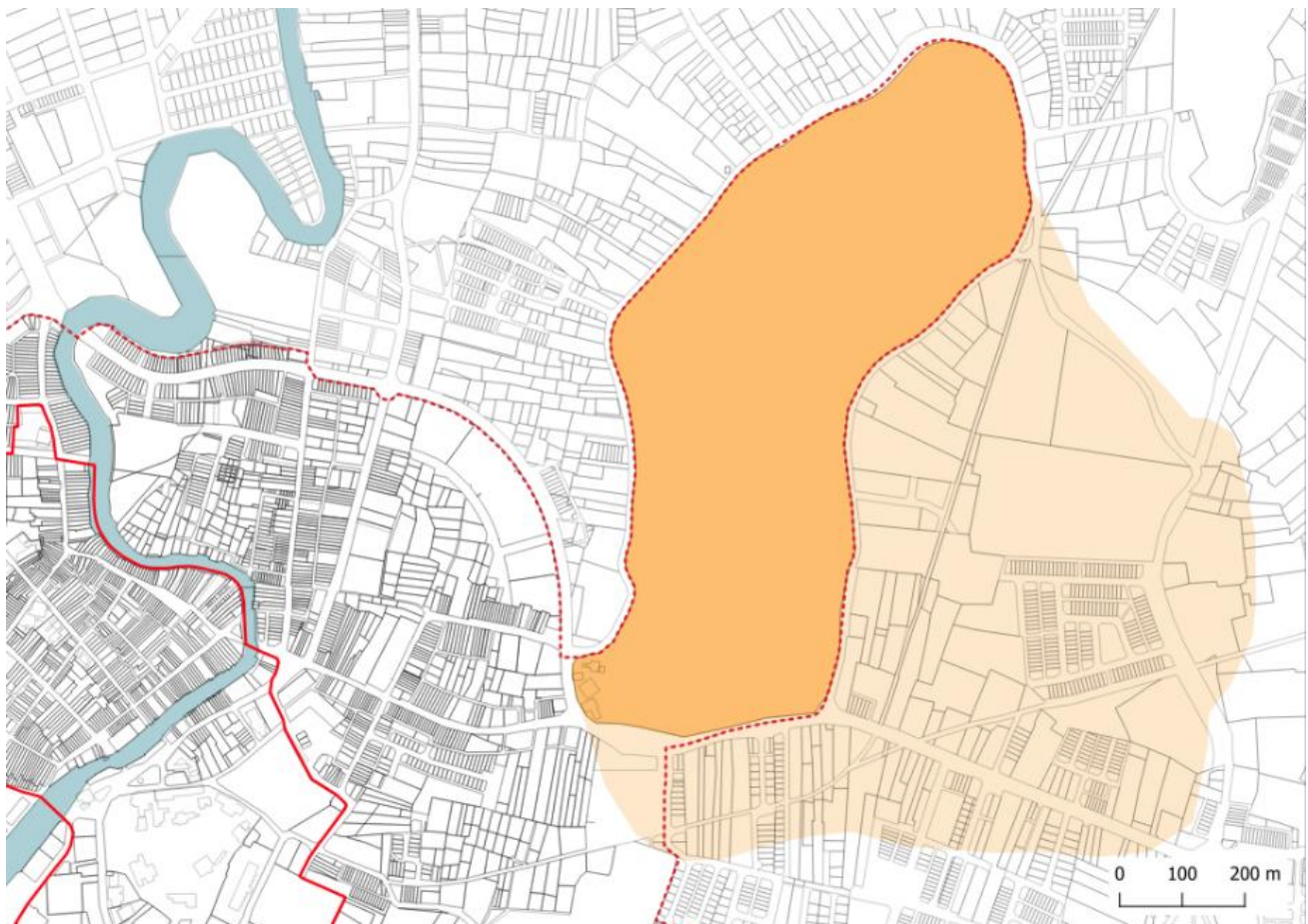


Figure XX: Evolution of the form of Bukit China.

Map by the author. Realised on the basis of Figure XIX.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the historical forms, functions, and evolving trajectories of public spaces in the historic city centre of Melaka. By tracing the transformations of civic squares, streetscapes, and green open spaces from the Melaka Sultanate through Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule into the post-independence era, one can understand the layered complexity of Melaka's urban fabric and the shifting meaning of its public spaces.

Historically, public spaces in Melaka served vital communal, commercial, ceremonial, and recreational roles. In the Sultanate period, marketplaces and the riverfront were central to economic and social life. Under the Dutch, public space became more formalized, especially in areas like Dutch Square, where colonial civic life and governance were embedded in the spatial organization. The British introduced green open spaces such as Padang Pahlawan, infusing public space with symbolic, recreational, and imperial functions. Streets and shophouses throughout these periods functioned as vibrant, multifunctional spaces of daily interaction, trade, and community life, blurring the boundaries between private and public.

Over time, these spaces evolved significantly. Shifts in political power, economic focus, and urban priorities changed how space was organized and used. Dutch-era civic squares became British-era leisure spaces and, later, tourist-oriented zones. Streets once filled with communal life were increasingly dominated by vehicles and privatized functions. Green spaces transitioned from colonial recreational areas to sites of national symbolism, and, in some cases, commercial development. Urban expansion, land reclamation, and modernization initiatives from the late 20th century onward further transformed the physical form and accessibility of many historic public spaces.

In recent decades, nearly all public spaces in Melaka, regardless of their original form or function, have been subject to processes of privatization and transformation. Some, like Padang Pahlawan, were entirely overtaken by commercial development, losing both their physical openness and their public function. Others, such as Bukit China, managed to resist these pressures through strong public opposition and have remained accessible as symbolic and cultural spaces. Meanwhile, the streetscape, long neglected and fragmented by traffic and commercialization, is now starting to receive renewed attention through initiatives like pedestrianisation and cultural programming, suggesting a potential shift back toward more inclusive, community-oriented uses of public space.

Ultimately, the case of Melaka highlights the ongoing tension between heritage preservation, public access, and urban growth. Public spaces remain contested terrains, where memory, identity, economy, and politics intersect.

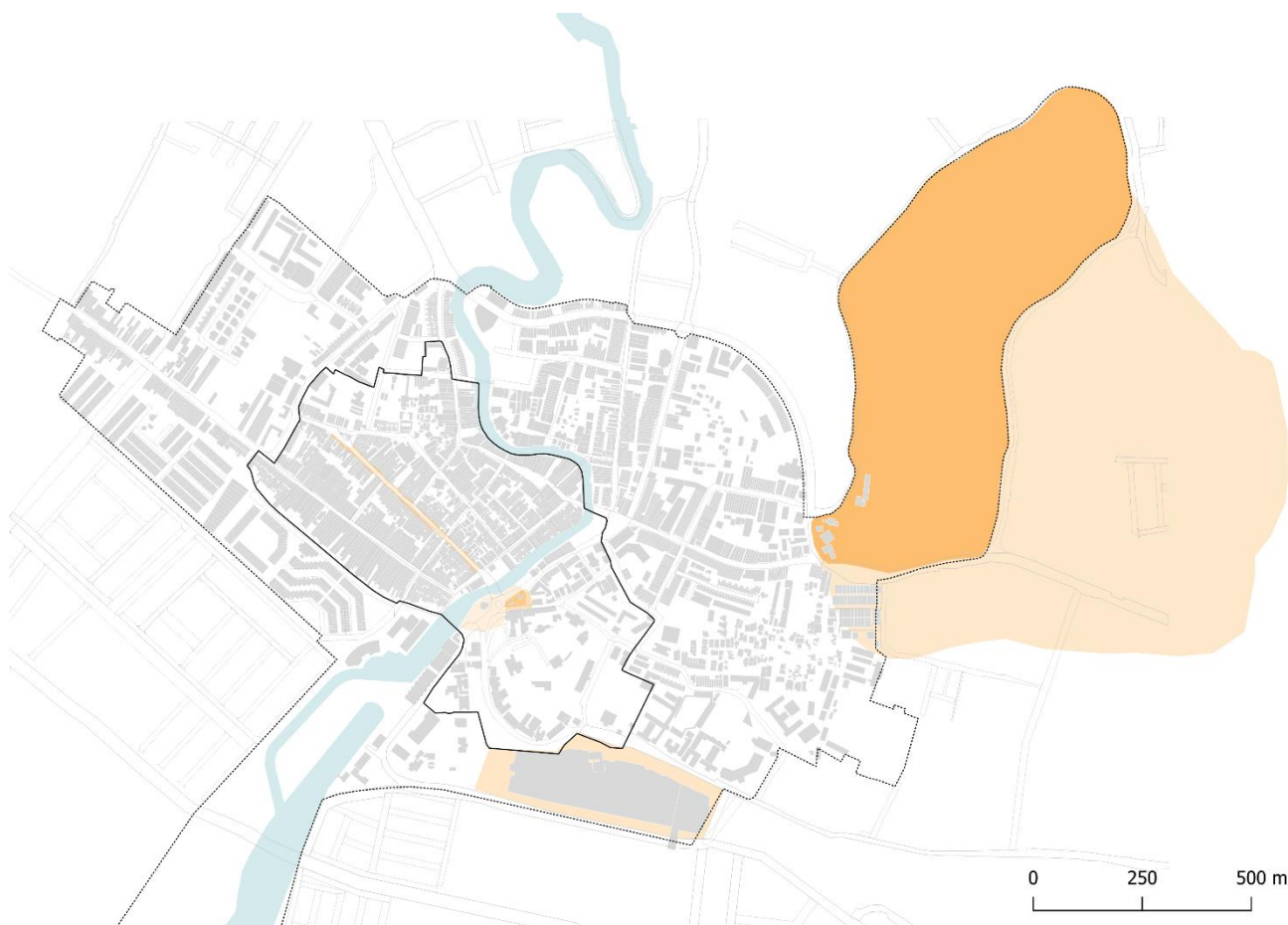


Figure XXII: Evolution of open public spaces.  
Map by the author.

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