

Negotiating the Unseen Tensions

MEDIATING POLARITIES

Late 19th to early 20th century

After the 1881 Kuala Lumpur fire, migrants from **India** and **Ceylon** (Sri Lanka) arrived in Brickfields to work on railway construction and brick kilns.



1982

Jalan Brickfields which became a major thoroughfare and was later renamed **Jalan Tun Sambanthan** in honor of independence leader Tun V.T. Sambanthan.



2009

In 2009, the Malaysian government announced that the country's "official" Little India would be moved to **Brickfields**. This was a significant redesignation, as the identity had long been associated more organically with the area around **Jalan Masjid India**.



2010

As part of a RM128.7 million package deal, MRCB's subsidiary was contracted to deliver the "Little India" beautification, build the **Pines Bazaar** (Tun Sambanthan Complex), and construct **new government quarters** (KKKA). In exchange for these works, the company was compensated with the valuable land where 100 Quarters were located.

2001-2014

Despite protests from heritage groups, the century-old **100 Quarters** are torn down to make way for the new **Sentral Sulep** development, marking a significant loss of tangible history.



2012

The government-owned **police headquarters** land is transferred to a **Prinamada** in exchange for the construction of a new facility, continuing a pattern of transactional development. The land was later sold at twice the valuation to **SeniBina**.



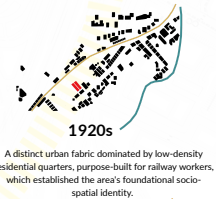
2018

The **Allia Bangsar** tower, an ultra-high-scale morphological outlier was completed. Its stark contrast with adjacent governmental residences such as **KKKA Brickfields Residences**, **PPAM** (Under construction) physically manifests the area's fragmented gentrification.



URBAN MORPHOLOGY

1920s



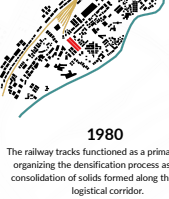
A distinct urban fabric dominated by low-density residential quarters, purpose-built for railway workers, which established the area's foundational socio-spatial identity.

1960s



Post-independence, demographic expansion and land use intensification began to formalize the district's urban morphology into a structured grid pattern.

1980



The railway tracks functioned as a primary datum, organizing the densification process as a linear consolidation of solids formed along this critical logistical corridor.

2000s



The 2001 launch of the KL Sentral Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) was a catalyst for the profound spatial and socio-economic restructuring of Brickfields, transforming it from a historic residential area into a high-density commercial hub.

2019



A spile of new transitional voids from demolished sites like the 100 Quarters, heralding vertical densification, not a more porous urban form.

2025



The culmination of vertical densification, where transitional voids have been superseded by massive, high-density solids, creating a fragmented urban morphology in which new vertical extrusions dominate the residual, fine-grained historic fabric.

1881

A major fire and flood destroyed Kuala Lumpur's **main market**. British Resident Frank Swettenham then required buildings to be made of brick and tile, sparking high demand and giving rise to Brickfields.



Pre 1881

Before formal urbanisation, much of what is now Brickfields was undeveloped or lightly used, including plantations and natural land. It was around 15 miles (hence "Batu Lima Belas") from the village of Damansara.



Post 1881

Yap Ah Loy acquired land in Batu Lima Belas (Brickfields) to produce quality bricks for rebuilding Kuala Lumpur, bringing in **Chinese workers** for the brickmaking and tin mining industries.



THE RAILWAY

Physical Datum & Narrative Spine of Brickfields

The railway not only shaped the urban morphology of Brickfields, with its linear streets, workers' quarters, and industrial yards) but also its **social composition**. Indian and Sri Lankan laborers brought in to build and maintain the railway network established communities that continue to define the district's religious and cultural identity.

In the postcolonial period, the railway's symbolic and spatial influence persisted even as its functional prominence declined. The construction of **KL Sentral** (2001) reactivated this infrastructural legacy, transforming Brickfields into a transit-oriented node within Kuala Lumpur's metropolitan system. Yet, this redevelopment also intensified pressures of displacement and gentrification, unraveling unseen tension between the increasing polarities.

STRENGTHS

Brickmaking history

Rooted in its history as Kuala Lumpur's primary brickmaking center, Brickfields has a distinctive urban structure and a rich cultural identity, shaped by its early laborers.



Railway as Datum

Brickfields' urban layout and social fabric were shaped by its historical link to the railway, a legacy revitalized by KL Sentral's development into a major transit hub.



WEAKNESS

Destroyed Memory of Place

Minimal or no traces of **Alleyway Godowns**, brick kilns, 100 Quarters, Padang.



Forced Identity

The ornamental arches of "Little India" are a superficial, **top-down branding** effort that commodifies culture, displacing Brickfields' authentic, multicultural identity for tourism.



OPPORTUNITY

Catalyst for Authentic Placemaking

The Little India beautification project's failure argues against commodifying culture, creating an opening for residents and advocates to reclaim their neighborhood's narrative through genuine, bottom-up placemaking.



Remembering history

Bringing back forgotten history of the brick making era of Brickfields and the identity that the railway plays to Brickfields.



THREATS

Gentrification & Population displacement

Urban renewal projects like KL Sentral have driven land speculation, causing rising property values and gentrification that displaces long-time residents and threatens Brickfields' cultural identity.



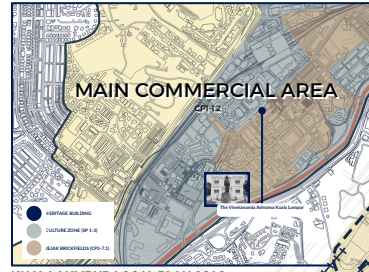
Politicized Development

Politicized land swaps and projects, like "Little India", have damaged Brickfields' heritage by demolishing historic spaces and breaking promises, resulting in a loss of community identity.

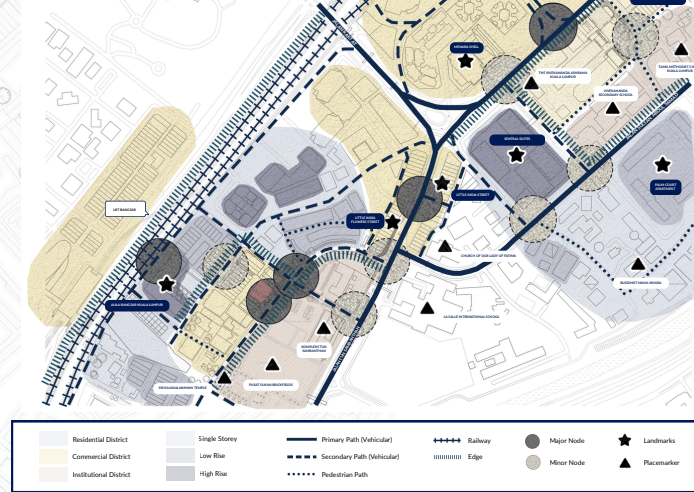


IMAGEABILITY

The image of the city (Kevin Lynch)



KUALA LUMPUR LOCAL PLAN 2040



RESIDENTIAL TYPOLOGIES



SINGLE STOREY

The scene shows a row of attached old terrace houses with a lived-in charm. White-painted ground floors with metal grilles contrast the reddish-orange brick upper levels, while differing roof tones, plants, and hanging laundry highlight the sense of everyday domestic life.

LOW RISE

The building is an old low-cost apartment block with a dense, lived-in character. Weathered facades of stained metal grilles, white laundry, plants, and wires spilling from balconies reveal the rhythm of everyday city life.

HIGH RISE

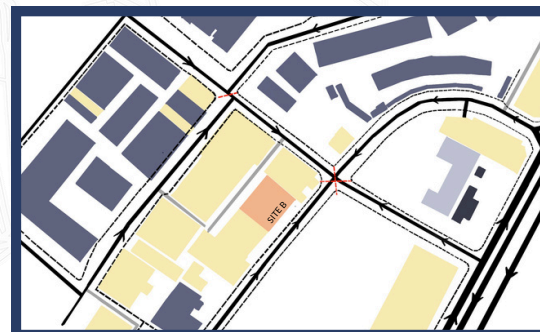
The high-rise condominium stands tall and commanding. Its curved facade filled with endless identical balconies. The once-uniform design is broken by air conditioners and hanging laundry, turning its modernist order into a lively, chaotic expression of dense urban life.

ULTRA HIGH RISE

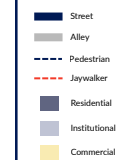
The modern high-rise stands within the urban fabric. Its dark facade and clean lines exuding sophistication. While balcony grilles contrast the charcoal exterior, landing at luxury living, while the textured podium and nearby railway roof tie it in the dense cityscape.

PERMEABILITY

Landuse and Linkages



LEGEND

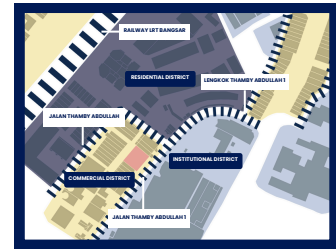


THREATS

Less of Social Connectivity

More functional housing forms and interaction, reducing social activity and strengthening the social fabric and sense of place.

DISTRICTS & EDGES



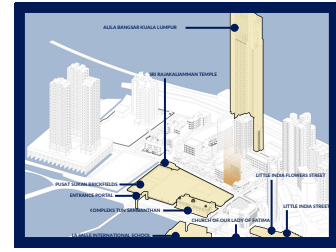
Edges define the boundaries between the commercial, residential, and institutional districts, creating a clear spatial separation while shaping the character and interaction of each area within the urban fabric.

PATHS & NODES



The site follows primary, secondary, and pedestrian paths connecting key areas. Major and minor nodes mark activity points, with a temporal node at the Church of Our Lady of Fatima and the main node in Little India, serving as the central hub of movement and interaction.

LANDMARKS & PLACEMARKERS



Landmarks and placemarkers act as visual cues that enhance spatial identity and orientation for both visitors and locals, reinforcing the legibility of the urban setting.

STRENGTH

Food & Cultural Nodes

Along Jalan Tun Sambanthan, dense clusters like the Bazaar Bazar, Telok Ayer, and the Chin Peng Centre create vibrant nodes that anchor the street and encourage pedestrian movement.

Distinct Districts

Little India, at the heart of Brickfields, stands out with its dense, colorful, and vibrant atmosphere. The area's historical significance and cultural heritage are preserved and celebrated through its unique urban form and character.

Strengthened Urban Legibility through Connectivity

The clear and legible urban form, with its strong sense of direction and clear path network, enhances the area's legibility and encourages pedestrian movement and interaction.

WEAKNESS

Disrupted Pedestrian Linkages between districts

Along Jalan Tun Sambanthan, the dense clusters of buildings and the narrow street network disrupt pedestrian linkages between districts, making it difficult to navigate and encouraging car use.

Deficiency of Social and Spatial Nodes

The current dense urban form and the narrow street network lack social and spatial nodes that encourage pedestrian movement and interaction, leading to a sense of isolation and lack of community.

OPPORTUNITY

Streetscape Upgrades

Enhance the streetscape through improved lighting, facade restoration, and green painting, while creating walking green corridors that connect key heritage sites within Brickfields.

Heritage Connectivity through Green Corridors

Integrate the heritage corridor through green corridors, creating a sense of continuity and enhancing the area's legibility and encouraging pedestrian movement and interaction.

THREATS

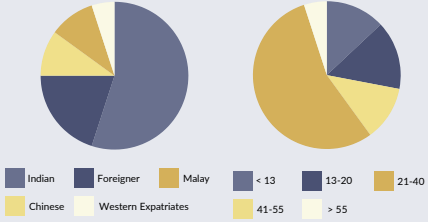
Loss of Social Connectivity

More functional housing forms and interaction, reducing social activity and strengthening the social fabric and sense of place.

PLACE & BEHAVIOURAL SURVEY

Townscape Revisited (Shuhana Shamsuddin)

DEMOGRAPHIC



The population is mainly Indian and aged 21-40, showing a young, working-age majority. There's also a mix of foreigners, Malays, Chinese, and western expatriates, making it a diverse yet Indian-dominated community.

USER CATEGORY

Place & Placelessness (Edward Relph)

Empathetic
'Deep Communal Bonds'

INSIDERS

Existential

'Detached from rhythms'

Objective

OUTSIDERS

'Transient and Fleeting contact'



Long-time everyday residents like Rev. Bala Moses of the Lutheran Church, whose families have lived in Brickfields for generations, share deep communal bonds rooted in culture, interactions, tradition, history, livelihood and routine. This connection shapes an inclusive way of life that naturally extends beyond their homes into the place



New residents in affluent developments such as Aila Bangsar and Sentral Suites value Brickfields for its convenience but remain detached from its everyday rhythms. Their lifestyles are more exclusive, creating a clear boundary between their enclaves and the surrounding community.



Tourists and commuters passing through KL Sentral, NU Sentral, or the Bangsar LRT engage with Brickfields briefly and functionally—consuming, moving, and departing. They form a transient community with only surface contact to the place.

"To be inside a place is to belong to it and identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are, the stronger is the identity with the place."
— Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness (1976, p. 49)

Strengths

Cultural Belonging
Strong cultural identity and community belonging among residents, especially those with long-term roots.

Diverse User Dynamics
Coexistence of different user types: residents, commuters, tourists, and workers.

Opportunities

Reinvigorated Social Connectors
Revival of shared spaces like cafes, temples, and markets to foster community.

Intergenerational Engagement
Creating shared spaces for different age groups to interact and share knowledge.

Weakness

Underserved Communal Field
Brickfields' public space is not well-maintained and lacks modern amenities like playgrounds and sports facilities.

Heightened Safety Concerns
A July 2018 gunshot incident in the area has led to increased public concern and safety measures.

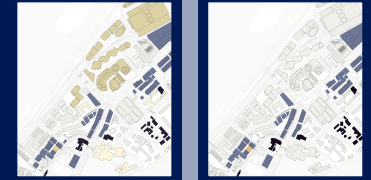
Threats

Urban Tension
Social division appears between older residents and newer, wealthier tenants.

Urban Distance from Redevelopment
New corporate and residential developments are being built in the area, potentially displacing the existing community.

BEHAVIOURAL PATTERN

10AM



4PM



10PM



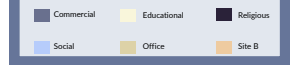
WEEKDAY

Weekday activity centers on commercial, office, and educational functions with steady movement from daily routines.

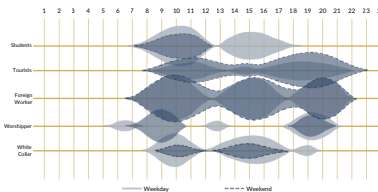
WEEKEND

Weekends focus on religious and social activities, making the area livelier with visitors and families.

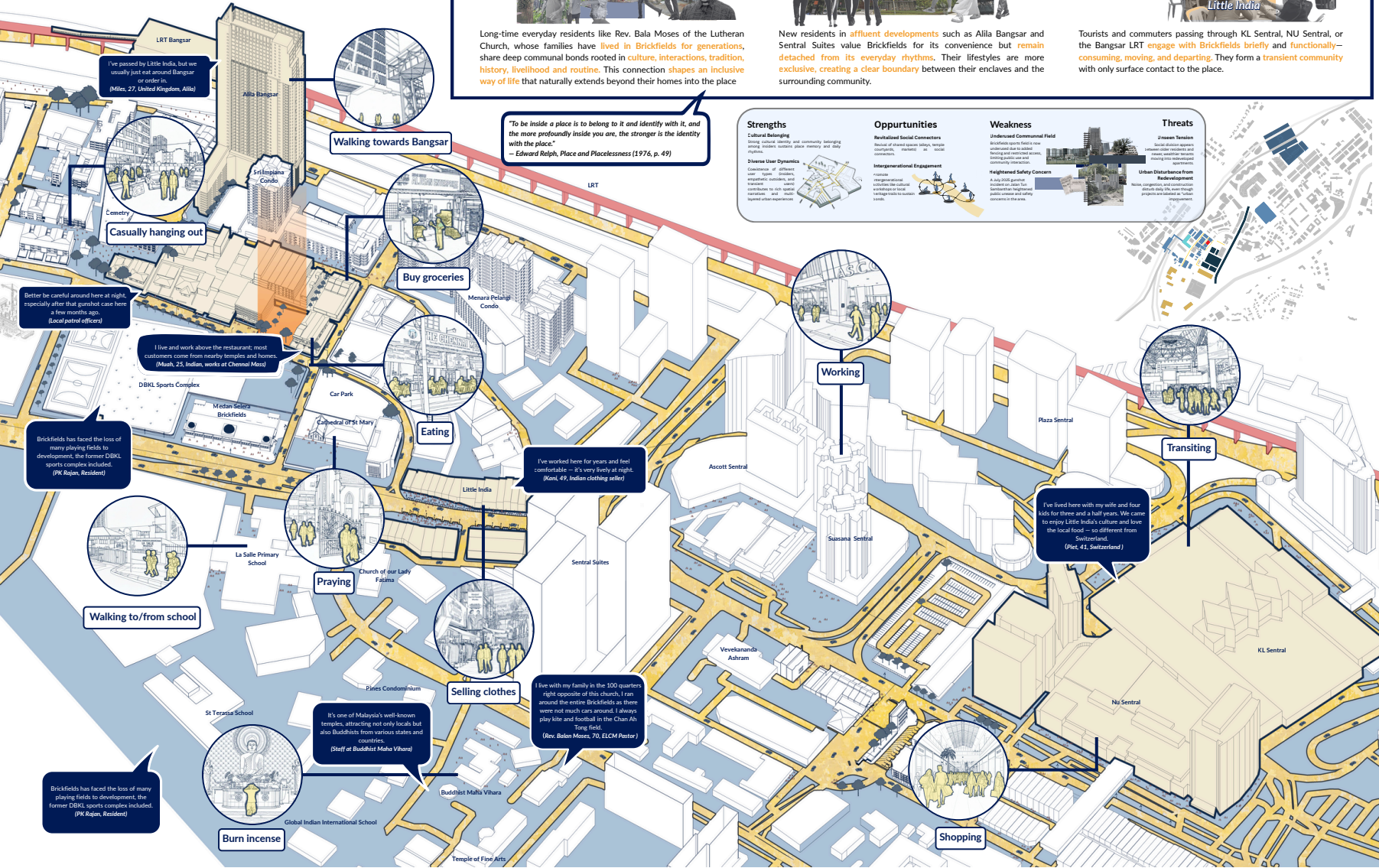
ACTIVITY

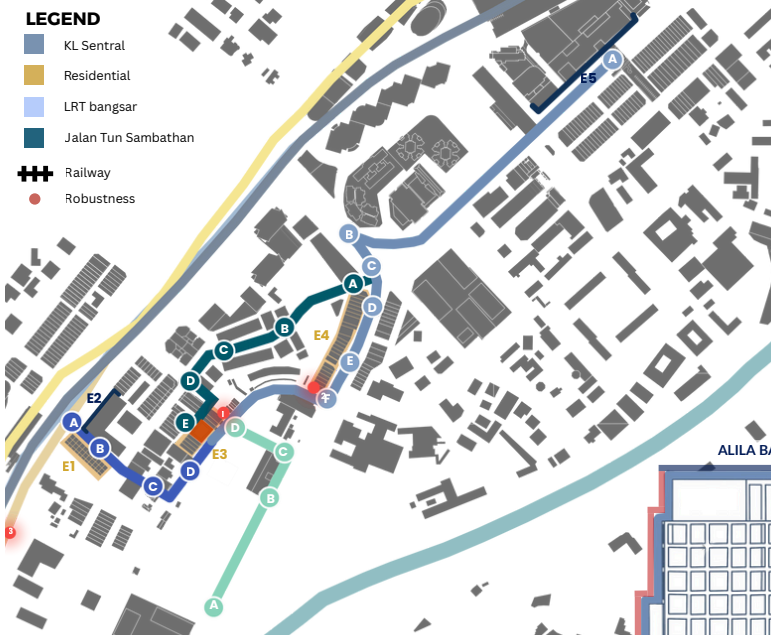


TEMPORAL PATTERNS



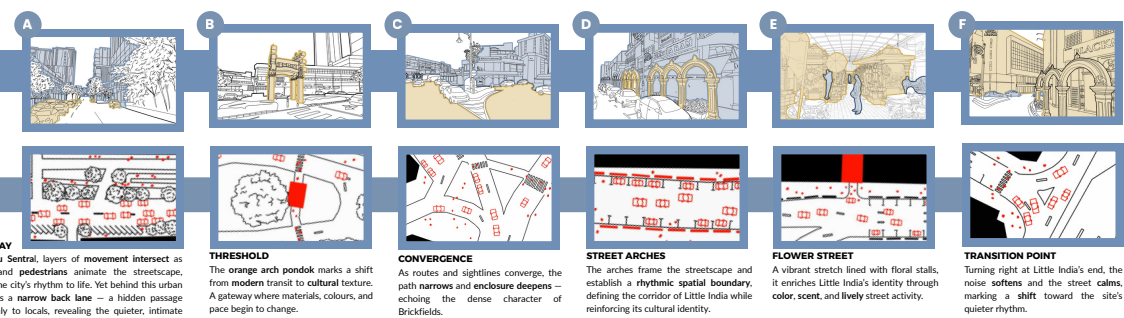
Brickfields' temporal pattern is purpose-driven, shifting from work and education on weekdays to religious and social activities on weekends.



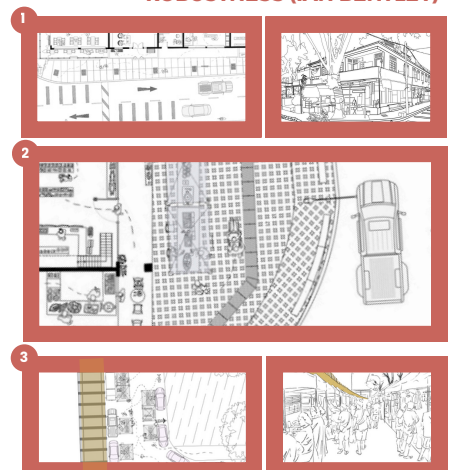


Objective **Outsiders**
Existential **Insiders**
Emphatetic **Insiders**

KL SENTRAL

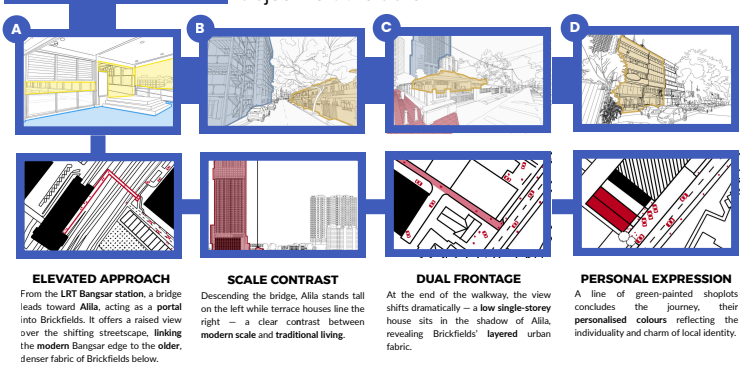


ROBUSTNESS (IAN BENTLEY)



LRT BANGSAR

Emphatetic **Insiders**
Objective **Outsiders**



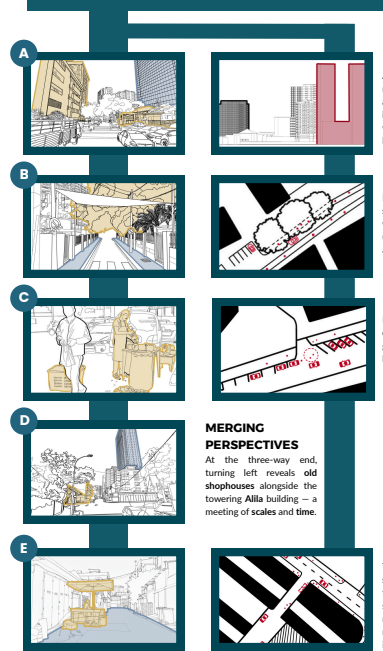
SHOPLOTS E3

SITE B

SHOPLOTS E3

JLN THAMBY ABDULLAH

Emphatetic **Insiders**



Responsive Environments (Ian Bentley)

THE URBAN WALL (SCALE 1: 300)



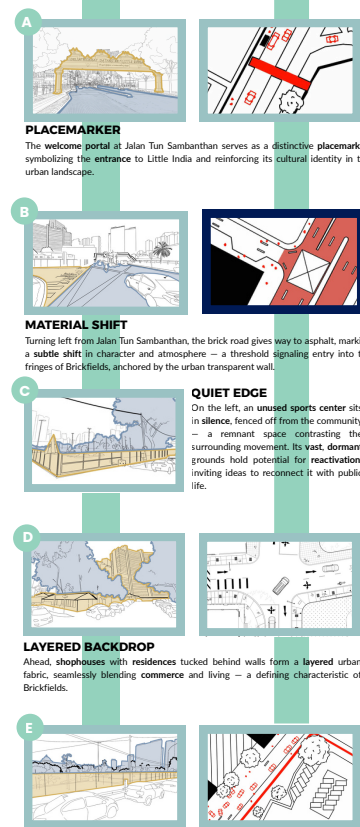
DISTRUPTION

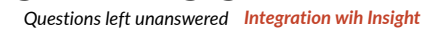
DISTRUPTION

COLOUR

Objective **Outsiders**

JALAN TUN SAMBATHAN





DISRUPTION

URBAN INTERVENTION

Repair | Reinforce | Reimagine

As catalysts for inclusion, coexistence, celebrating the rich and diverse tapestry and strengthening the identity of place while fostering pride and a sense of belonging within the communities.

The railway remains both the physical datum and the narrative spine of Brickfields – a structure through which the district's **evolving genius loci** continues to be negotiated, connecting histories of movement, labor, and transformation within the larger urban fabric of the city.

The Railway Follies

Recognise and celebrate the identity not as infrastructure but as memory and metaphor

The Avenue

An avenue of trees beside Ailla create a visual avenue (with pops of plaques on the stories of place) connecting the new Chan Ah Tong Field (The Padang) and Little India, linking Ailla's high-end residents to the community.

Padang Brickfields

A proposition to open the DBKL field to the community, removing the fencing, a barter for the reposed Chan Ah Tong Field at 100 Quarters.

Forgotten Engines

A replica locomotive from the brickmaking era sits on a disused railway at the avenue's end, enfolding the edge drawing visitors while commemorating what was lost. A mini archive and potential for flexible usage

Urban Pocket Park

Transforming an abandoned green void into an urban memorial park commemorating the demolished 100 Quarters, where former residents can share their stories. A mural wall imaging the brickworkers. Forging the Insiders and Outsiders

Signal Cabin Reimagined

A reconstructed signal cabin from the past serves as the new Chan Ah Tong Field's toilet and changing facility, meeting residents' needs while preserving historical memory.

Urban Stop

A small urban pocket with sitting benches and a cooling fountain to be served as a social node for connecting the community together.

Carriage Stop

A replica locomotive carriage repurposed as a bus stop provides shade for waiting passengers while narrating the story of place

Railway Monument

A replica of a large locomotive engine serves as a landmark at a key road intersection at Jalan Tun Sambanthan, re-emerging the fading railway narrative.

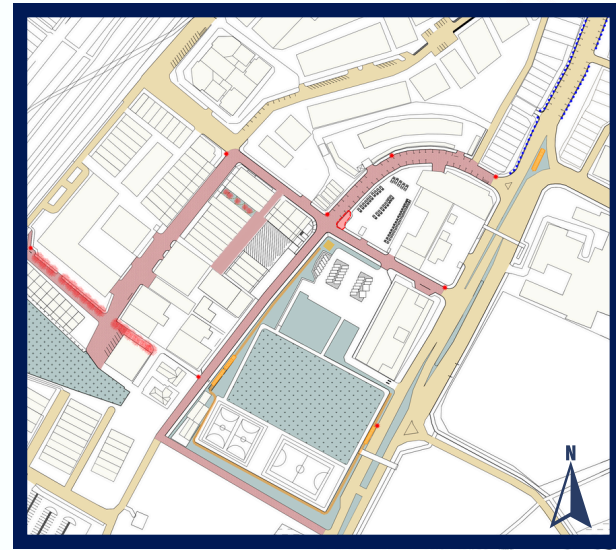
Trail of Bricks

Brick-built historical panels narrate the story of Brickfields, doubling as wayfinders that guide visitors through the district's heritage trail.

Bottom Up Placemaking

Reimagining the top-down imposed identity through bottom-up placemaking, involving residents and users of Brickfields in competitions and public voting.

SITE PLAN



FRAMEWORK

Social Fragmentation

Hierarchical spatial and social structures create tension and limit inclusivity.

Lost Identity

Historical and cultural narratives of the site have faded over time.

Lack of Social Vitality

The site offers minimal opportunities for interaction or community life.

Inauthentic Representation

Existing symbolic elements fail to reflect Little India's true identity.

Underused Open Space

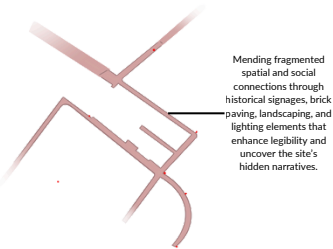
The sports field remains an untapped communal asset.

Safety Concerns

Physical and perceptual safety issues reduce comfort and accessibility.

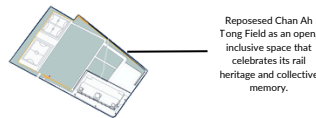
REPAIR -- CONNECT & REVEAL

To mend fragmented spatial and social connections.



REINFORCE -- COMMEMORATE & RECREATE

To strengthen collective memory and identity through place-based storytelling.



REIMAGINE -- IDENTITY REINTERPRETATION

To re-envision place identity for contemporary relevance and inclusivity.

