

Masjid Jamek downtown soundwalk in Kuala Lumpur

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In late January of 2010, Multimedia University sound students accompanied me on a soundwalk through downtown Kuala Lumpur, in the vicinity of the Masjid Jamek train station. We met there, just outside the train station, a location chosen because it is very central and easy to access. It was only after we arrived that day, that I was told of its historical importance. Sau Bin Yap, who agreed to use his local mapping knowledge to lead us through the area, told me that Kuala Lumpur was founded at the confluence of two rivers, a spot just a few hundred meters from where we were standing at the beginning of the soundwalk. People were using all kinds of recording equipment for this walk. I was wearing my binaural in-ear microphones and using a flash audio recorder. Students had another kind of flash recorder with stereo mics. Many people were carrying cameras and some were using cellphones to record images or sound. Everyone was asked to refrain from speaking to each other during the walk, so that we could concentrate more on listening. The walk began with some suggestions about ways to listen (for more on listening and structures of soundwalking, read this new article on soundwalking and improvisation published on the Improvisation, Community

and Social Practice website). The Masjid Jamek downtown KL soundwalk (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WppJoRBHcYE> here is a youtube video) led through the area surrounding the mosque, Little India and Chinatown, a sonic trace of our passage through the multicultural arteries of downtown Kuala Lumpur. In the discussion at the end of the walk, several of the students remarked particularly on their enjoyment of the Little India section of the walk, and how the shops sounded like Radio India, with each shop defining its space through the playing of recorded popular Indian music. This reminded me of an article by Kreuzfeld (2006), in which he discusses Jane Jacobs' idea of urban vitality as an important value. Everyone noticed the ubiquity of the traffic noise, and how it often masked other sounds. The heavy



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traffic became a determinant of the pace and phrasing of the walk as well (see Augoyard 2007 for an analysis of the rhetoric of walking), as the large group would wait for the lights to change, then hurry to cross each street and wait at the other side for everyone to catch up before continuing. Meanwhile, our leader was eager for us to experience all three cultural microclimates within the time-frame of the walk, so had to be reminded sometimes to wait! As we walked into Chinatown, the group became separated into two parts on different trajectories but, by using cellphones to communicate, we met up again at a central crossroads in the Chinatown market, and continued along to finally walk the waterside footpath by where the two rivers join, one of the few places on the walk that we could clearly hear bird song. At the end of the walk, we returned to our starting point and had a discussion about what we had heard, and what that listening reveals about cultural values and the sonic environment of the city at this moment: vital-

ity, noise, traffic, marketplaces, circulation; still a swirling confluence.

References:

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Kreuzfeld, Jacob. "Ishibashi Soundscape: Investigating the Soundscape of Urban Japan." *Studies in Urban Cultures* Vol. 8, pp.88-99. 2006.



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