

ESSAY - Reclaiming Memory: A Learning Street for Brickfields

Brickfields, one of Kuala Lumpur's earliest settlements, was born from the rhythm of the railway — a place where sound, material, and memory intertwined. But as the city modernizes, that rhythm is fading. Old shophouses give way to towers, the once-familiar texture of clay brick and timber is replaced by glass and steel. The result is a slow erasure of identity — not just of architecture, but of the stories embedded in it.

The **issue** I address is the **loss of architectural heritage and material memory** in Brickfields.

My design intention is to create a **learning centre and urban plaza** that respond to this loss by reintroducing *hands-on, material-based learning*. Instead of preserving heritage as a static display, the project transforms it into an active process of making and re-making — using **clay, plaster, and brick** as tools to rediscover the forgotten language of Brickfields.

The building becomes a “**temporal street**” — a vertical sequence of spaces where residents move, make, and reflect. It's not a monument to the past, but a living workshop where the act of crafting becomes a way to reclaim identity.

1. Issue and Design Intention — Learning Through Material and Memory

In Brickfields, the decay of old structures tells more than neglect; it reveals the fading of local knowledge. The craftsmanship that once shaped railways, shophouses, and tiled corridors is disappearing with the generation that practiced it.

My **design intention** is to **bring back architectural awareness through making**.

- The **Learning Centre** teaches residents to understand their built environment — not through theory, but through touch, texture, and process.
- The **Urban Plaza** serves as a civic threshold where this knowledge becomes public — a space to gather, exhibit, and celebrate what is made.

The project's learning framework focuses on two main themes:

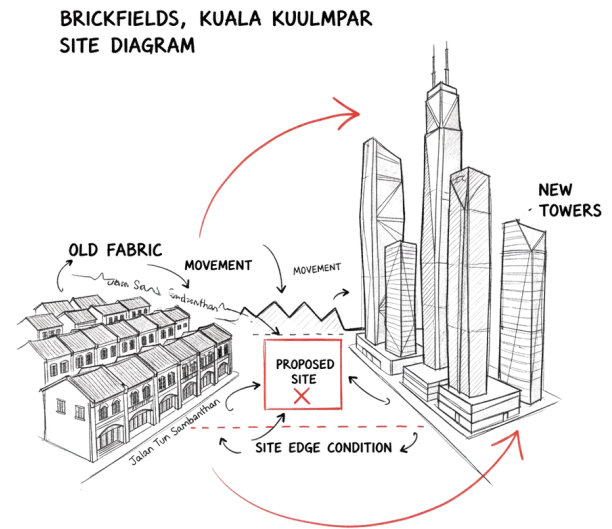
1. **Crafting with Earth and Hand** – using **clay, plaster, and brick** to relearn traditional building crafts.
2. **Model Making as Urban Memory** – constructing scaled models to document, reinterpret, and preserve Brickfields' architecture.

Through these, the centre aims to **reignite the relationship between people, material, and place** — teaching that heritage is not frozen in time, but reborn through the act of making.

2. Site Reading and Urban Response

The site sits at the transitional edge between the old shophouses of **Jalan Tun Sambanthan** and the modern high-rises near **KL Sentral**. This edge condition — between old and new, fast and slow — defines the project's architectural response.

- The **genius loci** of Brickfields is the **railway** — a symbol of movement, rhythm, and transformation. My building translates this into a **vertical street**, where movement through levels becomes an experience of time.
- At the **ground**, activity spills out into the street — open workshops, material displays, and small gatherings that blur the line between city and building.
- As users ascend, the building becomes quieter and more introspective — workshops give way to model-making studios, then to reading decks, and finally to a rooftop terrace overlooking the railway lines.



This upward journey mirrors the process of learning: from touch to reflection, from material to meaning.

3. Theoretical Grounding — Space, Time, and the Act of Making

The project draws from three urban theories:

- **William H. Whyte's** observations on how public spaces succeed through accessibility and comfort inspire the **plaza and workshop edges** — open, visible, and human-scaled to encourage spontaneous participation.
- **Camillo Sitte's** study of organic urban form influences the **spatial rhythm** — narrow corridors opening into wider courtyards, creating an irregular yet intuitive movement that feels alive and unplanned, much like Brickfields' streets.
- The **Temporal Dimension in Architecture** becomes the emotional core. Time is treated not as an enemy, but as a co-creator. Materials are chosen for their ability to age and record — rough plaster, clay bricks, concrete with visible grain — each surface revealing the passage of use and weather.

Together, these ideas form an architecture that teaches through experience:

You learn by walking, touching, observing — not just by being told.

4. Learning by Craft and Making

At the centre of the project is the **Craft and Model-Making Programme** — designed specifically for **local residents**, especially those who have long lived around the railway quarters and shophouses.

A. Clay, Plaster, and Brick Craft Workshop

This is where residents relearn the tactile craft of building.

Using raw clay from nearby sources, plaster, and reclaimed brick fragments, participants mould, press, and fire small architectural elements — tiles, reliefs, and bricks that reinterpret traditional motifs found around Brickfields.

Workshops focus on:

- **Clay relief panels** inspired by old shophouse ornamentation.
- **Brick carving and stamping** to recreate lost patterns.

Plaster casting of columns, window trims, or ventilation tiles.

These crafted pieces are later installed within the building's walls or exhibited in the plaza — allowing the community's hands to literally leave a mark on the architecture.

B. Architectural Model-Making Studio

Here, residents learn to translate observation into form.

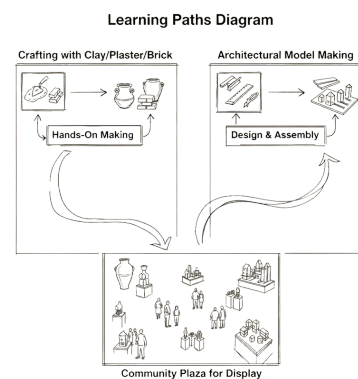
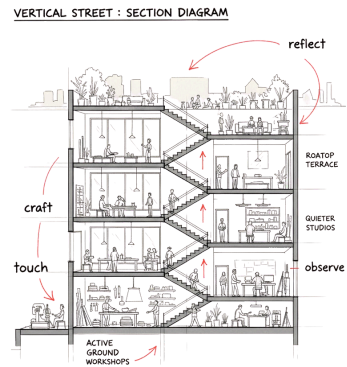
Using recycled wood, clay, and plaster, they construct scaled models of historical façades, railway quarters, or imagined futures of Brickfields.

The studio becomes both a **classroom and an archive**, documenting the district's evolution through physical models that grow over time.

Workshops explore:

- **facade studies** of shophouses
- **Miniature brick vault models** inspired by railway arches
- **Mixed-media “future collage” models**, combining fragments of past and new visions

Through making, the community rediscovers its craftsmanship, spatial understanding, and pride of place.



5. Precedent Studies — Learning from Time and Layers

From **Carlo Scarpa's Castelvechio Museum**, I learned how new insertions can celebrate the old — layering materials to reveal time rather than conceal it. Scarpa's precision informs how my workshops display both finished and unfinished works, showing process as beauty.

From **Neri & Hu's Design Republic Commune**, I was inspired by the transparency and rhythm of adaptive reuse — how old walls and new frames coexist. My learning centre uses a similar dialogue, exposing structure and material joints to express honesty.

Finally, from **Kowloon Walled City**, I understood the power of informal, self-built systems — where life organizes itself organically. This influenced my flexible spatial design, allowing workshop layouts to change as the community grows.

6. Design Strategies — Material, Movement, and Orientation

The architectural strategy translates the concept of the *temporal street* into a built experience that responds to both context and human rhythm.

Three key layers define how the building functions spatially and socially:

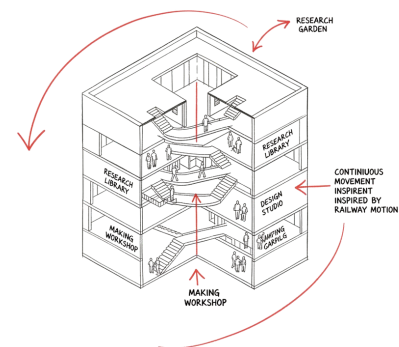
- **Material Continuity and Tactility**

Clay, plaster, and brick are not only workshop materials but also structural and aesthetic language. These materials are expressed honestly — in raw texture, patterned surfaces, and exposed edges — allowing time and weather to leave marks of use. The façade reveals its own aging process, teaching users that material change is part of architecture's life.

- **Vertical Street Circulation**

The building's internal movement mimics the railway's continuous linearity. A central spine of stairs and ramps links all programmes, guiding users through a sequence of spaces that shift from active to reflective — from bustling ground workshops to quiet upper studios. This journey through levels mirrors the experience of time, discovery, and growth.

ARCHITECTURAL AXONOMETRIC DIAGRAM:
LINEAR JOURNEY



- **Contextual Orientation and Entry Response**

The **main entrance faces toward the residential side and the open plaza**, rather than the busy Jalan Tun Sambanthan.

This gesture anchors the building within its *community context*, welcoming local residents from the quieter neighbourhood streets rather than commercial traffic.

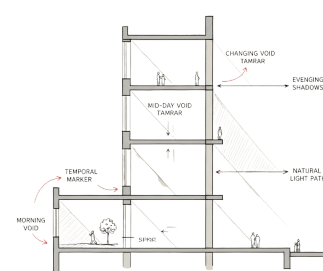
The rear elevation addresses the commercial corridor — more enclosed and visually rhythmic to complement surrounding shopfronts — while the plaza side remains porous, shaded, and inviting.

This duality ensures the learning centre becomes both a *neighbourhood hub* and a *civic threshold* between home and city.

- **Light, Shadow, and Courtyard Sequence**

A series of courtyards punctuate the structure, filtering natural light and ventilation throughout. These voids are designed as “temporal markers,” shifting in mood with the day's sunlight and encouraging users to slow down and reflect as they move between floors.

COURTYARD LIGHT & SHADOW: TEMPORAL MARKERS DIAGRAM



Together, these strategies transform the building into a rhythmic vertical street — deeply connected to its place, people, and time.

7. User Group — The Hands and Voices of Brickfields

This project primarily serves the **local residents of Brickfields**, those who live within walking distance of the railway quarters, temples, and shophouses.

They represent the *living memory* of the district — craftsmen, elders, small business owners, homemakers, and youths who have inherited Brickfields' rhythm but risk losing their sense of belonging amidst redevelopment.

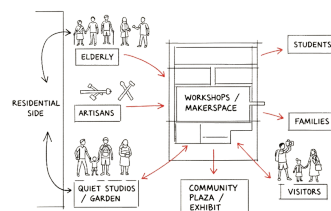
Main user groups include:

- **Elderly residents** who carry oral histories and craft knowledge from earlier decades.
- **Artisans and small shop owners** seeking space to relearn or showcase traditional skills such as plasterwork, brick carving, and signage craft.
- **Youth and students** who explore model making, heritage documentation, and sustainable building materials.
- **Families and neighbours** who use the plaza as an open learning and gathering space.
- **Visitors and cultural enthusiasts** who engage through exhibitions, workshops, or weekend markets.

For these users, the learning centre is not a school but a *community workshop* — a place to rediscover pride through making.

Each crafted clay tile, cast plaster ornament, or miniature model becomes a collective memory piece — a fragment of Brickfields rebuilt by its own people.

USER FLOW: LEARNING CENTRE DIAGRAM



The design therefore acts as both a **learning architecture** and a **social infrastructure**, reuniting the community through shared craft and slow observation.

By entering from the residential side, users approach it not as outsiders but as *contributors* — continuing the story of Brickfields with their hands.

8. Conclusion — The Street That Makes, Remembers, and Belongs

The Brickfields Learning Centre and Plaza is more than a building — it is a conversation between hand, material, and memory.

It reclaims architecture as something the community can *touch and shape*.

In a district losing its identity, the centre becomes a place where people remember not by looking back, but by *making forward*.

Through clay, plaster, and brick, Brickfields finds its way home again — one crafted piece at a time.

