

## On Soft Architectures

*Sobre arquiteturas suaves*

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## ON SOFT ARCHITECTURES\*

**Abstract:** This text explores relationships between political action and enunciation of rights over the use of spaces. The empirical context is directed towards practices of collective action in Malacca's Portuguese Settlement (West Malaysia). Based on ethnographic research, we argue for the idea of soft architectures of collective action as socially weaved ways of popular contestation that are imbricated in daily modes of practicing space(s).

**Keywords:** space, power, tourism, Malacca, Malaysia.

## SOBRE ARQUITETURAS SUAVES

**Resumo:** Este texto explora relações entre ação política e enunciação de direitos de uso sobre espaços. Toma-se como contexto empírico o Bairro Português de Malaca (na Malásia Ocidental), bem com um conjunto de práticas de ação coletiva que têm lugar no espaço. Com base em pesquisa etnográfica, argumenta-se a favor da ideia de arquiteturas suaves de ação política, formas de contestação popular tecidas socialmente, e imbricadas nos modos quotidianos de praticar o(s) espaço(s).

**Palavras-chave:** espaço, poder, turismo, Malaca, Malásia.

This paper is about marginal aspects of architectures of political action. I refer to them as soft architectures. By soft, one refers to having variable geometries, adjusting to broader space(s) of multi-sited political action(s). This text explores, therefore, the idea of soft architectures. Based on ethnographic fieldwork between 2006 to 2009, it addresses the problem of place identities and contested appropriations of space in a

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tourist-oriented neighbourhood facing the Straits of Malacca (Selat Melaka), in Malacca (West Malaysia).

It discusses relations between space, collective action and resistance to change. The main focus is placed in analysing collective action practices developed by residents in reaction to changes in the seashore near their dwellings, and how these changes have opened up contested spaces. The line of my argument is this: in a residential area where land is being reclaimed at a fast pace, residents are using their soft architectures to contest this process. These assume various forms. I will address them below. Contested spaces, following Setha Low and Denise Lawrence, are “geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 18).

#### **MALAYSIA, MALACCA, KAMPUNG PORTUGIS**

In August 31<sup>st</sup> 2007, Malaysia celebrated 50 years of independence from colonial rule. *Merdeka* (Independence) occurred in 1957, putting an end to several centuries of European dominance. The historical capital of the country is Malacca (*Melaka*, in Bahasa melayu). Indeed, Malacca’s growing importance in a complex network of trading activities in the Malay Archipelago led to the colonial rule of European powers – Portugal, the Netherlands and England, respectively – from 1511 to 1957. The city’s contemporary urban cartography still reveals the historic thickness of these successive colonial occupations. Nowadays, one of the city’s main touristic icons is Santiago’s Gate – the ruin of a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese Fortress. Ironically, Malacca’s history as a major trading emporium of the Straits of Malacca has also led to its recent listing (in 2008, together with Georgetown, Penang) as UNESCO World Heritage City.

On the outskirts of the city lies the Portuguese Settlement. This urban village is also named *Kampung Portugis* (in Bahasa melayu), and *Padri sa Chang* (in the Creole language spoken locally); comprising an area of approximately twenty-eight acres of land, it has an estimated population of 1,200 residents. The village was “born between 1926 and 1934 as a quite literary fabricated entity resulting from the philanthropic efforts of two priests as the nucleus of residence of the ‘Malacca Portuguese’” (O’Neill, 2008: 55). The group is also known as *Kristangs*. According to Brian O’Neill, today ‘the term *Kristang* has three meanings: (1) the Creole spoken by the Malacca Portuguese, (2) a person of the Catholic Faith, or (3) a member of the ethnic group of Portuguese Eurasians’ (*ibidem*: 56-57). According to Vicky Lee, the “term ‘Eurasian’ has generally been understood to refer to someone of mixed European and Asiatic parentage and/or

ancestry” (Lee, 2004: 2). As Lee points out, in the past “Eurasians had often been perceived as the living embodiment of colonial encounters. They belonged to a marginalized and isolated colonial category that straddled racial, ethnic, and sometimes national boundaries’ (*ibidem*: 8). This point is particularly true for the case of the Malacca Portuguese Eurasians described in this paper. Being a Eurasian, in contemporary Malaysia, means being part of a complex process of identity making. There are several formal and informal groups involved in this process of identity making. The *Regedor’s Panel* is the formal structure that rules the compound, and to whom the leadership is recognized by the political structure of the country/city. But there are other institutions and groups also visible locally and influencing the identity building process. Three examples that deserve mention are the Malacca Portuguese Eurasian Association, the Funeral Association and the Residents’ Action Committee. The main aspect of all these groups is their rootedness in the social life of Malacca’s Portuguese Settlement.

In 2007, the official celebrations of the anniversary of Independence from British rule were spread throughout the country and Portuguese Settlement was no exception. This village took part in the official celebration but, at the same time, and subverting the official programme, a group of around 100 residents decided to have an alternative celebration. Besides celebrating Merdeka, this was also a time to claim for better life conditions in their neighbourhood. This was done by means of a collective statement, in soft ways, towards the ruling elite. Locally, the Regedor Panel is the institution that represents the ruling powers. Historian Gerard Fernandis reminds us that the “*Regedor* is a Portuguese word which means the administrator. In this context, it means the headman of the Portuguese Settlement” (Fernandis, 2004: 291). This author notes that the “position was set up when the Portuguese Settlement began in the 1930’s and the *Regedor* acted as a liaison man as well as an agent for the government” (*ibidem*). Regardless of carrying a colonial categorization still in use, the reality of the social space where the Regedor moves himself is embedded within the main social issues under discussion locally. The transition of the institution of the Regedor from colonial to postcolonial times is evocative of Edward Said’s work on the connections between culture, territory and politics. Quoting Edward Said: “The slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory which is at the heart of decolonization is preceded – as empire had been – by the charting of cultural territory” (Said, 1994: 209). This is a process that Said refers to as *reinscription* (*ibidem*: 210). As a consequence, “it must to a certain degree work to recover forms already established or at least influenced or infiltrated by the culture of empire”, creating what the author has named as “overlapping territories” (*ibidem*: 210). In Malacca’s Portuguese Settlement,

the institution of the Regedor seems to inhabit one of these overlapping territories. And indeed, some of the soft architectures of action under analysis are directed towards a perception of lack of political action by the leader. Most of the older residents I interviewed recall that the Regedor used to be chosen with the participation of the people, and was highly regarded as a figure of authority. In contrast, in contemporary times, the last Regedor (1998-2014) has been appointed by the Government.

### **EMPTY SPACE: SQUARES AND POLITICS**

In this section I explore the notion of emptiness in relation to the empirical context under analysis. Emptiness is best seen as an “*evocative* category, a stimulus for rethinking conceptions of space” (McDonogh, 1993: 3). Here I adopt Garry McDonogh’s meaning of ‘empty space’, as “seen in both its limitation and its cultural definition as a place, even if defined by a cultural construction of non-use” (*ibidem*: 4). This author also refers to ‘*Speculative* emptiness’ as “intrinsically linked to the destruction of buildings and places as well as to the apparent ‘fallowing’ of vacant lots” (*ibidem*: 7). Another alternative approach to exploring emptiness comes from Peter Brook’s (2008 [1968]) classical work on scenic spaces and multi-layered meanings of emptiness in theatre. All these meanings are useful in framing the present context.

Planned under colonial rule as a low-income residential area for the minority group of Portuguese-Eurasians (Pires, 2010; Sarkissian, 2000), the place has also become a Gazetted Heritage Site in post-Colonial Malaysia. Due to the agency of multiple actors, this spatial and symbolic appropriation for tourism has been followed by a land reclamation process along the seashore, in line with urban growth policies in the region. Using a constructivist approach, some of social and rhetorical aspects of this spatial transformation are discussed here, focusing on the role public space plays, within process of imagining local as well as national cultures. This brings to light questions of agency and power, related to processes of labelling and appropriating space. I follow Sherry Ortner’s (2006) approach to conceptualizing agency: “(1) the question whether or not agency inherently involves ‘intentions’; (2) the simultaneous universality and cultural constructedness of agency; and (3) the relationship between agency and ‘power’” (Ortner, 2006: 134). This relationship, when applied to the study of tourism processes, may shed light into how and why certain places are pointed out as attractions, whether or not “we have official guides and travelogues to assist us in this pointing” (MacCannel, 1999: 192).

Chris Rojek’s proposition concerning the role that myth and fantasy play in the social construction of tourist sites (Rojek, 1997) is another conceptual tool for analysing the social construction of places for tourism; according to his view, as a social

category, “the extraordinary place’ spontaneously invites speculation, reverie, mind-voyaging and a variety of other acts of imagination” (*ibidem*: 51). Asian countries appear as a particularly fertile context to question some of the politics of tourism underlying these processes, also due to “Asia’s transformation from mere host destination into a region of mobile consumers” (Winter *et al.*, 2009: 4). Domestic travelling, as illustrated in the case of Thailand (Evrard and Leepreecha, 2009) presents one striking example of the political dimensions of tourism in relation to nation-building, and the act of gazing upon ethnic minorities as a part of “feeling Thai” (*ibidem*: 251). In Malaysia, a comparable process (to the one described above) seems to be taking place. Official tourism discourses emphasise the economic and political dimensions of tourism activity, noting that it “plays a very important role in energising the nation’s economy to keep it dynamic” (*Melaka Tourism*, n.d.: 4). Governmental tourism discourses also highlight Malacca as the historical centre of the nation. Within this rhetorical landscape, the Portuguese community is a portrait: one piece among the multicultural and colourful heritage of Malaysia’s past and present. Historical references highlight the original name of the place, *Padri sa Chang* (Priests’ Land) and the two missionaries whose agency enabled its founding, in the late 1920s (*ibidem*: 4). In the national context, Malaysian federal government members, celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence in 2007, have launched a tourism campaign (*Visit Malaysia*, 2007) within which Malacca’s Portuguese Settlement is also represented. The ‘cultural extraordinariness’ of the place – and its touristic relevance – is central in one particular public space – the Portuguese Square. Additionally, the place is also indexed with references to Portuguese architecture, cultural performances and gastronomy. Images of the square in official propaganda discourses depict ‘a square similar to the central square in Lisbon, Portugal’ (*Melaka Tourism*, n.d.: 4). In the *Malaysia Travel Guide*, the Settlement is also represented as a place “where visitors can enjoy its lively square and eat Portuguese-inspired seafood” (*Malaysia Travel Guide*, n.d.: 19). The ‘liveliness’ of the place is pointed, in particular, towards the existence of cultural shows with musical performances.

#### **APPROPRIATIONS AND CONTESTED SPACES**

Place names may tell us a lot about ownership, appropriation and significance of spaces. In this case, Malacca’s Portuguese Settlement clearly stands as an example of colonial production of space, a process carried out in a close alliance between the British colonial government and Christian (Roman Catholic) missions. Up until today, street names (given after Portuguese sailors and other agents) are an enduring marker of colonial production. Interviews with elderly residents confirm that the social

appropriation of the place, by the first settlers, occurred in the early 1930's. The first residents were mostly fishermen and their families. After 1957, already in post-colonial times, the Portuguese Eurasians themselves would creatively integrate a new Portuguese identity as a dimension of their ethnic identity through music and dance performances (of Portuguese folklore). This process of symbolic appropriation would provide economic revenue during the 1980's and 1990's, when tourism started to spread more vigorously in the city. Meanwhile, the neighbourhood's physical environment would start to reflect this rhetorical identity: in 1984, the Malaysian Government built a Portuguese Square. The opening speech, given by the Prime Minister himself, discloses some of the political meanings of the place:

On Medan Portugis the Prime Minister said it could be used as a place for the Portuguese community to promote its unique culture through tourism. 'Although the Portuguese were once our conquerors, we need not have hang-ups about this,' he said. He added that if the community could retain its culture and could profit from it through tourism, it was free to do so. He hoped that the square would be central point for the community's cultural and traditional activities. (*The Star*, 1985: 2)

On the ground, this spatial transformation would bring relevant changes in the built environment and appropriative practices in *Kampung Portugis*. Locally, the decision to build a square in the village gave rise to contestation from the residents; the main reason was the place chosen for it: the *Padang* (an open-air playground where the people of the place usually gathered at sunset for leisure activities).

A "Detail Survey of Portuguese Settlement"<sup>1</sup> confirms the use of the open space as a "playing field". Additional information on this space is visible in the map: next to the field there was a "committee hall" and a "children's playground". These spaces, located opposite to the school, were mentioned by the residents as ordinary places for spending freetime in the seashore of the settlement. In the shoreline near the school, in mid 1970's, the government built two "shop houses", or stalls, for the consumption of local food.

The open space of the *Padang*, facing the sea, would then give birth to a new volumetric building, which would soon become a marker for the appropriation of tourism in the community. The 'destruction' of the playground would create a rupture between residents and their political leaders over contested meanings ascribed to the

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<sup>1</sup> This document was collected from a family archive of a former Secretary of the Settlement, George B. Lazaroo, dated ca. 1979.

square. Political leaders viewed the new building as a desired centre for community life, as well as a tourist attraction. For many residents, however, the square became a symbol of the Government's appropriation of their *Padang*, interrupting a long time relationship with the place and creating a new exogenous spatial marker. Designed to resemble a Portuguese Plaza and Market, near Malacca's seashore, its built form was designed, from the beginning, as a leisure and tourism complex with multiple uses.

Despite initial contestation about the building, the people I interviewed generally suggested that the square would gradually be appropriated by the *Kristangs* and become a gathering place for both tourists and locals. Its uses, though, were regulated from the start. It was a place to eat local food at the restaurants existing inside and around it, and to watch weekly performances of Portuguese folklore on the local stage by one of the several cultural troupes of musicians from the community. There is also a community museum, a souvenir shop and, in an adjacent building, a Community Hall used for religious practices. Two of the restaurants preceded the development of the Portuguese Square and have been located near the seashore since late 1970's. In 1988, *Kampung Portugis* was listed by the Government as a Gazzeted Heritage Village<sup>2</sup>, and would start to be represented more strongly as one of the symbolic centres of Malacca's cultural heritage. In line with the rhetorical appropriation of the Settlement by the government and other external agents, the spatial and symbolic appropriation for tourism and leisure purposes was followed by land reclamation of the seashore not far from the Portuguese Square. Previously built just across the seashore, the land reclamation process has put the building further inland, as another new portion of the seashore gave way to new reclamations. In 2000, political changes in the management and ownership of the Square were also underway. The Portuguese Square had been under the administration of the Malaysian government from 1984 to 2000 at which time it came under the management of local community leaders, the Regedor's Panel. This was preceded by complaints concerning abandonment and low maintenance of the equipment. The complaints, made by Portuguese Eurasians themselves, were supported by tourists (who were asked by the Regedor's staff to write suggestions on 'how to improve the place'). The Regedor's agency was instructed by the State government to administer the Square, but their efficiency has been under question. Following this negotiation process, the owner of the building would soon end the patronage and funding of cultural activities in the place, but would keep the ownership of the Square. Consequently, since 2005, there have been no more weekly cultural shows at Portuguese Square.

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<sup>2</sup> Gazzeted, in this context, refers to the act of a space being valued as 'heritage-listed' place.

In 2006, another six more acres of seaside land were reclaimed. Reclaiming, here, refers to the act of making land which was previously under water (the Strait of Malacca) proper for building purposes. Land reclamation was done by the Malaysian Government, for the building of a hotel named after the Portuguese capital, Lisbon. The design of the new building slightly resembles the Portuguese Square. Locally, the opening of this government-owned hotel in June 2007 has given rise to open debates over ownership and appropriation of space. Among residents, this land-reclamation process has been more strongly opposed by local fishermen, who have pointed out how the changes in the ecological system have endangered their activity. The contestation had its peak in 2007, during the National Day (31<sup>st</sup> of August). On this occasion, part of the Settlement's residents, organized in a Residents' Action Committee, gathered in an open-air stage area near Hotel Lisbon; by using the surrounding area through leisure practices (namely through football, and other games), residents' actions reclaimed symbolic ownership of a place that, in the past, used to be the Settlements' playground.



**IMAGE 1 – Women Playing Football on Merdeka Day**

Author: Ema Pires (2007).

In the image above, a group of women play football under a waving national flag of the Malaysian Federation. They did not ask the authorities permission to hold the game. By doing this, they are claiming their belonging to the former social space of the

*Padang* that existed in this area before the land was reclaimed. Through these leisure activities, they are re-appropriating their practice of the public space as they used to do before urban development started to change the Settlement's layout. The majority of the residents strongly identified with the space of the playground, one that existed in the seashore before land-reclamation. In contrast, the nearby new Hotel Lisbon is generally perceived as a space of alterity. Local reactions to it seem to vary from indifference to passive rejection. Social access is restricted and the building's gated entrance poses a physical as well as social boundary. Inside the gate, Lisbon Hotel stands forlorn, facing *Selat Melaka*, not far from another rather empty building: the Portuguese Square.



**IMAGE 2 – Part of the Residents' Action Committee, decorating the Façade of the Portuguese Square with the Malaysian Flag**

Author: Ema Pires (2007).

The image above (Image no. 2), also taken in August 31<sup>st</sup> 2007, shows a small group of residents decorating the façade of the Portuguese Settlement and covering the open space surrounding the square with the Malaysian Flag. This coverage had symbolic meanings: on the one hand, the bulk of this action underlines a broad perception of lack of political leadership. Which makes this public act a kind of a silent

counter-narrative regarding the occupation of the vague space of the Regedor. On the other hand, the residents also voiced a sense of injustice in terms of an unequal distribution of resources. Finally, it also expresses a series of expectations regarding the uncertain future of the community after fifty years of independence.

In a way, the hard architecture of the Portuguese Square reminds all of the residents that development has had strong positive consequences for the residents, too. For instance, from the 1980's onwards, in parallel with the construction of the Square, the Federal Government gave the Malacca Portuguese the possibility to invest in a national scheme of State national shares (*Amanah Saham Nasional*), with interest rates of 7% per year. This is regarded by most residents as a very good investment, one that had been previously only available to native (ethnic Malay and Orang Asli) citizens and that was now available for Malacca Portuguese citizens as well. However, the positive discrimination by the National government regarding the national investments did not apply in the same way to the land rights regarding the soil where their houses are built. In Malaysia, most citizens do not own the soils where their houses are built. Due to this fact, in 1987 some residents received letters from the government informing them that their temporary occupation licences were about to expire, and proposing a renovation of those permits. This circumstance has placed the residents in a new crossroads: fighting for the right to use the space where their dwellings are built. The licences of all the houses were given within a Temporary Occupation Licence, valid for 60 to 90 years. According to the residents interviewed, some of the house-owners signed up to these proposals, while others chose not to do it.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, *Selat Melaka* was undergoing rapid change, as more land was being reclaimed to build artificial new land spaces in the shores of the Strait (*Selat Melaka*). The surroundings of the Portuguese Settlement would not be without consequences. In particular, the fishermen now go to catch fish in (even more) shallow and polluted waters. Changes in the geography of the coastal area are also having direct effects over the lives of animals and plants. A good example of this was given by an advertisement campaign in the Settlement. In 2007, an outdoor message announced: "Even the birds come to see us". By 2008, the outdoor sign had already been removed, maybe because less "birds" started to be seen near the seashore, due to major changes in the surrounding environment. Also, the aesthetic value of the space (Portuguese Settlement) is closely linked with its access to the seashore of the Strait. In that sense, from the moment the town was listed under UNESCO Heritage Cities, most of the residents hoped for an increase in the flux of visitors and tourists in the neighbourhood, being attracted to the seashore area. In the newly reclaimed area

of land, a set of new restaurants (stalls), facing the sea, centralize peoples' preferences for enjoying a meal in the space.

From 2007 until early 2014, within *Padri sa Chang* residential quarters, one finds the question of access to the land to be causing open contestation among Malacca's Portuguese residents. The bulk of the contestation is directed, still, towards the Regedor's Panel. Among the conflictive voices one finds Michael Singho, president of the Malacca Portuguese-Eurasian Association (MPEA). This association is based in one of the houses of the Settlement, and unites a group self-identified as "Malaysian Portuguese-Eurasians". In an article entitled "Include 'Portuguese Eurasian' Heritage", published in the newspaper *The Star*, the president of the Association advocates for the defence of the group:

[...] a small community, a minority of minorities, where its only bastion, the Portuguese Settlement, is now sadly experiencing a depletion of its cultural energies and vitality and a threat to its identity and socio-cultural framework brought about by commercial exertions, encroachment into its fundamentals, subtle subjugation and above all a detached leadership that leaves much to be desired. Perhaps elevating this treasure into the status of a National Heritage could help contain this decline, conserve and protect its wavering strength and hopefully help-to re-energise its spirits.

In July 2007, Michael Singho's voice could also be heard at a public meeting held in the Settlement. In July 15<sup>th</sup>, the *Residents' Action Committee*, a self-proclaimed group of residents (mainly from one of the streets, *Texeira Road*) gathered in the open field of the settlement in order to elect a new *Regedor*. Several candidates were available to step forward, people voted in the open-air stage, and one of the residents, Mr. Alfred Danker, resident in *Texeira Road*, was elected. All happened in the day-light and under the distant surveillance of the authorities, and after sometime, also under close coverage of some of the local media. However, the newly-elected *Regedor* suffered a stroke shortly after the election and the effective consequences of this alternative political action were suspended and postponed, as his recovery process unfolded slowly. He has been known as the shadow-*Regedor* since. According to the majority of the residents, the appointed *Regedor* has been mostly a *puppet-leader* and should resign. He has also been held responsible for the emptiness perceived by the residents regarding the Portuguese Square and other related spaces in the Settlement. The spatial emptiness seems to mirror the residents' perception that the local Regedor Panel is not doing anything regarding the rapid urban transformation in progress.

Despite having granted Malacca's entrance in the List of World Heritage Cities, UNESCO officers are aware of what has been going on in the city's local context. In an informal interview conducted on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2008, with UNESCO adviser Richard Engleheart, during a meal in one of the restaurants of the Portuguese Settlement, the adviser noted that he was "concerned for the future of this place". The Portuguese Eurasians have had historical bonds with the sea near their dwellings, and the UNESCO adviser is aware of the difficulty of articulating community development with the recent urban development of tourism facilities, which has brought the shallowing of the waters where Eurasians' traditional fishing activities used to occur in the past.

### **ON OPEN QUESTIONS**

How are these soft architectures of political action made visible in the social space? In moments of collective action such as the one described above. Why are they soft? They show conflict but not violence; space is re-appropriated collectively in symbolic ways.

How should we read the emptiness of the Portuguese Square? In contrast to the centrality that is given to it in official tourist narratives, this is a rather abandoned social space. At the entrance, colourful signs indicate a museum, some restaurants and a souvenir shop. However, the emptiness of the place is only diminished at meal times or when the souvenir shop's loud music fills in the space as a strategy for stimulating tourist consumption practices. A general perception of emptiness is corroborated by the people who work in the place.

David Greenwood's (1989) classic study on the commoditization of culture might be a useful comparison here in terms of the dense process of appropriation of this place by multiple agents. The Spanish Alarde in the Basque Country (Greenwood, 1989) has shown how the commoditization of culture has destroyed the cultural significance of the event and the place. A similar process seems to be in progress in Malacca's Portuguese Settlement, where the touristification of the space has been eroding the residents' physical, social and symbolic access to the seashore.

Based on ethnographic analysis, I have been using the term 'soft architectures' to describe subtle textures in practices of collective action: not sharp, nor outspoken, violent or rigid, but expressing the condition of collective quest for action. From the empirical context under analysis, this has been made visible through an observation of leisure practices, in public acts of people dealing with institutionalized powers that have taken over the public space around their residential spaces. Though the practices of leisure, residents are appropriating space and using soft architectures of political action. By doing this, and regardless of how ephemeral this process may be, residents

are pronouncing a double statement: they are claiming land-use rights through the practice of spaces; and they are relating to ruling powers (through speeches or press releases).

This text suggests the idea that one can learn about soft architectures of collective action through an ethnographic understanding of how people act. I argue for an inclusive alternative and broad reading of spaces. One that includes the subtleness of soft forms of collective action, as well as many others which do not always gain space in the theoretical landscapes of contemporary social sciences. By doing this, I aim to inscribe these practices in the landscape of soft architectures of political action, in order to voice out their opinions regarding space, place and power games.

Though the practice of soft architectures of political action, Malacca Portuguese Eurasians as a group imagine *Padri sa Chang* as the stage upon which social memory is constructed, where locality is ‘produced’, and as a site for touristic performance in local, national as well as trans-national contexts. It also seems to be a symbolic arena for negotiating place and identity, a space for coping with the media and politics, and an intense economic contact zone during festive events. The symbolic appropriation of the village by the Malaysian government forefronts *Kristangs’* religious identity, and how their spatial practices are appropriated into national rhetoric by Malaysia’s State. The exoticism present in some of the narratives about the place brings to the discussion the transformation of a Christian ghetto into a touristic place. Following this process of appropriation, I have shown that there are alternative meanings of emptiness, in relation to an Institution – the Regedor – and also a place - a Square. This square has been pointed out by the Government as an attraction for tourism; the people I interviewed during fieldwork – tourists, residents, political leaders and other agents – perceive it as “empty” and ‘read’ the square’s emptiness in different and sometimes conflicting ways. Also, the place of the Settlement in official tourism discourse highlights relations between power and tourism, regarding processes of ideological and economic investment in the construction of sites. From its colonial production to its post-colonial appropriations, this seems to be the case in Malacca’s Portuguese Settlement.

Based on this empirical research, I argue that the political action is not made of individual acts, but rather of the collective combination of actions. In August 2007, during the Celebration of Independence Day, the collective action of residents reclaimed justice and access to the seacoast space. Soft Architectures of justice could be applied to the contestation space of the Settlement’s *padang*. In Melaka, half a century earlier, it was in another *padang* that independence from colonial rule was proclaimed by Malay leaders. The collective action that took place in the Portuguese

Settlement decades later re-activates this symbolic agora as a space of justice and of public voice.

The movement of contestation to the authority of the Panel of the Regedor shows how the Settlement is a political arena where serious games (Ortner, 2006) occur. In the political sense, one infers from observations that emptiness means ambiguity and conflict. It also means silence. One finds links between a perception of emptiness of political action and the absence of communication from the local leaders appointed by the government (the Regedor's Panel). At the time of writing (2015), though, a new Regedor Panel has been constituted. Last but not least the land-reclamation process goes on running in full speed in the Portuguese Settlement.

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