Francis E. Hutchinson and Johan Saravanamuttu (eds)


Two characteristics of this publication should be clarified at the outset. First, it is important to know that this volume arose out of the 2010 Penang Outlook Forum and the explicit aim to contribute to Penang's planning and policy agendas. As Johan Saravanamuttu and Francis E. Hutchinson note in their Introduction, the principle objective was ‘to address the fundamental questions that lie before Penang as it seeks to position itself in a changing global environment’ (p. xvii). The second point follows from the first, and this is to note the diversity of topics covered in this slim volume. In order to ‘take stock’ and ‘chart the course ahead for the state’ (xviii), the net has been cast wide to include industrial development, heritage preservation, water management, international temporary migrants, and medical and heritage tourism. It is fair to say that breadth has been privileged over detailed discussions of a smaller number of topics.

The book is divided into four sections. The first is a context-setting essay by Hutchinson that considers the economic and policy environment that shapes Penang's opportunities and challenges. Many of the economic and policy concerns noted by Hutchinson have a familiar ring—for example, how to remain competitive and attractive to MNC investment, how to ensure an adequate and appropriately skilled work force, how to support innovation amongst Penang's small and medium enterprises (SMES), how to maximise opportunity relative to federal government policy frameworks, and how to overcome the constraints of space and of low private sector investment. These themes recur in the three chapters of third section. The first chapter in this section by Lee Kah Choon, Wein Siew Wei, and Sherine Loke commences with an overview of Penang's industrial development and the various forms of state government support. Lee was the Chairman of ‘InvestPenang’ and a Director of the Penang Development Corporation so can speak with some authority on these matters. The chapter concludes with a list of potential future investment areas that is heavily biased towards technology. The next chapter by Poh Heem Heem and Tan Yin Hooi considers the role played by the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) and its current skills training programs developed in consultation with industry. The final chapter charts the former Penang Water Authority's transition from public authority to public company. Former Penang Water Authority engineer and now Chief Executive Officer of PBABH (Penang’s water corporation), Jaseni Maidinsa draws on international and national comparisons to argue that...
corporatisation has improved the service provided by Penang’s licensed water operator, despite increasing demands and a limited capacity to increase supply.

Returning to the second section, the focus of these three chapters is George Town’s heritage precinct. George Town was designated as a World Heritage Site in 2008 and Khoo Salma Nasution provides an overview of the history and challenges of Penang’s heritage movement both prior to and after the UNESCO listing. Khoo’s long involvement in the heritage movement makes for an informed analysis of the political, planning, and financial hurdles to preserving George Town’s outstanding architectural and cultural value. In the following chapter, Goh Beng Lan introduces a further challenge, namely, how to recuperate an awareness of the cosmopolitan and civic debates that once animated many of the buildings in the heritage precinct. Penang-born but now at the National University of Singapore, Goh wants to rescue George Town from forms of touristic commodification that uncritically reproduce racialised political and public discourses dominant in Malaysia today. Her suggestion is that we integrate in this heritage zone an acknowledgement of the earlier intellectual and civic life of George Town and its citizens. A final chapter considers the perspectives of George Town’s poorer and marginalised Muslim community. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied’s interviews document the pessimistic ‘hidden transcripts’ of George Town’s Muslim minority and that of its non-Malay Muslims (a minority within a minority). In response to this sense of marginalisation, younger non-Malay Muslims increasingly adopt Malay language and culture thus further obscuring the diverse origins of George Town’s multicultural Muslim community.

The final section of the book evaluates the economic futures of four distinct industries. Yoon Chon Leong draws on survey data from 600 firms to consider technology trends in the electrical and electronics industry, long the mainstay of Penang’s manufacturing sector. Yoon starts with a sobering account of Penang’s declining international competitiveness and the inability of small and medium enterprises to be more global in their operations. He ends with a call for a new industrial blueprint that builds on Penang’s established technical competencies. Mika Toyota and Mayumi Ono’s chapter sheds light on the growing phenomenon of long-stay Japanese retirees. They outline the demographic and political factors that have resulted in growing numbers of Japanese establishing temporary second homes in Malaysia, while offering a note of caution in relation to Penang’s continuing urban development and traffic congestion. Their research has found that long-stay migrants tend to be rather footloose (few actually purchase property) and will move elsewhere if they feel a loss of amenity in Penang. Su-Ann Oh’s chapter reviews another recent industry,