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BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS AND BROADER AFFORDABILITY CONCEPTS: A CASE STUDY OF PENANG HIJAU E-KOMUNITI AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

Studies on affordable housing have focused on pricing affordability while broader affordability concepts remain in the background. Broader conceptualization of housing affordability is multidimensional and is intertwined with the concept of housing sustainability. This study is an exploratory case study where it seeks to identify to what extent broader affordability (sustainability) concepts are embraced in affordable housing programs. Data were obtained through literature search, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussion. Using theories of bureaucratic politics, this article examines the role of bureaucracy in the process of implementing broader affordability concepts in Penang state's largest affordable housing project, Hijau E-Komuniti. Findings demonstrate that bureaucrats are not value neutral as argued in the theories. Results also suggest that sustainability concepts are embraced by public officials who are responsible for the Hijau E-Komuniti project in the decision-making and implementation process.

Keywords: public administration, sustainable affordable housing, community living, green design, public space

INTRODUCTION

In the urban built environment, housing together with other buildings are important elements that affect city dwellers' daily activities and shape their urban living styles. However, housing affordability is a major concern in cities where, according to a study, regardless of income level, city dwellers generally tend to view affordable housing availability as a bigger issue than those living in the suburbs or rural area (Schaeffer 2022). In 2016, cities housed 54.5% of the world's population but only 13% of cities had affordable housing (UN Habitat 2016).

Policymakers have no single standard in defining housing affordability and affordable housing, leading to variations based on policy disparities and program contexts. Generally, affordable housing targets middle to lower-income households, with terms such as public, social, or low-cost housing used interchangeably. These dwellings typically have prices below the market rate (Earl et al., 2017; Meltzer et al., 2016). As for housing affordability, the term refers to the relationship between income and housing cost. Traditionally, it is characterized as housing where occupants spend no more than one-third of their earnings on gross housing expenses. This 30% income threshold, known as cost burden or affordable rent burden, hinges on disposable family income, allowing for the fulfillment of essential needs (Earl et al., 2017; Meltzer et al., 2016).

However, housing affordability is more than an issue of finance. Broader conceptualization of housing affordability is multidimensional and is intertwined with the concept of housing sustainability (UN Habitat 2012). Housing units that consist of broader affordability or sustainable elements should be able to satisfy the demands of the present generation without trading off the benefits of subsequent generations. Green houses, community living, social well-being, among others, are dimensions of broader housing affordability (sustainability) concepts. It is the type of housing that not only ensures a roof overhead, but is also eco-efficient and sustainable in design, and has good locational amenities (Chiu 2004; United Nations 1987; UN Habitat 2012).

The multiple dimensions that beset broader conceptualization of housing affordability have intensified the concern towards government's housing policy. Conflicts often arise between the goals of providing shelter and creating wealth. To minimize these conflicts, political compromises and bureaucratic cooperation are necessary (Diamond 2016; Tighe and Mueller 2013). Like other cities worldwide, Penang state of Malaysia which is experiencing urbanization is also facing a similar housing policy predicament.

Development in Penang has been remarkable. Nonetheless, conflicts over land use in the tiny state are not uncommon. House price in Penang is one of the most unaffordable in Malaysia (Yeap 2017). Existing studies on Malaysian housing primarily focus on cost, demand, supply, planning, and accessibility (MacDonald 2011; Suraya, Intan and Puteri 2015), leaving broader affordability (sustainability) concepts in the background. This study aims to explore the inclusion of broader affordability concepts in Penang's largest affordable housing project and assess the role of bureaucracy in their decision-making and implementation. While studies on housing sustainability in other countries predominantly examine planning, design, environment, social, and economic perspectives (Molloy 2016; Mulliner and Maliene 2015; Qian, Chan and Khalid

2015), there is a notable gap in understanding this matter from a bureaucratic perspective within a mass housing project. Specifically, this study tries to answer this research question: How do bureaucracies influence the implementation of broader housing affordability concepts in Penang's largest affordable housing project? The main objective is to investigate whether public officials overseeing the project embrace community living and green design as key aspects of broader affordability (sustainability).

Studying affordable housing challenges through a bureaucratic lens is significant. Public officials, wielding influential discretionary power in policymaking, shape the essence of emerging settlements. Integrating wider affordability (sustainability) aspects into housing initiatives is often viewed as costlier than traditional constructions, particularly in affordable housing programs. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate whether Penang's largest affordable housing endeavor adopts broader affordability (sustainability) concepts, with all expenses covered solely by the state government and without central government assistance.

The scope of this study is from 2008, the year where Penang fell to the opposition until 09 May 2018, the date where Malaysians witnessed the change of its central government for the first time.

BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS AND HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Bureaucratic Politics

Urbanization intensifies conflicts over land use and stakeholders' claims to city space. Accessibility to basic needs, such as housing and transportation, is shaped not only by earning capacity but also by city *gatekeepers* (Pahl 1974, 1975). These *gatekeepers*—bankers, investors, developers, and authorities—strongly influence individual life chances. Local/state government professionals, wielding authority in decision-making, resource allocation, and law enforcement, hold significant power in defining and controlling urban space (Pahl 1974, 1975). These dynamics highlight the complexity and power struggles inherent in urban development and spatial allocation.

Modern governments increasingly rely on bureaucrats, whose operational skills augment bureaucratic power. These professionals, adept at public resource allocation, gain influence as allocated resources grow (Lewis 1977; Pahl 1974). Bureaucratic politics theory underscores the administrative role in policymaking, highlighting bureaucracy's centrality in the political power structure (Frederickson et al. 2016; Meier and O'Toole 2005; Peters et al. 2015). Lasswell

(1936) posited that politics is essentially the study of "influence and the influential" (p.296), emphasizing the authoritative allocation of values. The growth of big government and bureaucratic complexity shifts elected officials' responsibilities, compelling them to delegate decision-making to bureaucrats. In the policymaking process, bureaucrats regularly allocated values and make important decisions which have significant influence on who gets what, when and how to get it (Frederickson et al. 2016; Lasswell 1936). Goodsell (2005) asserts the bureau's value extends beyond efficiency to supporting responsible governance. Meier and O'Toole (2005) assert bureaucratic values outweigh political factors in shaping bureaucratic outcomes. The claim of *administration is politics* applies not only in democracies but also in communist nations (Waldo 1985). In essence, administration is inherently political, inseparable from politics in various political systems.

The discourse on the nexus between democracy, bureaucracy, and the interplay of politics and administration persists today. Notable bureaucratic politics frameworks include Allison's model and the theory of representative bureaucracy (Allison 1971; Frederickson et al. 2016; Kingsley 1944). Even though the applicability of bureaucratic politics theories is not free from disputes,[1] public administration scholarship underscores the necessity of bureaucratic politics theories (Frederickson et al. 2016). These frameworks share the foundational recognition that bureaucrats, inherently value-laden, wield substantial influence in policymaking. This article, delving into the political role/dimension of bureaucracy, scrutinizes the extent to which bureaucrats infuse their values into decision-making processes related to the implementation of broader affordability (sustainability) concepts in Penang's largest state-driven affordable housing project.

Democratic institutions play a pivotal role in shaping non-elected public bureaucracy, serving as a tool for the current government to acquire and uphold power. The bureaucratic system operates with a clear hierarchical decision-making structure, featuring strong and legitimate authority relations between leaders and followers, where authority is recognized as legitimate power (Coleman 1997). Those in power naturally seek to preserve and enhance their authority (Pahl 1975). Viewing from this perspective, in the context of Penang's affordable housing project, decisions on development elements are presumed to align with the interests of stakeholders in Penang. Also, the bureaucracy's hierarchical structure fosters loyalty throughout (Lutzker 1982), leading bureaucrats to implement commands from higher administrative levels (elected officials) to achieve organizational goals and safeguard their interests (authority, position, remuneration, etc.)

In sum, in government agencies, bureaucratic politics significantly influence the adoption or rejection of sustainability values by both elected and non-elected officials in public programs. Resolving conflicts stemming from bureaucratic politics and fostering cooperation are crucial for incorporating sustainability concepts into public projects. Using the example of the affordable housing project under study, the article will explore whether concepts like community living and green design should be integrated and implemented, addressing these issues in the **"Results and Discussion"** section later in the article.

Housing Affordability and Sustainable Development

Housing affordability remains a challenge worldwide due to growing privatization of property, increased land speculation and the global financial crisis, among other reasons, that stretched land and housing resources. The challenge is especially severe in Asian cities. Due to a lack of affordable housing alternatives, one third of Asian population live in slums. The Asian urban population is estimated to reach 3.4 billion (nearly double) in 2050 (UN Habitat 2011). However, population growth and infrastructure in urbanized areas do not always go hand in hand. Ghettos and squatters build up. Slums swell. Informal settlements bloat. In such situations, the main agenda of most developing country governments is not more than providing cost-effective affordable housing to satisfy the growing (citizens') demands/needs. This cost-effective agenda occurs in Malaysia too. As Goh et al. (2013) point out that most housing policies and programs in Malaysia are more focus on affordability rather that sustainability. This concept of cost effectiveness in building often implies the compromise of quality and functionality of its products.

The housing affordability challenge extends beyond mere cost, encompassing factors such as energy efficiency, neighborhood quality, open green public spaces, transportation costs, environmental concerns, and the density and quality of housing areas (Edwards and Turrent 2005; Mulliner et al. 2016; Perera and Lee 2021). Perera and Lee (2021) propose a relational perspective, asserting that housing affordability should be understood through the complex housing choices of households, where "housing is not an independent unit but connects with different spatial (neighborhoods and regions) and social scales (household and communities)" (p.316). All the above arguments point to broader affordability (sustainability) concepts.

Broader conceptualization of housing affordability which includes resource-efficient models of construction, technically feasible, economically viable, and pleasant living environment are vital in producing sustainable housing. Edwards and Turrent (2005) contend that factors such as the construction, design and type

of housing, mixture of tenure, energy use and environmental impact are critical to the long-term quality of life and sustainability of its inhabitants. In line with this, the intricate relationships of the above factors made many scholars agree that sustainability and affordability are compatible and not mutually exclusive goals (Kibert et al. 2009; Nottingham 2010; Robertson 2016). The concept of sustainable affordable housing development should embrace the responsibility of contemporary society for the quality of life of today's generation with the obligation of preserving resources in ensuring future populations also have the opportunity to experience a good quality of life (Edwards and Turrent 2005; Chiu 2004; United Nations 1987).

In Malaysia, the government introduced sustainability concepts in housing projects aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Construction Industry Master Plan (CIMP) 2006-2015, offering guidelines on sustainable practices. However, the implementation has been sluggish (Goh et al., 2013; Switchasia, 2019). Challenges include high costs, insufficient incentives, limited public awareness, and inadequate commitment from professionals and the government. Additionally, there's a lack of collaboration between the government and private institutions, scarcity of expertise, and a shortage of locally produced green technology, hindering progress in sustainable housing (Goh et al., 2013).

Community Living

Housing is more than a shelter. Kemeny (2003) argues that housing could only be understood as one element in a social structure, hence there is a shift in focus of housing studies from house to home to residence (a term carries many social connotations, particularly concerning the ways in which individuals tie into wider circles of locality and context). The shift of the concern is desirable, as "one which embraces locational factors and ties housing studies into macro issues of the nature of social structure," and that the dimension of the spatial organization of housing will "makes an enormous difference, far beyond the narrow issue of shelter" (Kemeny 2003, p. 9). Social sustainability is one of the key dimensions of sustainable development, hence sustainable affordable housing should focus on people instead of buildings and shifts the emphasis away from shelter (bricks and mortar) to people and social dimensions (Chiu 2004).

Life between buildings encompasses a spectrum of individual and community activities, essential for social and recreational engagement (Gehl 1987). The provision of ample public spaces between buildings is crucial, fostering interaction and enabling neighborhood participation. Sustainable communities hinge on effective resident participation, creating opportunities for community consultation (Edward and Turrent 2005). Such engagement enhances public spaces, encouraging longer-term investment in neighborhoods and fostering a

sense of belonging. Inhabitants, when provided with enriched public spaces, become more connected, engaged, and comfortable in their surroundings. Ultimately, this effort promotes togetherness, inclusiveness, and contributes to the establishment of a sustainable and enduring community.

Public spaces are also said to play an important role in providing places for citizens to learn the ins and outs of democracy because it serves as the site of public gathering, cultural events, and other expressions of community (Walljasper 2011). These spaces facilitate gatherings, cultural events, and micro-macro societal linkages, contributing to democratization. Adequate public spaces connect individual interactions to broader societal processes, promoting community living (*to live* instead of just *to reside*) in affordable housing.

Regarding housing affordability, Perera and Lee (2021) argue that it involves how households structure living arrangements to afford a house. Kemeny (2003, p. 10) emphasizes, "The organisation of housing finance and the extent of owner occupation... of major importance to spending patterns at different ages and among different social groups." Scholars like Chiu (2004) and Edward and Turrent (2005) assert that housing estates, accommodating diverse populations, foster sustainable communities. An affordable housing system with amiable social relations is crucial for social and housing sustainability, necessitating programs that create balanced communities with units at various price points (Perera & Lee, 2021; Chiu, 2004; Edward & Turrent, 2005).

In Malaysia, Nor Rashidah et al. (2012) discovered a positive correlation between the availability of public amenities and externalities with social support and the quality of life of the urban poor in Klang Valley, Kuala Lumpur. Lack of public parks for recreation was a significant issue, and the variable "area around the house is not well taken care of" had a significant relationship with respondents' physical health status (Nor Rashidah et al., 2012, p. 835). Dasimah's (2008) study on low-cost housing in Shah Alam revealed overall satisfaction with community facilities. However, respondents "requested for the improvement of the provision of open space, children playground, car parks, motorcycles bay and also public transportation service" (p. 102). Examining social integration and residential satisfaction in low-cost housing in Selangor, Ahmad (2003) found that structural conditions and poor social and physical environments had impacts on social integration in urban and non-urban areas. Nonetheless, there is no discussion on how houses with various price points promote or deter sustainable communities building with diverse background in the above studies.

Green Design

The relationship between human and nature is often a prevailing environmental discourse on the concept of sustainability. Of the essence, the prime requirement is that the world's total stock of resources should not diminish over time (Nair et al. 2005; Spence and Mulligan 1993). The Brundtland Commission (United Nations 1987, No. 27 and 30) views sustainable development as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs," and it is actually a concept pointing to meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Echoing the above perspective, Chiu (2004) concurs that the essence of sustainable development is the sustainability of the ecological systems and equity within and between generations.

Housing, a pivotal element of the built environment, plays a crucial role in sustainable development. Sustainable housing should promote consumption values within ecological bounds (United Nations 1987, No. 5). A notable trend is the emphasis on living in harmony with nature, shifting towards environmentally sustainable housing from low-cost, low-energy units (Chiu 2004; Edwards and Turrent 2005). Edwards (2005) asserts a sustainable house embodies "a more harmonious relationship with nature, seasons, and daily cycles" (p. 154), fostering social cohesion, good design, and resource efficiency. In short, sustainable housing is resource-efficient, safe, attractive, and fosters ecologically friendly and rich neighborhoods.

Aligned with the aforementioned considerations, various guidelines for sustainable development emphasize energy conservation, local support, and collaboration with communities. Robertson (2016) illustrates that through-life affordability, achieved with clever design and suitable technologies, minimizes upfront costs. True affordability and sustainability demand housing development that preserves ecological balance and supports societal equity, economic prosperity, and ecological integrity (Kibert et al. 2009; Nottingham 2010). Affordable housing, fostering community inclusion and green living, aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 11 and the United Nations' (2017) *New Urban Agenda*.

In Malaysia, despite the launch of the Green Building Index (GBI) for residential developments in 2009 (revised in 2011), the country lacks "a mandatory standard or code for green building" (Switchasia, 2009, p. 267). While there is a growing interest and momentum for green building, it has yet to become mainstream, with the public sector primarily driving GBI adoption. Various factors contribute to the slow progress, including high project costs, uncertainty in green building

investments, lack of demand, organizational disinterest, regulatory status quo, and challenges with local authority enforcement (Zainul Abidin et al. 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The Study Site: *Hijau E-Komuniti* Affordable Housing Project in Context

Physically, Penang comprising mainland Seberang Perai and Penang Island, has a diverse population of 1.8 million in 2023 (41.5% bumiputra, 40.2% Chinese, 8.8% Indian, 0.6% others, 8.9% non-Malaysian). Despite being the second smallest state, Penang is the second most densely populated in Malaysia (Penang Institute 2023).

Penang, recognized as one of Asia's livable cities, garners international acclaim. Its strategic development aligns with the vision to evolve into an international intelligent city (MacDonald and Teh 2016). Despite George Town's remarkable growth, land use challenges accompany this expansion. To alleviate these pressures and counter space scarcity in the state capital, Penang's government initiated the development of its third satellite town in Batu Kawan on mainland Penang (Figure 1), aiming to further accommodate and sustain the city's growth.
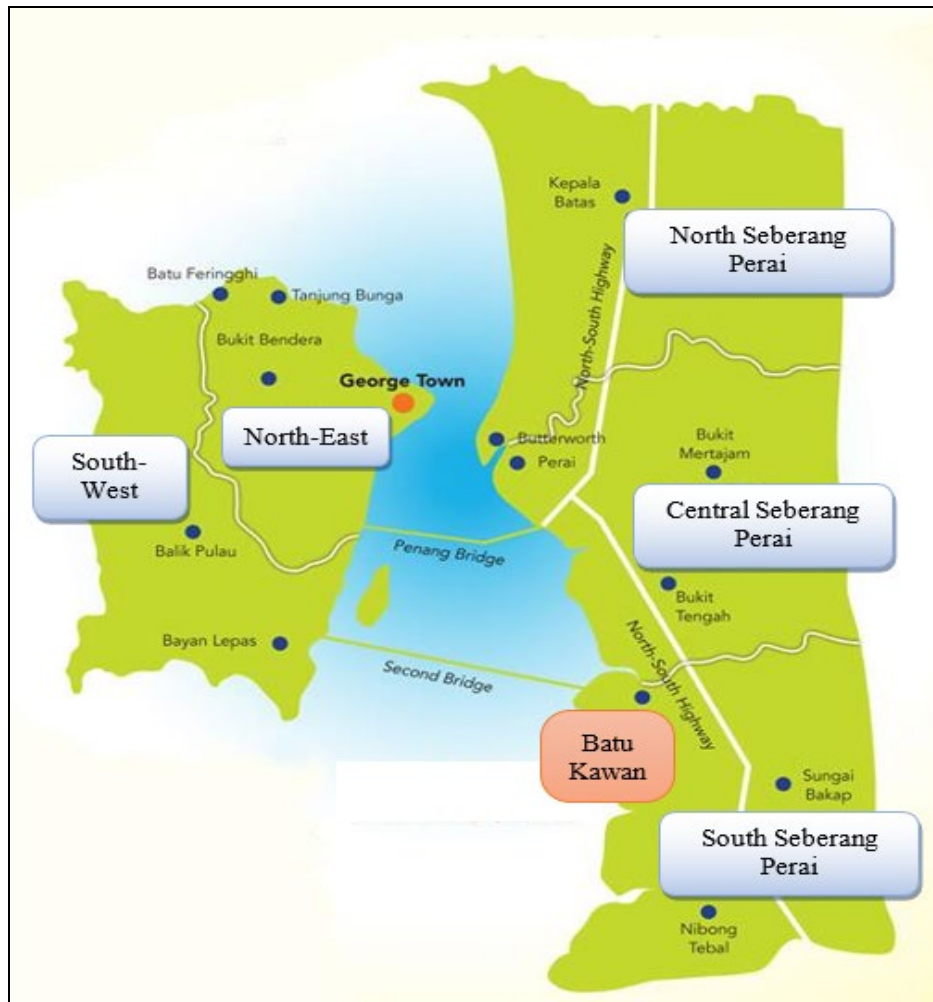
Figure 1. Penang State of Malaysia
Source: Woo KH (2018)

Commencing in 2014, the Penang state government initiated the development of Batu Kawan, introducing the largest affordable housing project in Penang, known as *Hijau E-Komuniti*, situated at the heart of Bandar Cassia. The project is anticipated to unfold over a span of ten to fifteen years.

Method and Data Analysis

Qualitative data collection techniques were employed in the study. Secondary data/information was obtained through literature survey and was content analyzed

to place the study in the Penang context. In-depth interviews and focused group discussions (FGD) were utilized to obtain primary data.

This study is an exploratory case study where it seeks to identify to what extent broader issues of affordability (sustainability) are included in Penang's affordable housing program. The use of case study is appropriate for in-depth examination and comprehensive understanding of a particular issue, group of people or individual. Case study emphasizes experiential knowledge of a case which could only be derived from the key informants who are closely involved in the case (Gerring 2007).

Key informants for this study were identified through purposive sampling, focusing on high-ranking public officials from Penang's housing committee. From October 2016 to March 2018, in-depth interviews and FGDs were conducted with fifteen informants, primarily elected and non-elected officials. Although this sample's high-ranking nature is a limitation, it serves two justifications. Firstly, during data collection, awareness of Penang's new affordable housing program was limited, and these officials were well-informed, and holding crucial roles. Getting elites who are well informed on the project was challenging, with several declining invitations despite repeated attempts through emails and calls. Secondly, the focus on "bureaucratic politics" justified the selection of this elite group.

In-depth interviews and FGD were used to elicit primary data from this group of key informants in stages. All interviews/FGD, which lasted from 45 to 90 minutes for each session, were recorded with the respondents' consent. After the interview/FGD, all audio recordings were transcribed, and content analysis was used to code and capture themes that link to this study.

Relevant secondary data was collected from journal articles, housing reports and statistics, news reports, and books were content analyzed together with the primary data/information. Themes were developed based on the commonalities and emerging patterns related to the study's key concepts based on the Penang context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Process of Data Analysis

This study employed a combination of secondary and primary data collection methods, including interviews and FGDs, within the framework of an exploratory case study. Content analysis was the primary analytical tool used to identify and

interpret key themes and patterns related to the inclusion of affordability and sustainability issues in Penang's affordable housing program. The process of the data analysis is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Process of Data Analysis

Process	Activities
1. Sampling strategy	Purposive sampling was employed to identify key informants
2. Data collection period	October 2016 to March 2018
3. Data collection process	a. In-depth interviews/FGD were conducted with the key informants.
	b. The interviews/FGD were structured to elicit primary data.
	c. All interviews/FGD were recorded with consent.
4. Data transcription and analysis	a. After the interviews/FGD, audio recordings were transcribed.
	b. Content analysis was used to code and capture emerging themes.
	c. This process enabled researchers to identify and organize key concepts.
5. Integration of secondary data	a. Primary findings were integrated into relevant secondary data.
	b. Themes developed based on emerging patterns, align with the study's key concepts.

In the process of analysis, the main concepts that emerged included "bureaucratic loyalty/cooperation", "bureaucratic commitment", "sustainable housing", "house price", "green design" and "community living". Further discussion on the above findings is categorized under the themes of *Bureaucratic Politics in Penang Context* ("bureaucratic loyalty/cooperation" and "bureaucratic commitment"),

Pricing ("housing price" and "sustainability"), and *Green Design and Community Living* ("sustainability") in the following sections.

Bureaucratic Politics in Penang Context

The policymaking of a government in any project/program is often inseparable from politics. Malaysia experienced a political tsunami in 2008 where the two-third majority Parliament of the then central government has been denied since 1969. Penang was one of the five states that fell into the hands of the opposition. Many factors, including housing, facilitated the desire for change by Penangites. This desire continued to the Malaysian 2013 general elections. Knowing housing affordability is one of the prime concerns of Penangites, as such, the Penang state government had made "Housing for All" topped its manifesto in the 2013 state elections and thus won them the second mandate (Yeoh 2013).

The political animosity between the then Malaysian federal and Penang state governments was obvious since 2008. Housing issues have become an apple of discord among both governments. For example, the then federal government was accused of practicing discriminated (housing) policy against states governed by political rivals and not providing any affordable housing for low-income Penangites (Lim 2017). In return, Penang state government was slammed for not being cooperative with the federal government in solving affordable housing issue leading to over 10,000 units of affordable homes in Penang have been held back (Goh 2014; "Minister Slams Penang" 2014).

Due to the politically hostile environment, Penang state government is determined to have its own affordable housing program. The state government set up its "Public and Affordable Housing Fund" and had its official launch of the registration of affordable housing in February 2013 (Lim 2017). This situation clearly suggests that the decision of Penang government to have its own affordable housing program was influenced by the political context then. In other words, *Hijau E-Komuniti* was a political product, though undeniably it is also a social program to aid (low and middle income) Penangites. The then opposition-run Penang state government successfully maintained its ruling powers in Penang via the 2013 general election which was held on 05 May 2013—about three months after the official launch.

Placing housing issue into its election manifesto was the first step. The more difficult next step is to hold its promise. To live up to its promise and to ensure the program is implemented in line with its political ideology, Penang state government works closely with its bureaucracy. Bureaucratic loyalty and authority must be consolidated. The loyalty of the state's bureaucrats to Penang government is clear where as high as 71% of the study's respondents agreed that

they are responsible and answerable to state agencies and Penang state government. The head of an agency admitted he will only take orders from the state chief minister and his view was echoed by an architect (Personal communications, October 28 and November 30, 2016). This type of attitude reflects that non-elected public officials are aware of the source to maintain their interests (authority, position, and remuneration) is flowing from their direct superiors in the hierarchy of the bureaucracy, namely, elected officials. Therefore, as expected, they loyally executed the commands from their superior in the (state) bureaucracy.

Commitment from bureaucrats is important to the Penang government to take the lead in its affordable housing program. They definitely would like to produce affordable housing that are better, or at least compatible with affordable housing that are produced by the then federal government in other Malaysian states. This was where and when the idea of producing affordable housing units that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable creeped in. An informant (Personal communication, November 14, 2016) highlighted that sustainability is always an element in developing Penang, however, "more emphasis is placed on it by the current state government".

Pricing

Since 2008, Penang has witnessed a steady increase of about 10% per annum of property price. In 2014, with a 5.2 median multiple housing affordability, Penang house price was higher than the national median annual household income threshold (4.4 times) and it further worsened to 6.32 times in 2016 (Yeap 2017). Due to surging property prices, several measures to control the housing market have been implemented. In an in-depth interview, an elected official contended that the decision to intervene was needed. The intervention, as he argued, was to ensure Penangites could access affordable housing along with the housing motto of "1 Family, 1 House". Accordingly, these intervention measures have "seen a cooling down in the market" (Penang Housing, Town and Country Planning Office 2017; Personal communication, August 29, 2017). This housing democratization policy is echoed by three other informants, namely an elected official who was also a member in the state housing committee, an engineer, and a deputy manager in a state agency (Personal communications, November 21 and 30, 2016, and August 07, 2017).

Broadly, Penang develops five types of affordable units that cater for different income earners. Types A and B units, priced at RM42,000 and RM72,500, are respectively catered for those earning not more than RM2,500 and RM3,500 monthly. Types C1, C2 and C3 units are respectively capped at RM150,000, RM200,000 and RM300,000, are catered for Penangites who earn not more than

RM6,000, RM8,000 and RM10,000 monthly separately (Penang State Government 2016; Personal communications, November 30 and December 21, 2016). The variously priced affordable housings are reflecting the government's intention in creating balanced community with economically diversity in its affordable housing program.

Green Design and Community Living

In 2011, the Municipal Council of Seberang Perai of Penang (MPSP) has been tasked to turn Batu Kawan into an eco-town. *Hijau E-Komuniti* masterplan emphasizes the green living concept. The Green Building Index (GBI) is followed in designing *Hijau E-Komuniti* to materialize the concept. GBI is the national benchmark to encourage sustainability in a built environment and has six criteria in assessing residential properties in recognizing a green (property) design (Greenbuildingindex 2017). *Hijau E-Komuniti* lives to its name (literally "Hijau" means "green") by providing a green living environment. The project has at least 20% open space within its area (Figures 2 and 3). It surely is a project that all the study's respondents are proud of. A planner even exclaimed that the project is "fantastic" (Personal communication, November 14, 2016).

Figure 2. Illustration of *Hijau E-Komuniti*: Broader conceptualization of
affordability
Source: Penang Development Corporation (2016)

Figure 3. Illustration of *Hijau E-Komuniti*: Green lung
Source: Penang Development Corporation (2016)

Obviously, GBI is hardly a consideration of most affordable housing projects in Malaysia. However, GBI is one of the standards for developing *Hijau E-Komuniti*. An architect has expressed the challenges he faced in designing and developing *Hijau E-Komuniti* according to the GBI standards:

> We actually reserved about 40 acres out of 200 acres for open space and then green design concept for GBI as both back to end [back-end charges] because GBI will add cost to the construction …. We are also looking at the full infrastructure … [to see] how to integrate all the areas and the eco-city guidelines by MPSP. (Personal communication, November 30, 2016)

In addition to the above features, within its vicinity, *Hijau E-Komuniti* also has such facilities as industrial park, water sport, theme park, stadium, international golf course, higher learning institution, mangrove and bird sanctuary for eco-tourism (Penang Development Corporation 2016; Personal communication, November 30, 2016). *Hijau E-Komuniti* is therefore said to offer an ideal residential environment for today's individuals who prefer a healthy living lifestyle. A planner proudly claimed that what they are doing is a project that is "more than just placemaking" but also affordable homes that harmonize with the local context and surrounding environments (Personal communication, November 30, 2016).

Quality public space is important in encouraging community living of a residential area; hence, it is one of the considerations in developing *Hijau E-Komuniti*. The general manager of a Penang state development agency opined that people who live in affordable housing are more dependent on the community compared to rich people. Affordable housing dwellers will spend more time outside their houses. Hence, he emphasized on the importance of a community living concept in developing affordable housing schemes as quoted below:

> To low-income people, their houses are very small, so chances are they spend much more time outside …. So, when we started our new brand of affordable homes, we thought about creative communities rather than building houses. A house is a unit by itself. How much can you do with a certain cost to build a unit anything between 120[K] and 150[K]? It is just the hard cost and within an area of 600-700 square feet, nothing much you can give anyway …. That is why the concept of community becomes important … through design, they [architects/developers] should think about how they could socialize people in a strict kind of situation. They have to create places that make people meet and talk along the way with some benches, street furniture …. We want a community living concept [of affordable housing]. (Personal communication, October 28, 2016)

These efforts of bureaucrats to ensure incorporation of the community living concept in affordable housing design is clearly consistent with Gehl's (1987) notion to use design as a means to achieve the end. To Gehl, a design starts with public space for community life between buildings, the design becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. In short, life between buildings deserves careful consideration.

Social dimension is one of the important components of sustainable development. The same general manager contended, "The social dictates sustainability. We are not profit-oriented. If we don't make money, but developing affordable housing is socially good … it's good for us too. That is positive. It's worth the money" (Personal communication, October 28, 2016). With such value embedded in their

strategic thinking, the manager and his team together with elected officials who were in charge of the project have incorporated enough open spaces and sport facilities in *Hijau E- Komuniti* as an effort to materialize the community living concept through sports. A planner proudly claimed that *Hijau E-Komuniti* has "vast open space" where he does not think any profit-oriented private developer would provide (Personal communication, November 21, 2016). The L-shaped green lung, 3G Center, linear park, football field—which sounds a bit luxurious for an affordable housing project—and other facilities in *Hijau E-Komuniti* have been highlighted by respondents (Personal communications, October 28, November 30, and December 21, 2016).

Building prayer room (*surau*) is one of the conditions in residential development in Malaysia. However, *surau* is not built in *Hijau E-Komuniti*. A mosque will be built instead. One architect pointed out that they would like to strengthen the community living concept via religious site design.

> I think it's interesting [to highlight to you] …. We actually don't provide any *surau* here [in each phase] but we provide bigger *surau* [mosque] … we are calling the community to come here and meet each other: 'Hey, you should come here and meet your neighbors'… this is what we try to promote. (Personal communication, November 30, 2016)

In sum, either in deciding the affordability range in terms of pricing or the inclusion of broader affordability (sustainability) concepts into the project, obviously *Hijau E-Komuniti* is consistent with the theory of bureaucratic politics, where the emphasis is given to the central role of bureaucracy within the polity's power structure. As demonstrated in the case, the role of legitimate authority (public officials) in decision-making and implementing housing policy in the project basically reflects their authoritative allocation of values and resources in deciding who gets those affordable housing, how and when to get it, which is in line with Lasswell's (1936) notion of who gets what, how and when.

CONCLUSION

Like other governments, Penang state government is also "adopting and implementing policies and strategies aimed at making housing habitable, affordable and accessible" (UN Habitat 2011, p. ix). The aim of Penang's affordable housing program is to provide more affordable homes to Penangites. In addition to the pricing affordability, the two broader housing affordability (sustainability) concepts of community living, and green design are included in the state's largest affordable housing policy.

Economically, echoing the clarion call of scholars on having affordable housing that shelter inhabitants with diverse backgrounds, and also consistent with the Penang state government's housing democratization policy, *Hijau E-Komuniti* offers five types of affordable housing with different price points in its effort to produce a balanced and sustainable community in the affordable housing system.

Ecologically, the green design of *Hijau E-Komuniti* via the adoption of GBI, providing a green living environment by integrating the affordable housing project into an area where facilities (industrial parks, schools, stadiums, parks, tourist destinations etc.) are within its vicinity. This effort is tying individual micro activities (traveling to work, school, and leisure destinations) to the macro natural environment through reducing transportation cost hence offering a green and healthy residential environment.

On the social dimension, through good spatial organization, *Hijau E-Komuniti* has a design that ensures meaningful community living via providing sufficient open space (200 acres or 20% open space of the project area) which enables residents to meet, interact and mingle. The community and sport facilities design include L-shaped green lung, football field, a mosque, liner park, among others. This effort is in line with the recent trend of housing where its emphasis shifted from bricks and mortar (house) to people (resident) as efforts to build sustainable community in *Hijau E-Komuniti*.

Politically, consistent with bureaucratic politics theories, non-elected public-official respondents of the study are not value-neutral as clearly shown in the processes of planning and developing the *Hijau E-Komuniti* affordable housing. Most of them embraced broader housing affordability (sustainability) concepts which sync with their superiors (elected public officials). When bureaucrats shared their elected officials' ideologies (e.g., housing democratization; 1 Family 1 House); when they strongly believed in certain values (e.g., sustainable housing development), these ideologies and values would be reflected in their decision-making in policy/project which is within their jurisdiction as depicted in the *Hijau E-Komuniti* project.

Public administration has to predispose appropriate zoning and sufficient resources for infrastructure and basic services, and building for sustainability offers the best chance of maintaining resources and long-term value. *Hijau E-Komuniti* supports what has been argued by Chiu (2004, p. 70) where government "plays an important role in shaping green values, attitudes and norms in housing production and consumption." The study shows that the efforts, ideologies, and values of the state bureaucracy reflected in its appropriateness in resources zoning and planning have produced its largest sustainable-affordable habitat that enables residents to interact with nature and neighborhoods.

Some implications could be drawn. First, the inclusion of sustainable element in affordable housing program would incur additional cost is often used as an excuse by many economically disadvantaged governments for not providing decent housing for their less-advantaged citizens. However, *Hijau E-Komuniti* showcases that developing sustainable affordable housing is not something unworkable even in a developing economy. This suggests the fragility of the excuse in shielding the incapability of some political leaders. The study suggests that the inclusion of broader affordability (sustainability) concepts in affordable housing programs is a matter of political will, political compromises and bureaucratic cooperation in decision-making and allocating resources.

Second, using bureaucratic politics theories, this study presents a new perspective in examining (affordable) housing concept where thus far, this perspective has been overlooked by many scholars. The central political role of bureaucracy has also been ignored by many parties which considered the bureaucracy not more than a politically neutral human tool in implementing policy as instructed. This study demonstrates the way bureaucrats, together with their elected superiors, allocate values and ideologies in creating the type of community they intended to create via affordable housing program. Scrutinizing bureaucratic values and ideologies would enhance our understanding in relation to the process of placemaking (inclusion of broader housing affordability concepts) in affordable housing policy, where thus far it has only been examined from the perspectives of sustainable urban planning and economy.

Third, as argued by Creswell (2004 and 2009), place is a way of seeing, knowing and understanding something that happens in the real world and the emergence of place is connected to human values, identity, goals and power. This study exhibits how space was transformed into a place through the value, identity and meaning that was given to it by a group of people in power. Knowing (local) bureaucratic politics is a way to better understand the relationships between public administration and politics to enhance better decision-making process and policy outcome.

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NOTE

1. Critiques of these two approaches are not unheard. Critiques exist for both approaches. Allison's model is criticized for lacking a generally applicable theoretical framework, with arguments that bureaucratic position alone is insufficient for determining policy stance. It is also criticized for being primarily focused on the executive branch, neglecting other significant players in the broader power structure, such as organized interest groups, intergovernmental relationships, and the public at large (Bendor and Hammond 1992; Frederickson et al. 2016). On the other hand, the theory of representative bureaucracy, while acknowledging the legitimization of bureaucratic power through appropriate societal representation, faces criticism for being contextually circumscribed. Most studies concentrate on representation among street- and executive-level officials in redistributive organizations, leaving other public officials and agencies understudied in terms of their authority and power legitimation. Additionally, critiques challenge the validity of the representative bureaucracy theory by questioning the assumption that passive representation and active representation are inherently linked. Studies assessing this claim have yielded mixed and sometimes contradictory results (Kennedy 2014).

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