

**THE EXTENDED URBANIZATION OF CAMERON HIGHLANDS:
AN OPERATIONAL LANDSCAPE PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, through the lens of extended urbanization, mobilizing the concepts of “operational landscapes” and “planetary urbanization” (Lefebvre, 1989; Brenner, 2014). It investigates how this former colonial hill station has evolved into a complex agrotourism destination, shaped by urban demands and global economic forces. Using a qualitative multi method approach, including field observations, interviews, and historical analysis, the study examines the working hypothesis that Cameron Highlands functions as an operational landscape that serves urban needs while being reshaped by urban influences, and evaluates this hypothesis through the triangulation of multiple qualitative data sources. The study finds that rapid development and commercialization have significantly altered the region's physical and cultural landscape, undermining its traditional appeal as a rural retreat. Key transformations include the 'plasticization' of the landscape, intensification of urban development, and erosion of the area's distinctive climate and character. These changes reflect broader processes of extended urbanization, where urban logics and practices extend far beyond conventional city boundaries. The research contributes to the theoretical discourse on operational landscapes by applying this framework to hill stations and agrotourism destinations. It also offers practical insights for sustainable development in areas experiencing rapid urbanization, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that consider both economic growth and environmental preservation in evolving operational landscapes.

Keywords: *Operational Landscapes, Extended Urbanization, Cameron Highlands, Agrotourism, Hill Stations*

INTRODUCTION

Cameron Highlands, situated approximately 200 kilometers from both Kuala Lumpur and Penang, has historically served as a popular tourist destination, offering visitors an escape from urban life and tropical heat. According to Aiken (1994), it was one of only four hill stations established by the British in Malaysia, alongside Fraser's Hill, Penang Hill, and Maxwell's Hill. The region's development trajectory, rooted in its colonial past, has shaped its current land use patterns and economic structure. Initially established as a retreat for British colonial elites in the early 20th century, Cameron Highlands was designed to evoke the British countryside, complete with leisure facilities and social venues (Scrivenor, 1931; The Straits Times Annual, 1936). Key figures such

as William Cameron and John Archibald Russell played pivotal roles in the region's economic development, particularly in establishing tea plantations and other agricultural enterprises (Grey, 2019). Among Malaysia's hill stations, Cameron Highlands has been the most extensively documented, with monographs dating from the colonial era to the present day, as noted by Weebers (2017, 2016). This rich documentation, coupled with its continued significance in both tourism and agriculture during the post-independence period, makes Cameron Highlands a prime subject for research into the region's colonial legacy and post-colonial transformation.

The literature on hill stations spans three main areas: historical studies, environmental and urban planning, and tourism practices. Historical research, such as Voon and Khoo (1980) and Robert Aiken's work (1994) on Malaysian hill stations, as well as Barbara Crossette's (1999) trans-imperial analysis, explores the origins and development of these sites, often focusing on colonial heritage conservation. Environmental and urban planning studies, like those by Shigeru Shirasaka (1988), examine the impact of tourism and urban expansion on vulnerable mountain regions, highlighting issues such as water management, waste proliferation, and deforestation. Recent papers analyze new tourist practices and promotion tools, with some critically assessing the impact of ecotourism and community-based tourism schemes, as seen in the work of Ismail et al. (2021) on Cameron Highlands. Tsutomu Inagaki's research (2008, 2023) provides a comprehensive overview of hill stations across multiple Asian countries, identifying common features from their inception to their current role as domestic tourism destinations. The World Tourism Organization (2018) has also contributed to the discourse on sustainable mountain tourism. Collectively, these studies underscore the tension between preserving the original appeal of hill stations and managing the pressures of modern tourism and urban growth, raising important questions about the sustainability of their development models and implications for local environments and broader urbanization processes.

Similarly to other hill stations in Southeast Asia (like Dalat in Vietnam and Garut in Indonesia), Cameron Highlands continues to attract visitors with its perceived 'natural beauty', cooler climate, and agricultural products. However, recent years have witnessed significant landscape alterations due to accelerated development and extended urbanization. This study employs the concept of 'operational landscapes,' grounded in Henri Lefebvre's (1970, 1974, 1977, 1989) work on planetary urbanization, to analyze the transformation of Cameron Highlands. The concept of operational landscapes, originating from Lefebvre's work on planetary urbanization, challenges traditional views of urbanization by emphasizing the interconnectedness of cities, industries, and specialized functional spaces. Neil Brenner (2014) further developed this concept, identifying three key types of operational landscapes: logistics networks for global resource circulation, waste management and pollution areas, and landscapes for resource extraction and transformation. This framework provides an empirical tool for examining urbanization beyond conventional urban boundaries like the city or densely built areas, highlighting how these often-overlooked landscapes sustain global processes of urbanization, capitalism, and globalization. By focusing on areas traditionally seen as non-urban and distant from cities, this approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the true extent and impact of urbanization in the contemporary world. By applying this framework to Cameron Highlands, this research seeks to illuminate the complex interplay between tourism, agriculture, and urbanization in shaping the region's identity and physical landscape.

This paper is part of a broader research project on hill stations (mountainous holiday resorts) conducted by the ANR (National Research Agency)¹. This study reframes the transformation of hill stations like Cameron Highlands within the context of extended urbanization, moving beyond simplistic colonial nostalgia or environmental degradation narratives. Rather than viewing current changes as a break from the past, this study shows a continuity and intensification of tourism and agricultural activities. These changes are positioned as part of broader planetary urbanization processes, driven by the growing demands of expanding urban centers in the lowlands. By examining Cameron Highlands through this lens, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how seemingly peripheral areas are integrated into global urban systems, challenging traditional urban-rural dichotomies and expanding our comprehension of contemporary urbanization patterns.

The research is guided by several key questions that frame the investigation of Cameron Highlands as an operational landscape. First, how has the historical idea of Cameron Highlands as a hill station evolved in the context of extended urbanization. Second, how do current development patterns affect the region's environmental, cultural, and socio economic landscapes, including both benefits and challenges. Third, in what ways does the case of Cameron Highlands refine the understanding of operational landscapes within the broader debate on planetary urbanization. These research questions, rather than formal statistical hypotheses, structure the inquiry and guide the qualitative analysis.

To address these questions, the study employs a qualitative methodological approach, combining historical analysis, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. This multi-faceted approach allows for the capture of nuanced interactions between human activities and the geographical landscape of Cameron Highlands.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

To investigate the effects of extended urbanization on the transformation of Cameron Highlands, this study employed a qualitative multi method research design. This approach was selected to capture nuanced, contextual insights into the interplay between human activities, the geographical landscape, and the evolving urban fabric. Field studies, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, digital ethnography, and secondary data analysis were combined to assess the working hypothesis presented in the introduction and to identify convergent and divergent patterns across data sources.

This multifaceted methodology allowed for a rich exploration of Cameron Highlands through the theoretical lens of operational landscapes and planetary urbanization, providing a robust framework for understanding the complex processes shaping this unique geographical area. The concept of operational landscapes guided the selection of observation sites, ensuring comprehensive coverage of spaces that serve both local and distant urban needs. The theory of planetary urbanization also informed data collection and analysis by focusing on flows and connections between Cameron Highlands and other urban centers (like Penang and Kuala

¹ https://anr.fr/en/funded-projects-and-impact/funded-projects/project/funded/project/b2d9d3668f92a3b9fbbf7866072501ef-4c647d5029/?tx_anrprojects_funded%5Bcontroller%5D=Funded&cHash=51db6de884dfe58ff11dbd25e0c07e9a

Lumpur), paying attention to landscape transformation and considering multiple scales of urbanization processes. This approach helped situate Cameron Highlands within broader networks of urbanization and explore how urban influences manifest in the changing face of the region.

Field Studies and Participant Observation

Data collection involved two field trips conducted in Cameron Highlands between January and March 2023. During these trips, the researcher engaged in extensive participant observation, guided by established ethnographic methods (Spradley, 1980; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Observations were carried out in various settings, including tea plantations, fruit farms, animal farms, curated flower gardens, agronomic parks, museums, colonial heritage hotels, and local marketplaces.

The participant observation protocol was designed to ensure comprehensive and systematic data collection while maintaining flexibility to capture unexpected phenomena and recruitment of participants. Observations were scheduled at various times of day and on different days of the week, with special attention given to weekends and Chinese New Year holiday season to observe peak tourist periods.

Observations focused on tourist behaviors and interactions with the environment, local tourist encounters, uses of public space and tourist facilities, visible changes in the landscape and built environment, and agricultural activities and their intersections with tourism. Documentation included detailed field notes, photographs, and audio recordings. After each observation session, the researcher wrote reflexive journal entries that recorded personal reactions, initial interpretations, and emerging themes. These reflexive notes were later compared with interview material and secondary sources as part of the triangulation strategy used to validate the qualitative findings.

Semi-structured Interviews

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted using purposive sampling to target key stakeholders: local business owners and workers, government officials, and tourists. The selection criteria for each group of participants were carefully defined to ensure a relevant data collection:

- Business owners and employees: Participants were recruited from those operating inside tourist attractions, including tour guides, cashiers at popular sites, waiters, restaurant owners, and staff at hotels and resorts. This group was chosen to leverage their unique everyday experience and knowledge about the sites of Cameron Highlands, the historical trajectory of the region, and their insider insights about tourist behaviors and preferences.
- Government employees: Civil servants were selected from specific departments to leverage their expert knowledge. This included officials from the tourism department, urban planning department staff, and forest management department personnel. These participants were chosen for their in-depth understanding of tourism development strategies, urban growth and management plans, and environmental challenges.
- Tourists: A diverse range of tourists was included, considering factors such as first-time visitors and repeat tourists, domestic and international tourists, and various age groups and travel purposes (e.g., leisure, sport-oriented, agrotourism).

While interviews in Cameron Highlands took place during the field studies, additional interviews were conducted in Penang between April and July 2023. This extended data collection period allowed for the inclusion of Penangite retirees who had visited Cameron Highlands multiple times since their childhood, providing valuable long-term perspectives on the region's transformation.

The researcher's residence in Penang and insider perspective facilitated deeper engagement with the local context, enabling access to long-time visitors and enriching the study with their historical insights. This approach not only ensured a diverse range of perspectives on urbanization and cultural shifts but also captured the evolving perceptions of Cameron Highlands over several decades. Ethical considerations were also paramount throughout the research process (Schwandt, 2007). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, whose identities were protected with a pseudonym, to ensure confidentiality, and identifying information was coded and stored separately from the interview data. Explicit consent was obtained for audio recording of interviews, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Tailored interview guides were developed for each participant profile, covering key themes such as urban planning, tourism industry evolution, agricultural activities, colonial heritage, cultural imaginings, and landscape perceptions. The interview guides allowed flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining a focus on research objectives. These themes were directly informed by the research questions derived from the operational landscapes and planetary urbanization theories. The sample size of 30 participants was determined according to the principle of data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). After approximately 10 interviews in each category, responses began to recur, which indicated saturation. Interview material was then coded thematically and compared with observational and documentary evidence to assess whether the qualitative data supported or challenged the working hypothesis.

By including this diverse range of perspectives, from those directly involved in the tourism industry to government officials shaping policy and tourists experiencing the region, the study aimed to capture a comprehensive picture of the urbanization processes affecting Cameron Highlands. This multi-faceted approach to participant selection aligns with the complex, interconnected nature of extended urbanization as conceptualized in the theoretical framework.

Secondary Data Analysis and Digital Ethnography

To complement the in-situ observations and interviews, digital ethnography was conducted on social media platforms including Instagram and Facebook. This involved analyzing pages and posts dedicated to influencers' trips to Cameron Highlands, focusing on identifying popular locations, analyzing sought-after landscapes, and examining how Cameron Highlands is represented and perceived in digital spaces.

Secondary data were also integral to contextualizing the findings from primary data collection. Historical records, administrative documents, and geographic information system (GIS) maps were analyzed to trace the creation, development, and contemporary expansion of Cameron Highlands (see figure 1). Comparing these materials with interview and observational data made it possible to corroborate or qualify the working hypothesis and to identify inconsistencies that required further interpretation. This multi source comparison clarified the region's urban trajectory.

By integrating these diverse methods and theoretical considerations, the study aimed to contribute empirically grounded insights to ongoing discussions in urban studies and related fields, bridging the gap between abstract conceptualizations and on-the-ground realities of extended urbanization processes. Through this comprehensive methodological approach, the research sought to provide

a nuanced understanding of Cameron Highlands' transformation, situating it within broader discourses on operational landscapes and planetary urbanization.

CAMERON HIGHLANDS AS A NON-CONVENTIONAL TERRAIN OF EXTENDED URBANIZATION

This section examines Cameron Highlands as an operational landscape within the framework of planetary urbanization, focusing on how its agrotourism sector embodies extended urbanization processes. By analyzing the region's tea plantations and strawberry farms, the study evaluates the working hypothesis that these ostensibly rural spaces are deeply embedded in urban networks and shaped by urban demands. The analysis both clarifies specific urbanization patterns in Cameron Highlands and contributes to a broader understanding of operational landscapes in global urbanization processes.

The Urban Construction of Cameron Highlands

This section explores the urban construction and operational landscapes of Cameron Highlands, a region in Malaysia that has undergone significant transformation from its historical beginnings to its current status as a major agrotourism destination. The analysis examines how this seemingly rural area exemplifies the concept of planetary urbanization, challenging traditional urban-rural dichotomies. Through case studies of tea plantations and strawberry farms, the section illustrates how these landscapes are deeply embedded in urban-centric networks and shaped by global economic forces. This examination provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between urban and rural spaces in the contemporary global economy, contributing to our understanding of operational landscapes and the far-reaching impacts of urbanization processes.

The development of Cameron Highlands can be understood through two major phases: the colonial period (late 19th century to 1957) and the post-independence period (1957 to present).

British colonists initiated the region's urban trajectory, shaping its landscape, economy, and labor demography through strategic agricultural and developmental policies (Jain, 1993; Kamble, 2007). Key figures like William Cameron and John Archibald Russell played crucial roles in mapping the area and establishing tea plantations, transforming Cameron Highlands into both a thriving agricultural hub and an exclusive holiday resort for the British elite.

After 1957, the focus shifted towards domestic tourism and economic diversification. The Malaysian government invested in infrastructure development and promoted new high-value crops. This phase saw significant growth, transforming the region into a major tourist destination while highlighting challenges in balancing development with environmental sustainability (see figure 1).

Land cover change in Cameron Highlands from 1992 to 2021

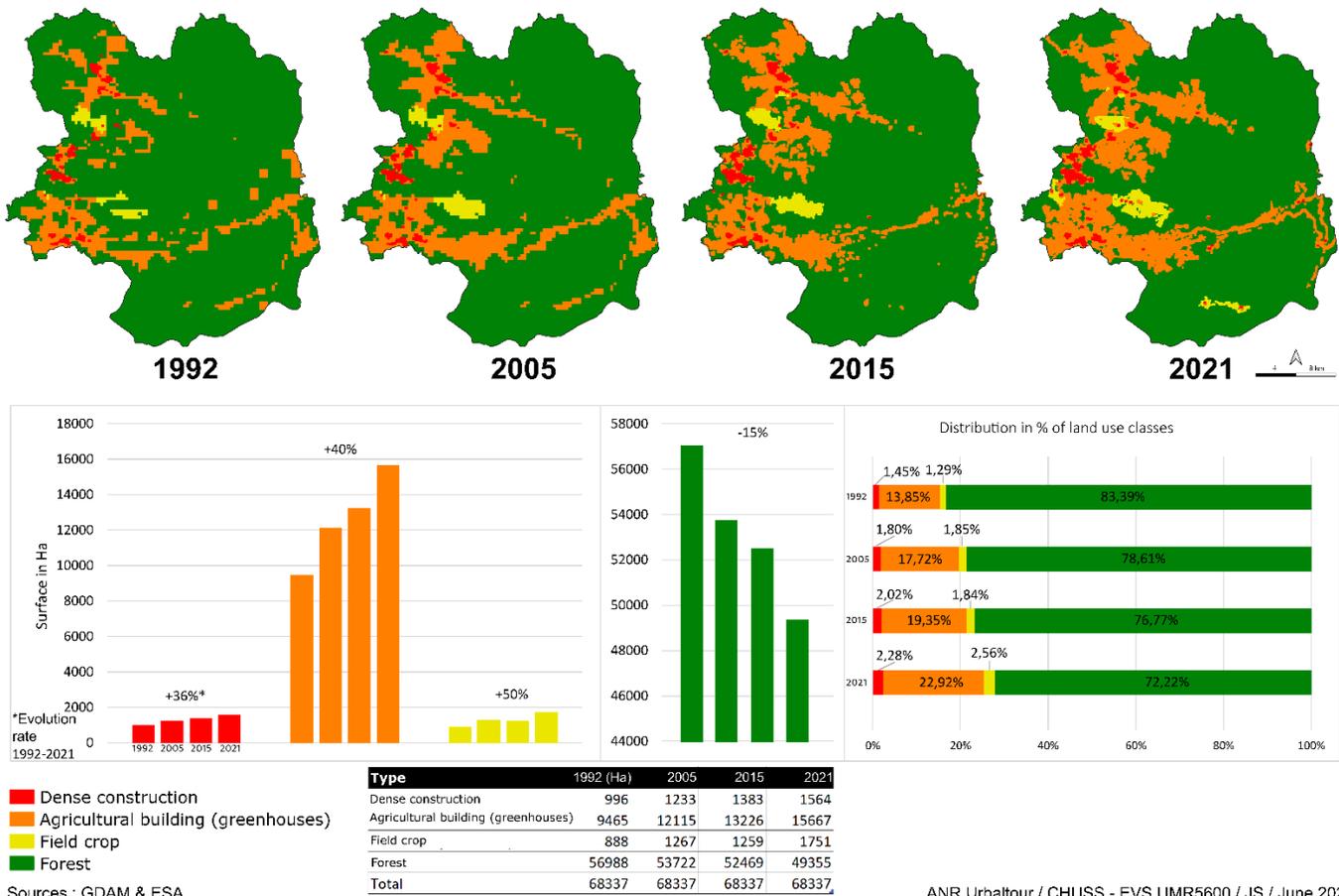


Figure 1. The increasing anthropization of Cameron Highlands

Source: Julien Sauvinet, ANR Urbaltour, 2023.

The 1990s marked the advent of agrotourism (Leong, 1992), spearheaded by the Cameron Highlands Farmers' Association (CHFA). Pioneering initiatives included the Brinchang Strawberry Farm (1993) and the Cameron Valley Tea Plantation (1995), offering immersive agricultural experiences. Today, Cameron Highlands boasts hundreds of agrotourism farms and businesses, offering a diverse range of activities that blend tourism with agricultural innovation. This evolution illustrates the dynamic transformation of Cameron Highlands from a colonial retreat to a modern agrotourism destination, shaped by both local and urban influences.

The Operational Landscape of Cameron Highlands

The tea plantations of Cameron Highlands

Tea plantations, covering over 4,000 hectares (about 5% of the land use) in Cameron Highlands, exemplify the concept of operational landscapes within the framework of planetary urbanization. While these expansive, rolling hills of tea bushes appear quintessentially rural (see figure 2), a closer examination reveals their deep entanglement with urban networks and global economic systems.



Figure 2. The rolling hills of Boh tea plantation, Cameron Highlands
Source: Farhat, 2023.

The urban influence on these plantations is multi-faceted and pervasive. Major tea companies, such as BOH Plantations, are headquartered in urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, centralizing decision-making and financial authority away from Cameron Highlands. This corporate control from urban areas significantly shapes the operations and development of these rural landscapes. Furthermore, the tea industry relies heavily on urban consumer markets (with a higher purchasing power), both for high-end tea products and agrotourism experiences, creating a direct link between urban demands and rural production. The plantation workforce, primarily comprising migrant workers from South Asia, reflects the enduring legacy of colonial labor structures and contemporary global migration patterns, highlighting the complex socio-economic connections that span urban and rural spaces (Jain, 1993; Kamble, 2007; Lowrie, 2023). Additionally, tea plantations have evolved beyond mere agricultural sites to become key attractions in Cameron Highlands' agrotourism sector, catering to urban visitors' desires for rural experiences and aesthetics. This transformation underscores how these landscapes are shaped by and serve urban needs, even as they maintain their rural appearance. These factors collectively demonstrate how tea plantations in Cameron Highlands are operational landscapes that represent a complex interplay between local agricultural practices, global economic forces, and urban-centric tourism demands. This analysis challenges traditional urban-rural dichotomies, illustrating how seemingly peripheral areas are integral to broader urbanization processes and deeply connected to urban networks and influences.

The Operational Landscape of Strawberry Farms: Urban Influence on Rural Agriculture

Strawberry farming in Cameron Highlands presents a compelling case study of how seemingly rural agricultural practices are deeply embedded in urban-centric networks and demands. These farms also exemplify operational landscapes that blur the traditional urban-rural divide in several

key ways. Many strawberry farms operate under franchise-like models, with significant involvement from multinational corporations such as the Chitose Group. This structure mirrors urban business models and introduces urban capital and technologies into rural agriculture, creating a direct link between urban financial centers and rural production spaces (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Rows of elevated strawberry hydroponics in Cameron Highlands
Source: Farhat, 2023

The farms have also undergone a significant transformation in response to urban-driven agrotourism. What were once purely agricultural enterprises have evolved into tourist attractions, catering to urban visitors' desire for rural experiences. This shift has led to the creation of "mini theme parks" centered around strawberry cultivation, complete with cafes, product stalls, and visitor-friendly picking areas (see figure 4).



Figure 4. The ‘Instagrammable’ entrance of a strawberry park
Source: Farhat, 2023

The adoption of innovative agricultural practices, such as hydroponic systems and raised beds in strawberry cultivation, reflects both a response to tourist preferences and an alignment with urban-centric ideas of efficient, high-tech agriculture (see figure 3). These adaptations demonstrate how urban influences shape even the most fundamental aspects of farming in this region. The marketing of Cameron Highlands' strawberries often relies on romanticized portrayals of rural life, crafted to appeal to urban consumers and tourists. This marketing strategy effectively bridges the gap between urban consumers and rural producers, reinforcing the interconnectedness of these spaces. However, the intensive farming practices, including heavy use of chemicals, highlight the tension between meeting urban market demands and maintaining environmental sustainability. This conflict reflects broader challenges in balancing economic development with ecological preservation in operational landscapes. The transformation of strawberry farms in Cameron Highlands thus illustrates how rural agricultural spaces are reshaped by urban influences, market demands, and global agricultural trends. These farms, while physically located in a rural setting, function as operational landscapes that are intricately connected to urban networks and serve urban-centric needs and desires, challenging traditional notions of the rural-urban divide.

The examination of Cameron Highlands through the lens of operational landscapes and planetary urbanization reveals the complex interplay between urban and rural spaces in the contemporary global economy. As demonstrated by the tea plantations and strawberry farms, areas traditionally perceived as rural are deeply embedded in urban-centric networks, shaped by urban capital, technologies, and demands. These case studies challenge conventional urban-rural dichotomies, illustrating how seemingly peripheral areas are integral to broader urbanization processes. The transformation of Cameron Highlands from a colonial hill station to a modern agrotourism destination underscores the dynamic nature of operational landscapes, constantly evolving in

response to changing urban influences and global economic trends. This analysis not only contributes to our understanding of Cameron Highlands' unique development trajectory but also provides insights into the wider implications of planetary urbanization. It highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to urban studies that recognizes the interconnectedness of urban and rural spaces and the far-reaching impacts of urbanization processes beyond traditional city boundaries. As such, the case of Cameron Highlands offers valuable lessons for understanding and managing the complexities of development in similar operational landscapes worldwide.

CAMERON HIGHLANDS' DWINDLING ALLURE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF OVERT URBANIZATION IN AGROTOURISM

The transformation of Cameron Highlands from a quaint hill station to an increasingly urbanized agrotourism destination exemplifies the concept of operational landscapes within the framework of planetary urbanization. This section examines how rapid development and commercialisation have altered the region's physical and cultural landscape, challenging its traditional appeal and raising questions about sustainable development in operational landscapes.

The Changing Face and the Plasticized Landscape of Cameron Highlands

As the built environment expands in Cameron Highlands, the region's identity as a rural escape is increasingly compromised. The proliferation of high-rise buildings, commercial centers, and urban infrastructure stands in stark contrast to the area's natural beauty, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment among visitors seeking an authentic rural experience. This transformation not only diminishes the region's charm but also raises concerns about environmental degradation and the sustainability of its tourism model. The urbanization of Cameron Highlands reflects broader processes of planetary urbanization, where urban logics and practices extend far beyond traditional city boundaries. As an operational landscape, Cameron Highlands serves urban needs for leisure and agricultural production, while simultaneously being shaped by urban-centric development patterns. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between rural spaces and urban influences in the context of global economic systems.

The idea of a 'plasticized' landscape in Cameron Highlands vividly illustrates how this operational landscape is shaped by and serves urban demands, often at the cost of environmental integrity. This transformation is evident in two key areas: urban centers and agricultural zones. In the bustling towns of Cameron Highlands, the increase in shops and restaurants catering to urban tourists has led to a marked rise in plastic waste. This proliferation of plastic detritus not only diminishes the region's aesthetic appeal but also poses a significant ecological threat. The long-term environmental implications of this plastic pollution, including soil and water contamination, underscore the tension between serving urban tourism demands and maintaining the natural allure that initially attracted visitors.

Beyond the urban centers, the verdant landscapes that have historically drawn nature enthusiasts are increasingly dominated by plastic-covered greenhouses and agricultural waste (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Strawberry greenhouses within the forest, near Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands
Source: Farhat, 2023.

This visual transformation of the landscape reflects the intensification of agriculture to meet urban market demands. The widespread use of plastic in farming practices, while increasing productivity, contributes to both visual pollution and ecological degradation.

The experience of Antonio, a tourist from Italy, encapsulates the disillusionment faced by many visitors: "When I came to Cameron Highlands, I thought I'd see pure nature, like in pictures. But everywhere I look, there's plastic from these greenhouses. It's like a wound on this lovely place. I came for clean air and beautiful views, but the plastic is just too much."

Antonio's sentiment highlights the growing disconnect between the marketed image of Cameron Highlands as a natural retreat and the reality of its increasingly 'plasticized' landscape. This disconnect is a direct consequence of the region's function as an operational landscape, where the demands of urban markets for agricultural products and tourism experiences reshape the physical environment.

The proliferation of plastic in both urban and agricultural areas of Cameron Highlands exemplifies how operational landscapes are transformed to serve urban needs, often at the expense of their original character and environmental integrity. This transformation raises critical questions about the sustainability of current development models in such landscapes and the long-term viability of agrotourism in regions undergoing rapid urbanization.

A Scarred Landscape: Urban Development in an Operational Landscape

The intensification of urban development in Cameron Highlands, particularly in the central towns of Tanah Rata and Brinchang, exemplifies how operational landscapes are reshaped to accommodate urban demands. This transformation is characterized by an increasing density of built environments, including hotels, resorts, and commercial structures, which have significantly altered the region's physical landscape (see figure 6).



Figure 6. Residential building in Tanah Rata, Cameron Highlands
Source: Farhat, 2023.

The spread of urban development in Cameron Highlands has had multifaceted socio-economic implications. The region has experienced growth in local commerce and employment opportunities, providing an economic boost. However, this rapid development has also led to infrastructure challenges, such as traffic congestion, straining the region's capacity and sparking political concerns (The Star, 2023). Areas once rich in vegetation are progressively cleared for construction, particularly for condominiums, resulting in a significant loss of green spaces. Furthermore, a significant proportion of new properties are converted into Airbnb accommodations, further integrating the region into global tourism networks. This shift in the real estate market has often priced locals out of property ownership opportunities, reflecting broader economic disparities. The influx of urban capital and the resulting displacement of local communities highlight the complex socio-economic dynamics at play in this evolving operational landscape.

This urban expansion in Cameron Highlands illustrates how operational landscapes are reshaped to serve urban needs for tourism and leisure, often at the expense of local ecosystems and communities. The transformation of the physical landscape reflects the extension of urban logics and practices into areas traditionally considered rural, a key aspect of planetary urbanization.

Shifting Identity: The Erosion of Cameron Highlands' Distinctive Appeal

The transformation of Cameron Highlands as an operational landscape is reflected in the changing perceptions of visitors, particularly those with long-term experiences of the region. This shift in identity underscores how the area has been reshaped to serve evolving urban demands, often at the cost of its original charm.

Older visitors note a palpable shift in climate, with the once-distinctive cool temperatures becoming less noticeable. This change, attributed to both global warming and local anthropogenic impacts, erodes one of the key features that set Cameron Highlands apart as a retreat from urban heat. Concurrently, the rapid infrastructural development has imparted a conspicuously urbanized feel to the region, shattering the sense of otherness that visitors traditionally sought. This urban sprawl reflects the region's adaptation to serve increasing urban tourism demands. Among participants, there is also a growing sentiment that Cameron Highlands is not "natural enough" compared to other hill stations. This perception highlights the tension between development to serve urban needs and the preservation of the natural environment that initially attracted visitors. The shift from small-scale, 'traditional rural' farming to large-scale, corporate agriculture focused on high-value crops further reflects the region's integration into global urban-centric food networks. This transformation continues to erode the rural character that once defined Cameron Highlands.

These shifts in identity demonstrate how Cameron Highlands, as an operational landscape, has been reshaped by urban influences and global economic trends. The erosion of its distinctive appeal raises questions about the sustainability of its current development model and its long-term viability as a tourism destination.

Cameron Highlands as an Evolving Operational Landscape

The analysis of Cameron Highlands through the lens of operational landscapes and planetary urbanization reveals the complex interplay between urban demands and rural spaces in the contemporary global economy. The empirical patterns identified across interviews, observations, and secondary sources consistently support the working hypothesis that Cameron Highlands has become an operational landscape shaped by urban demands. The region's transformation from a colonial hill station to a modern agrotourism destination underscores the dynamic nature of operational landscapes, constantly evolving in response to changing urban influences and global economic trends.

The 'plasticized' landscape illustrates how urban consumption patterns and agricultural demands reshape rural environments. Urban development in Cameron Highlands reflects the extension of urban logics and practices into traditionally rural areas. The shifting identity of the region demonstrates how operational landscapes are continually reshaped to serve evolving urban needs, often at the cost of their original character. These transformations challenge conventional urban-rural dichotomies, illustrating how seemingly peripheral areas are integral to broader urbanization processes. The case of Cameron Highlands offers valuable insights into the wider implications of planetary urbanization, highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach to urban studies that recognizes the interconnectedness of urban and rural spaces.

As Cameron Highlands continues to evolve, balancing economic development with environmental preservation and maintaining its unique appeal remains a significant challenge. This case study underscores the importance of sustainable development practices in operational landscapes to ensure their long-term viability and preserve the qualities that make them distinctive.

CONCLUSION: CAMERON HIGHLANDS AS AN EVOLVING OPERATIONAL LANDSCAPE

This study has examined the transformation of Cameron Highlands through the lens of operational landscapes and planetary urbanization, highlighting the complex interplay between urban demands and rural spaces in the contemporary global economy. Through qualitative triangulation of interviews, observations, digital ethnography, and secondary sources, the analysis has generated several key findings that challenge conventional urban rural dichotomies and contribute to the broader discourse on extended urbanization.

The ‘plasticized’ landscape of Cameron Highlands vividly illustrates how urban consumption patterns and agricultural demands reshape rural environments, exemplifying the environmental consequences of serving urban needs. The intensification of urban development, characterized by an increasing density of built environments, reflects the extension of urban logics into traditionally rural areas, leading to significant socio-economic changes. These transformations have eroded Cameron Highlands' distinctive appeal as a hill station retreat, raising questions about the sustainability of current development models in operational landscapes.

This study makes important theoretical contributions by expanding the application of the operational landscape framework to hill stations and agrotourism destinations, demonstrating its versatility in analyzing various forms of extended urbanization. It provides empirical evidence of how rural areas are deeply shaped by urban demands and integrated into urban networks, challenging traditional conceptualizations of urbanization. By tracing the historical development of Cameron Highlands, the research has highlighted the dynamic and evolving nature of operational landscapes over time, adding depth to the understanding of how these spaces are continually reshaped by changing urban influences and global economic trends.

The implications of these findings extend beyond academia, offering valuable insights for urban planning, environmental conservation, and sustainable tourism development. The case of Cameron Highlands underscores the importance of implementing sustainable development practices in operational landscapes to ensure their long-term viability while preserving their distinctive qualities. It calls for more integrated planning approaches that consider the broader network of relationships and influences shaping these landscapes.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations, including its focus on the agrotourism sector and the relatively short period of field studies. Future research could expand the scope to include other economic sectors, and provide comparative analyses with other similar hill stations. Promising directions for future research include investigating the social impacts of these transformations, conducting long-term environmental monitoring studies, and exploring the role of new technologies in reshaping operational landscapes.

In conclusion, the case of Cameron Highlands offers a compelling illustration of the complex processes of extended urbanization and the challenges of sustainable development in the face of global urban demands. As urban influences continue to reshape rural and peripheral areas worldwide, the insights gained from this study can inform more nuanced and sustainable approaches to managing these evolving landscapes, balancing economic growth, environmental conservation, and social well-being.

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