



### Analyzing Street Art to Present the Heritage of George Town, Malaysia

Seyedehelham Sadatisyedmahalleh<sup>1\*</sup>; Suraiyati Rahman<sup>2</sup>; Aldrin Abdullah<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

E-mail: [elham.sadatii@gmail.com](mailto:elham.sadatii@gmail.com)

---

#### **Abstract**

Street art comprises all kinds of art developed in public locations. This form of art has spread to all heritage streets in George Town, the capital of Penang Island, which is also a known UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, instead of its heritage, food, and interesting past life and structure, the rapid multiplication of street art in George Town has created a new and unusual art that attracts tourists. Street art has spread to small roads and heritage streets in the city. This art increases the awareness of spectators by introducing them to the rich history of these streets and inducing a lively concept in the inner city of George Town. Accordingly, the impact of iron rod sculptures and murals, which comprises approximately 90% of street art in George Town, were determined to explore and identify the effects of this street art on this world heritage site. The findings were obtained from 263 out of 306 questionnaires accomplished by tourists in George Town. The results confirm that tourists prefer murals over iron rod sculptures. Iron rod sculptures are designed to tell the history of the street, whereas murals are designed to create aesthetic value. The findings indicated that similar to iron rod sculptures, more control should be exercised on the subjects of murals.

**Keywords:** Iron Rod Sculptures, Murals, Street art, Georgetown

#### **Introduction**

Street art is a form of visual art created in public areas. This art gained popularity in the early 1980s and continues to be usable to this day for the following incarnations. Street art includes the placement of unassigned artwork in public places. People perceive street art differently; some see it as a new form of graffiti, whereas others perceive it as a new art movement and a professional engagement in unlawful activities (Sadatisyedmahalleh, Rahman, & Abdullah, 2015). The number of street art pieces in George Town has increased recently (Lee, Lim, & Nor'Aini, 2008). This historic city is one of the most complete city centers that have survived through the years. This city is characterized by a multi-cultural heritage because it was a British trade center (Abdullah & Mohamed, 2013). Indian, Chinese, and Malay people live together in this area (Cheah, 2013). Thus, these communities form a unique culture, urban design, and architecture.

George Town was declared a world as a World Heritage Site in 2008. Consequently, George Town has developed into a lively showcase of street art. This transformation began with the Marking of George Town project in 2009, which provided a platform to tell the social and street history of the city through drawings that overstate physical characteristics. At present, George Town is known for its structure, food, heritage, and multicultural and interesting ancient life. Nonetheless, the quick multiplication of street art created a modern and uncommon art in George Town that draws the attention of numerous visitors. In addition, this city has become popular because of its progressive street art (Ngiom, 2011; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015).

Street art is situated at the heritage site of George Town and has become an iconic furniture theme in the city. The George Town government has attempted to relate art and culture. One of the concepts for George Town is the formation of steel rod sculptures in every old street to clarify the role of the street in the history of the city (Penang Heritage, 2014; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015). Mural is another type of street art in George Town. Mural projects are exhibited in different spots in this old city. Some murals do not exhibit the local culture, but these murals have great artistic value and were painted by renowned specialists and artists (Ng, 2013; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015; Sen & Silverman, 2013).

In this study, we prepared questionnaires and conducted interviews with domestic and international tourists to understand the street art that attracts a substantial number of tourists in George Town. We examined whether tourists prefer to view iron rod sculptures and understand the history behind them that showcase the heritage of George Town or murals that only present aesthetic value and do not transfer history.

## ***Methodology***

The study was quantitative, and the survey involved domestic and international tourists who were asked to answer a questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents in April 2014. The questionnaires contained several questions that covered tourists' background information as well as their attitude and interest on murals and iron rod sculptures. The questionnaires were collected near the street arts in George Town, which were located in 11 zones. The survey involved 306 respondents from George Town, but only 263 of the forms were usable, representing an 86% response rate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six tourists in George Town in April 2014. Each interview lasted for 20–30 minutes.

## ***Results and Discussions***

### ***Profile of Respondents***

More than half of the respondents of the 263 usable questionnaires were between 25 and 44 years of age. Male accounted for 33% of the respondents, whereas 67% were females, and 81% were single. More than two-third of the respondents (78%) studied in a university. Moreover, 45% of the respondents were employees, 37% were students, 15% were employers, and 3% were retired and unemployed. About half of the tourists were visiting George Town for the first time, and most of them (63%) were traveling with friends. Additionally, 53.2% of respondents were Malaysian, and 46.8% of the respondents were from other countries, namely, Iran, USA, Singapore, Hong Kong, China, The United Kingdom, Switzerland, France, Poland, Thailand, Taiwan, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Djibouti, Denmark, Italy, Canada, Argentine, Sarawak, Australia, Russia, Vietnam, Belgium, Finland, Brazilian, Sweden, Astonish, and The Philippines. The mean household income of respondents was \$37,940. The household income ranged from \$0 to \$500,000.

### ***Iron Rod Sculptures and Murals***

Six types of street art can be found in George Town, namely, murals, iron rod sculptures, mosaic tailings, LED art, stencil art, and posters. Tourists were asked of their level of interest in these six street arts. A 5-point Likert scale was implemented, ranging from 1= uninterested at all to 5=very interested. The results show that tourists were most interested in murals with a mean of 4.7, followed by iron rod sculptures (mean of 3.8) and stencil art (mean of 3.7). The levels of interest on mosaic tilings, LED art, and posters had means of 3.6, 3.4, and 3.4, respectively. Therefore, murals possessed the strongest factors of attraction among street arts. This study focused on murals and iron rod sculptures because of the high quantities of these street arts in George Town. The other types of street art are rarely observed in this heritage site. Moreover, murals and iron rod sculptures were the two most interesting street arts in this town according to the survey. Tourists pay considerable attention to the 52 iron rod designs and 22 murals in George Town.

Boards are found at the entrance of every street in George Town. These boards explain the heritage of that street. However, these boards do not invite the interests of the tourists, although steel rod sculptures (Figure 1) can be observed slightly farther from these boards. These steel rod sculptures introduce the heritage using funny sentences and characters that can attract numerous tourists, therefore many of the tourists are interested in viewing the iron rods. Even children who are unaware of the street history enjoy looking at the funny and interesting steel rod street arts in George Town. The steel rods can be a means to introduce the culture and history of this heritage city. One of the German respondents who travelled to George Town with their three children said, *“Our children have enjoyed the iron rod sculptures and they hardly try to understand and read the story from each of them. As they tried, we have learned many things about the history of George Town more than from the brochure of the city”*. A British respondent added that, *“Every time I cross behind these iron rod sculptures, I stop and read their story. I think they are so funny, and they present creative idea.”*



Fig. 1 Iron rods sculptures

Similar to iron rod sculptures, murals are distributed in George Town even along narrow roads and on big walls of this city. These murals only have stylish value, but they do not reflect the history and culture

of George Town. They transform a sense of lively, unusual, and witty behavior to this old legacy region (Bak & Said, 2013). By contrast, the iron rods explain the history of every street in this UNESCO World Heritage Site such that the visitors can have increased awareness of the city's heritage.

The use of steel rods is an extremely practical method. Compared with murals that have continuously decreasing quality, the use of steel for street art in the tropical climate of George Town is a good choice to boost the lifetime of the artwork (Sadati seyedmahalleh et al., 2015). A few of these murals are not very recognizable and have been abolished because they do not play any role for tourists and there are policies for taking care of them. People touch these murals every day and stop to take pictures with them. Moreover, George Town receives a high amount of rainfall every year. Thus, the artworks are unprotected against rain and strong wind. The artwork evidently cannot survive through time. Similar to the picture in Figure 2, a visitor cannot understand the drawing and merely walks by without giving them any attention.



Fig. 2 Example of destroyed murals

Table 1 lists the 10 most attractive street arts in the George Town according to the survey. The results show that the “Kids on Bicycle” mural was the most attractive among the 74 street arts in George Town. A total of 26.57% of the 263 respondents considered this artwork. The “Brother and Sister on a Swing” obtained 23.75%. However, the percentage of the third most attractive mural, Old Motorcycle mural, was approximately less than half of the first and second most attractive street arts at only 10.87%. Iron rod sculptures are not included in Table 1, which indicates that mural street art can attract more tourists than the iron rod sculptures.

**Table 1** Ten most attractive street arts in George Town ( $N=263$ )

| Variables                     | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Kids on Bicycle               | 198       | 26         |
| Brother and Sister on a Swing | 177       | 24         |
| Old Motorcycle                | 81        | 11         |
| Boy on Chair                  | 63        | 8          |
| Children Playing Basketball   | 41        | 5          |
| Bruce Lee                     | 31        | 4          |
| Kungfu Girl                   | 25        | 3          |
| Skippy                        | 20        | 3          |
| Trishaw Man                   | 34        | 5          |
| Magic                         | 26        | 3          |

The results show that both iron rod sculpture and murals can attract tourists to walk in this heritage site. Figure 3 shows that street art can fairly keep the highest proportion of tourists to walk in this site (56%). Street art received a significantly higher mean score among all group of tourists ( $M=4.2$ ). No disinterested answer was given for this question, which shows that street arts can attract tourists to explore more the heritage site and be closer to the people.

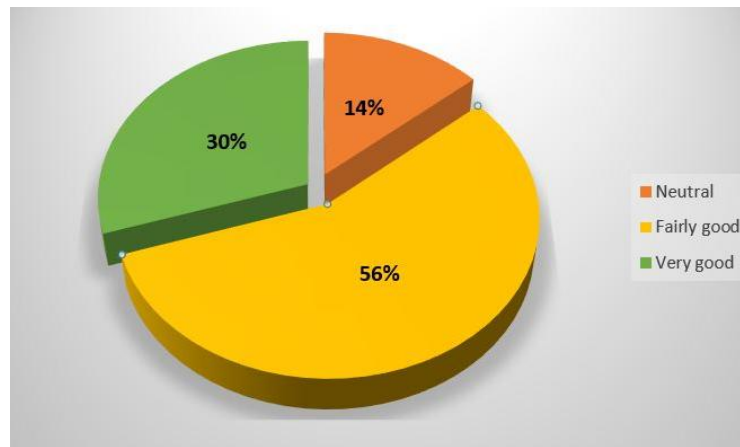


Fig. 3 Street arts can attract walking tourists in George Town

Tourists are also interested in knowing the history of George Town. Approximately half of the respondents were interested to understand the story behind the street art. A low percentage (0.8%) of the respondents was not interested in knowing the story of the street art. Figure 4 illustrates a pie chart of the levels of interest of tourists in understanding the story behind the street art. However, only the iron rod street arts of the George Town represent the history and culture of the city, whereas most of the attention

of tourists is on the mural street art. Mural street arts in George Town depict domestic subjects, but these subjects are very superficial and do not reflect a deep understanding of the rich culture of George Town. According to one respondent, “*I have visited all of George Town and have taken pictures from all murals with high artistic value. However, I did not understand anything about history and culture of George Town from these murals.*” Another respondent claimed, “*The murals of the George Town are very interesting and attractive. I like having these kinds of street art in our hometown as a way to transfer our culture to the visitors. However, the murals in George Town do not reflect anything about the history and culture of this UNESCO World Heritage site.*”

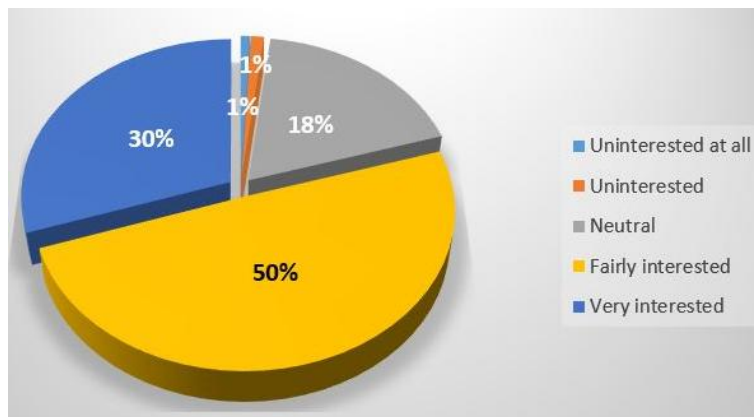


Fig. 4 Understanding the story of street art

### Conclusion

Iron rod sculptures adorn the heritage site of George Town, which present the culture and history of this city. By contrast, murals only adorn the city and present aesthetic and artistic values. Nevertheless, most of the tourists of George Town are interested in murals rather than iron rod sculptures. Thus, the Penang Tourism Board may not totally achieve its purpose of introducing the culture and history of Penang using murals. However, similar to iron rod sculptures, this issue can be solved by paying more attention to and controlling the subjects of murals.

### References

- Abdullah, A., & Mohamed, B. (2013). *The Heritage Tourism of George Town, Penang: Setting the Right Tourism Culture*. Global Cases on Hospitality Industry.
- Bak, Y. L., & Said, I. (2013). *A Framework for Assessing Public Art Towards Social Engagement: A Review*. Department of Landscape Architecture, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 4, 1–2.
- Cheah, J. (2013). *Penang 500 Early Postcards* (Didier Mil).
- Lee, L., Lim, Y., & Nor’Aini, Y. (2008). *Strategies for Urban Conservation: A Case Example of George Town, Penang*. *Habitat International*, 32(3), 293–304.

- Ng, V. (2013). Toward A Holistic Understanding of Sense of Place: A Phenomenological Reading of Chew Jetty, Penang, 9, 2–5.
- Ngiom, L. T. (2011). Penang Transitions—Marking George Town and Rifle Range Renewal Competitions. Penang Heritage, C. (2014). Penang Street Art. George Town, Penang.
- Sadatiseyedmahalleh, S., Rahman, S., & Abdullah, A. (2015). Critical Review on the Role of Street Art of George Town, Pulau Pinang. *Advances in Environmental Biology*, 9(4), 181–184.
- Sen, A., & Silverman, L. (2013). *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City* (pp. 148–172). Indiana University Press.