

PUBLIC MURAL ART
INSTALLATIONS IN AN
URBAN CULTURAL DISTRICT:
PLACE IDENTITY
UNDER SCRUTINY

MOHAMMAD YAZAH MAT RASCHID, OSMAN TAHIR
AND ELHAM KARIMIAN

Abstract

Public Mural Art Installation (PMAI) affects tourist perceptions and decision-making on a destination's features and the manner they enhance a place identity. Despite the intention, many PMAI seems to have a lack of purpose in conveying its message on the place's identity to tourists. The construction of the PMAI appeared to be haphazardly implemented and does not integrate well with the open public space to provide appropriate meaning to the place. This paper investigates how tourists' conceive the manner PMAI in Georgetown Cultural District enhances the identity of the place. A non-participant observation on the tourists behaviors during their engagement with the PMAI and descriptive analysis were conducted in the data collection process. The result demonstrates that both the local and international tourists were attracted to the PMAI and support by the local government through maintenance and events including more accessible and integrated approach in the planning and design of urban open spaces are essentially needed to further sustain the attraction. This study contributes to the creation of more effective construction guidelines concerning the PMAI installation in urban setting.

Keywords: Public Mural Art Installation, Place identity, urban public space, Tourists' Behavior and Tourists destination image

Background

Public Mural Art Installation (PMAI) is a relatively new approach in contemporary art in Malaysia. Public art installation may include any art that is exhibited in the public which can be either temporary or permanent (Bestor, 2003). Bestor further asserted that PMAI may be constituted with different types of natural materials which have good qualities to showcase a good and stable media such as video, sound performances and the internet. Many installations are specially designed for the particular space, in which it has been created for such activities. Exhibition spaces such as museums, galleries, public and private spaces are typical examples where art installation has been elaborated (Kabakov, 1995). In urban context, with urban modification and transfiguration ideas which begin in the 1970's, PMAI are vastly considered as models for improving and enhancing the quality of urban public spaces (Ahsen & Bayram, 2007). The concept of PMAI and place identity is closely connected to tourism; how it affects tourist perceptions and decision-making on a destination's features and enhances the identity of the place supports the tourism destination image. This paper deliberates this concept to understand how the PMAI developed into a catalyst in enhancing the place identity of an urban cultural district amongst the international tourists.

PMAI and Tourism

The PMAI is closely connected to tourism industry. One of its key challenges is to enhance a particular tourism destination image so that tourists will not only understand the place but also keep coming back to the place as a result of escalated sense of attachment. Arian (1989) regarded art experiences as tools to develop good citizenship and enhance the quality of life, all citizens have the right to explore art experiences depending on which selection they want to emulate; the provision to foster the commitment of the public and the art together always bring a connectivity between education and health allowing people of all backgrounds and classes to generate good art experiences. In this case, the PMAI images affect the tourist behavior, from their destination features and decision-making aspects and enhance the identity of the place. People have deep feelings about a place or strongly connected with a community when they are in contact with the environment either with people or open spaces (Ahsen and Bayram, 2007). Both clarified that on one hand, public spaces gives the channel for interaction of various groups of different socio-economic features having unique advantages as vicinity that meet the various social and physical needs of people. On the other hand, ram shackled, collapsed and characterless building blocks have a negative effect on the users of public spaces and reduce their quality and durability.

In terms of experience, a place should be able to generate a wider range of direct plans, goals, ideas and opportunities to the visitors. Every place has a story that gives the public a significant figure of what the place is all about and one of the great factor is how to construct a landscape that gives a explanation of the place (Landi, 2012). Cities have long used art to adorn and commemorate and if the quality of place is a dynamic institute, it will enable the area to generate talent (Florida, 2005). In this perspective, the exhibition of public art is not a stagnant or non-productive strategy but rather a connected fundamental component of well-organized cultural planning. Public art relates to city life in many dimensions that can give a memorable meaning, definition, social empowerment and the capacity for human (Landi, 2012). PMAI is, therefore object oriented, focusing specifically on the attribute based on the success and failure in connecting successful construction of places.

Without a doubt, the linkages of PMAI and place making can be traced from tourism perspective. Tourism is the commercial organization and operation of vacations, visits to places of interest. Tourism is used as the mechanism for regional developments and it has been evaluated that destination image has a great influence on how tourist react and behave (Ritchie et al., 2005). Tourists determine themselves on where to travel based on the information and destination image of where they are going. For the tourist to have

a remarkable journey, the destination image must be attractive and unique so as to give the tourist an urge to visit again. As such, destination images are being portrayed by the destination marketers in which they make sure that the destination is being constructed in a very outstanding way that will give a good impact to the tourist and the marketers gain more knowledge based on their past experiences to create a unique and attractive destination image (Pearce 2005).

PMAI and Place Identity

Chen and Tsai (2006) destination image of a place is based on the quality, value and overall satisfaction in which the tourist derives. Destination image can influence the tourists' future intentions to visit and their ability to recommend the destination to others based on their experiences. Tourism managers identifies destination image has the most influential factor in the destination market. Although economic benefits are often assumed to largely improving the quality of life of visitors (Liu et al., 1987), tourism is elaborated as a crucial and important economic base, which makes provision that will help to enhance and upgrade the quality of life. Tourists who want to travel needs to have a good knowledge about their destinations so as to be able to acquire necessary information that will help them during their journey (Pearce, 2005). Tourists generate different information outlet to improve and develop their mental destination graphics and im-

age thus, the destination image will only be generated in the tourist mind when the place is visited (Chi and Qu, 2008).

To construct a quality and professional environments on different segments of urban areas, holistic planning and design approach should be facilitated. The approach ranges from the urban scale to the street scale, that include harmonized quality reformation studies of urban residential environment, outstanding developments, gentrification of declining urban patterns, creativity of waterfront areas and improvement of public space quality (Gülersoy et al., 2003). Since the 1980s, public art has been a major and essential solution to solve series of urban issues and since then it has proved itself as a formidable force that can foster success in an urban development (Mitrache, 2012). The discontentment of users in their environment is one of the problems that residential areas go through, such environment cannot be perceived as a part of a whole and they have to reorganize their structures for the users' satisfaction.

The usage of public spaces creates social interactions that bring connection to the environment and creating a social cohesion that will stimulate tourist to feel at home (Blokland, 2003) and can also allow tourist to be connected to certain places because of the unique structures and also it will give them a bigger picture about the local area. Tourists will also face valuable

opportunities that will give them a greater satisfaction. However, urban open spaces provide an avenue where experiences are shared and spread to give the tourists a good orientation about their environment (Peters et al., 2010). Thus, the role of PMAI in fostering the identity of destination image is highlighted for this study.

It is acknowledged that PMAI contributes to the construction and transformation process that gives a proper direction to the public on the quality and durability of public space (Ahsen & Bayram, 2007). Both contended that it further creates a place that will make the users feel safe and secured with the patterns and designs in their environment and will encourage visitors to visit whenever they travel. The study investigates the existing PMAI construction, design characteristic and to understand the main stakeholders views on the manner in which the place identity can be achieved in the Penang Georgetown area.

Georgetown, Penang

In 2008, George Town was declared as Malaysia's newest UNESCO World Heritage Sites (UNESCO, 2012). Since 2012, a Lithuanian painter, Ernest Zacharevic's murals have started a trend for the creation of wall paintings, setting up this genre for the local art scene, and creating a niche for George Town's mural tourism. Visitors, local and abroad through the heritage site to take photographs with the murals during weekends or holidays. This has helped increase George Town's visibility as a World Heritage Site, allowing visitors to personally experience the city's lifestyle and learn about its Outstanding Universal Values (OUV's). George Town represents exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns in East and South-east Asia, forged from the mercantile and civilization exchanges of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European cultures

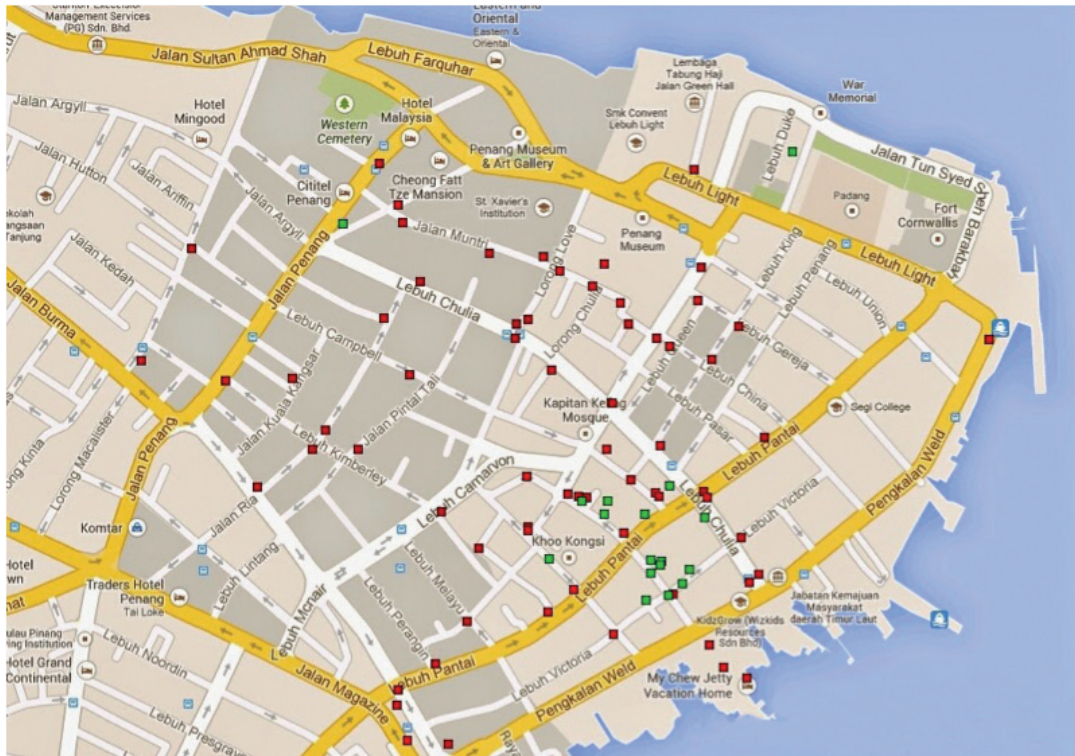


Figure 1: Locations of PMAI's in George Town Penang (Source: Google Map, 2015)

Several murals were produced and integrated with art installations features (Figure 2 and 3) whereas others are just normal murals painted onto existing traditional shop houses' walls (photo 3 and 4).

In Figure 2, the mural of two children is depicted in combination with a real life replica of 1970's bicycle

era. The idea is similarly utilized in the second mural (Figure 3) where a little boy is portrayed playing with a little dinosaur whilst the other watching on a motorbike. Here, the story of evanescent urban youths having fun along the street and their dreams are articulated in the mural form.



Figure 2: Mural 1; Children On A Bicycle, in Armenian Street (Source: Elham Karimian, 2015)



*Figure 3: Mural 2; A Little Boy With A Pet Dinosaur' and Mural 3; Boy On A Bike, in Ah Quee Street
(Source: Elham Karimian, 2015)*



*Figure 4: Mural 4; Reaching Up, in Cannon Street
(Source: Elham Karimian, 2015)*

The mural illustrations of a little children curiosity on what is happening around the neighborhood (Figure 4), a little girl dressed in a traditional blue Chinese clothing jumping on the street (Figure 5) and the typi-

cal street cats with observant eyes (Figure 6) can be considered as the artist attempt in celebrating the local lifestyles and surroundings.



Figure 5: Mural 5; MA, A Little Girl In Blue, in Muntri Street (Source: Elham Karimian, 2015)



Figure 6: Mural 6; Giant Cat, in Armenian Street (Source: Elham Karimian, 2015)

Methodology

A non-participant observation research method was employed in the data collection process. Observation of tourists' behaviour is a unique way to collect qualitative data on topics such as tourist reactions and emotions. It can consist of observations of facial expressions, certain types of behaviour, or physical and verbal actions (Godfrey and Clarke, 2000). Observation is often performed during focus groups, interviews, and in other settings because non-verbal cues and body language can provide insight into various issues beyond what is being discussed (Ritchie et al. 2005). The principal means of data collection for this study is the observation of tourists' attitudes in open public spaces which were recorded via handwritten notes on an observation schedule. The author noted down exactly what was being acted, including any gestures including as much of the dialogue and the specific time activities were undertaken and recorded his own thoughts of the tourists activity.

Meanwhile, other data sources and methods were used to substantiate these notes to add context. Video recording of the tourists' behaviour were used as a backup data. The finish materials, sizes and physical conditions of the PMAI were also recorded. Apart from the PMAI, the open spaces physical environment which includes the accessibility factors and the actual conditions of buildings which the PMAI were

attached to was also taken into considerations as tangible factors that determine the level of the tourists' perceptions on the PMAI. In summary, the author attempted not only to capture the tourists' behaviours on the PMAI installations but also to understand the extent of local and government support and the planning of urban open spaces roles in promoting the place identity. This is scrutinized from two important perspectives; observation on the current PMAI planning characteristics and local government supports; and level of tourists interactions with the PMAI and capturing the main interesting points of the PMAI from tourists' point of views.

Discussion

The observations were completed in two sections in December 2014 and April 2015. The tourists sampling is based the following criteria: it includes all races of tourists both local and international; include tourists in different ages; selection of the most popular mural arts installation (using the Penang Heritage Office (PHO) data and self-observation), and visit the setting under study at different times of the day to see how the PMAI was engaged at different setting. This study utilized random sampling selection technique to avoid fake tourists who tried not to act genuinely using observation schedules sheet.

Table 1 Most popular mural art installations

No	Name	Painter		Location
1	Little Children on a Bicycle	Ernest Zacharevic	June 2012	Armenian Street
2	Old motorcycle	Ernest Zacharevic	August 2012	Ah Quee Street
3	Boy on chair (Reaching Up)	Ernest Zacharevic		Cannon Street
4	Little Girl in Blue	Ernest Zacharevic		Muntri Street
5	The old man	Ernest Zacharevi	June 2012	Armenian Street Art Cafe
6	Broken Heart	Ernest Zacharevic		Muntri Street
7	The Awaiting Trishaw Paddler	Desmond Yeo		Penang Road,
8	Children in a Boat	Ernest Zacharevic		Chew Jetty
9	Little Boy with Pet Dinosaur	Ernest Zacharevic	August 2012	Ah Quee Street

PMAI in George Town Penang

Global Tourism Department of George Town, Penang recorded that there are more than 100 public mural arts all over the area but only 48 of them are allowed to be installed and protected by Georgetown World Heritage Incorporated (GWHI) (PGT, 2015). The remaining are designed and installed without prior any permission from GWHI as they do not adhere to the instructions and rules of heritage universal values such as using waterproofs paint color. Meanwhile, Penang Global Tourism (PGT), under the Penang state purview, distributes brochures which include some mural arts pictures and location map of popular PMAI's in the site to tourists for easy locations. Most of the popular mural arts installation is painted and constructed by Ernest Zacharevic during the Penang George Town festival 2012. Table 1 listed PGT's most popular mural art installation and their location.

Location of PMAI in a good and visible location will assist tourists to easily discover them. In the observation, there are numbers of murals that are difficult to be located. They were observed to have not been specifically designated for the tourists and can only be readily accessible by the local neighborhood. Using PGT data and observation by the author, most of the popular PMAI are located between Jalan Penang and Lebu Pantaj, located in the center of George Town and close to the hotels and restaurants. The observation by the researcher also demonstrates that the popular PMAI are located in the streets which

have many amenities or facilities such as shops, hotels, restaurants, and café. The Armenian street is one of the most popular locations of murals, which has all the facilities preferred by tourist. The existence of the street walk café, with appropriate provision of street furniture and night lighting assured the tourist a comfortable environment when engaging with the murals. However, there are many public open spaces which are still bare and without proper landscape and street furniture that can entice the tourists to spend their time longer in the area. Provision of street benches with proper roof covering to protect the tourist from the sun is still lacking.

The local government is found to be fully supportive of this program through its maintenance and promotion programs. GWHI's maintenance program helps to protect the art and preserve it for the public's enjoyment for years to come. A senior officer of GWHI points out that the PMAI's paints must be of commercial grade, exterior quality, acrylic paint with a minimum 10 years warranty on finishes; all finishing, pre-treatment and coating works should be specified and applied in a manner not to void manufacturer's warranty. Meanwhile such events conducted by PGT such as "Armenian Streets got talent" and "Georgetown Night Trail" were aimed at promoting the PMAI to local and international tourists and simultaneously enhances the place identity

Monitoring of Tourists' Behaviors

The observation started in the early morning hours from 7.00 am and finished by 8:30 pm in the evening. Tourists were seen meandering at the mural areas at 8:00 am. Most preferred to bike or walk for the murals visit. There are several bike rental shops that are conveniently located to provide the services. Penang roads, however, do not have designated bike lanes, and fearing for their safety, many tourists decided renting the trishaws instead. The trishaw owners were observed to have a lot of conversation with the tourists particularly on the subject of murals. In this case, they can be regarded as the best tour guide in explaining the murals motives.

The hot weather is a big issue to tourists. They brought sunglasses and umbrella along with them for protection from the sun. Tourists are also observed to wear simple casual outfits such as singlet, T-shirt, short pants, slippers and sandals to feel comfortable during their visit. Most of the tourists were seen carrying map of George Town as guide to the murals. They walk slowly but attentively while enjoying the murals. Most tourists took photos of the mural indicating their interests in them. They were talking and interacting with each other, possibly discussing the murals during the group photo shoots. Few were observed to imitate the murals profile. Several international tourists are used the locals as companions when they are visiting the murals.

Some tourists greet the locals and communicate with them to find out more about the murals. In the urban context, the mural makes better urban spaces, positive and livable spaces for social interactions amongst tourists. The citizens' sense of ownership or belonging to their environment through the murals can be seen as the locals explain the murals. This is believed to improve the perception of safety in the area. Once the murals are on their walls, they will take care of the work and the surrounding environment. Such social watch and people's improved awareness of the surroundings can improve the sense of safety in the neighborhood.

Conclusion

The non-participant observation concludes that the PMAI has successfully enticed both the local and international tourists to observe and learn about the Georgetown's identity. The PMAI can be considered as generally a mild provocative graffiti art form. They are neither gallery-selected piece nor municipal-funded art projects. They are basically the work of an individual who feels the need to make public statements. They are observed to be visible enough to a broad sector of the public and tourists with their provocative nature, making them a very powerful medium.

The observation demonstrates that the audience seems to be the tourists, local citizens as well as the authorities. Based on the conversations amongst the tourists, there is a call for renewed engagement and energy from the locals, and simultaneously a demand for a more accessible, integrated, available, and people-owned nature in the City. The nature-based graffiti in Georgetown really takes both nature and art out of the realm of the middle-class. The different voices need to participate to make them more visible. The observation points the way to a more philanthropic support for those artists who work in this space. Funding from global exchange programmes, dialogues between artists and ecologists, and nature-based graffiti art competitions, could all boost the scope and capacity of this community of artists.

Meanwhile, the local government's participation is needed through sponsoring cultural, carnivals and sports events to continuously promote the PMAI. They can assist in providing a suitable detailed textual description for any PMAI and their performance and be reviewed from time to time. The question is how to sustain and grow this informative art form that would foster these elements of civic engagement, especially among the youth? A natural inclination to social ills among the youths could be put to good effect

with ongoing exposure to nature, to develop a sense of custodianship which would in turn inform creative and artistic outputs.

Finally, the quality of urban space where the PMAI is located is also being analysed. They should be made to be more accessible and visible to tourist. The provision of appropriate street furniture such as street lights, benches or resting canopies can help tourist to be comfortable and this will enable them to visit the area again. The comfort and safety of tourists must be facilitated to inspire and give them a good orientation about the area and public art. The PMAIs as a powerful medium proved to be visible and provocative enough to a broad sector of the public and tourists even with specific open space design limitation; a criterion differed from a gallery perspective in which different environment can be simulated to adapt to the visitors' needs.

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