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Public Art: The Enrichment of Genius Loci

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ABSTRACT

Cultural, heritage and religious of a nation becomes significant component towards portraying the genius loci. Presently, public art become a trend to emboss the local distinctiveness through implementation of two-dimensional and three-dimensional art in the city. Despite of the robust city's development, local authorities with collaboration of various parties had done many public art projects that expose the city's identity whilst becoming the tourist's attraction. Thus, this paper reviews several public art projects in Malaysia, as reference studies; identify its contribution to the genius loci betterment and determine the prominent element of the city that being transformed into public art. Hence, it is hoped to improve the quality of public art implementation in the future that commendably reflecting the city's identity towards improving the place making and becoming the community's pride.

Key Words: Public art, Genius Loci, Place Making, City's Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

Every city has its own history and heritage to be commemorated and celebrated. One of the mediums to honour those priceless events or values is through the implementation of public art which evoke the understanding of a place; its past and current physical environment (Muhizam, 2008; Nurul Izzah, Mazlina and Nor Zalina, 2014). Recently, the installation of public art in the new projects and urban redevelopment projects has swiftly become prevalent in Malaysia as well (Mohd Fabian, 2010; Muhammad Falihin and Nik Hanita, 2016). According to Motoyama and Hanyu (2014), public art refers to any artworks placed in public places such as city squares, government buildings, plazas, and railway stations either by the public sector or the private sector to inspire art and cultural ambiances and values of the places. Present studies had identified that public art has potential as tourist attraction that telling the city's history and cultural diversity through an imaginative approach (Sitiawan, 2010; Mohd Fabian 2010; Motoyama, et al. 2014).

The objective of this paper is to identify public art's contributions to the genius loci betterment and to determine the prominent element of the city that inspired the public art. The analysis referred to the phenomenological approach by Christian Norberg-Schulz that explains image, space, character, and genius loci of a place. The result of the analysis is the identification of the significance of public art towards the enrichment of genius loci. Thus, this paper reviews several public art projects in Malaysia as reference studies.

1.1 Revolution of Public Art

Typology of public art had progressed as the time changed and the advancement of technology, for instance, mobile public art. According to Tyler (2013), latest public art can be categorised as technology-related artwork, which including large video screen that showcases local artists masterpiece and rhythmic light performance. From recent research, Nurul Izzah et al. (2014) indicated that vertical greenery could be a part of the public art typology, which benefits the aesthetic, economic, and environment. However in Malaysia, the typical mural on the wall surface become dominant to showcase the community's voice, idea and inspiration (Muhizam, 2008; Muhammad Falihin et al., 2016). This scenario happen because of the limited space, time and budget to implement public art in the urban area (Mohd Fabian, 2010).

Generally, public art can be categorized into five categories; (i) *remembrance artwork* – commemorate historical figure or significant event, (ii) *expressive artwork* – artistic value of life, (iii) *efficient artwork* – functional to public realm, (iv) *community artwork* – voice of the community about certain issues, culture and traditions, and (v) technology-related artwork – integrate sophisticated knowledge in art (Portland Public Art Committee, 2009; Tyler, 2013; Nurul Izzah et al., 2014; Muhammad Falihin et al., 2016). Thus, the elements of the city inspired the

artwork are historical value, artistic value, functional value, cultural value and technological value.

1.2 The Genius Loci

The genius loci or “spirit of the place” is augmented by activities within the building and its surroundings (Sentosa, 2001). According to Nordman and Mutinda (2016), genius loci assist in explaining human-dominated element of the landscape. Meanwhile, in a city centre, the urban landscape has a significant visual form to reflect the features of a city, whereas different cities have their unique characters (Lin, 2003). It plays an important role in the sustainable development of a city, the quality of life of the people and the identity of a place (Wen, Zhang & Zhang, 2015). Thus, every element implemented within the inhabitant area influence the ‘spirit of the place’.

1.3 Relationship between Public Art and Genius Loci

The interaction of natural and man-made space could be explained in the concept of image, space, character, and genius loci (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). He stated that the image suggests to the overall pre-assumption of the place, while the space refers to the three-dimensional (3D) organization of elements that build a place. Additionally, character refers to general broad atmosphere that signifies the concrete form and material of space-defining elements. Genius loci are the ambiance of a place and bring the place close to human. Relatively, the public art is a part of elements that build a place and give character to it whilst enhancing the spirit of the place.

2. Methodology

This paper studies and reviews six public art projects located in the major cities in Malaysia; (i) George Town in Penang, (ii) Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur, (iii) Laman Seni Seksyen 7 in Shah Alam, Selangor, (iv) Kuching in Sarawak, (v) Sungai Melaka in Melaka, and (vi) Johor Bahru City Centre. The selected projects reviewed are based on Chang (2008) and Hunting (2005) studies that highlighted the significance of locality as criteria for successful public art implementation and human-dominated elements (public art) lead the landscape (Norberg-Schulz, 1979; Wen, Zhang & Zhang, 2015). The review of the public art projects is carried out as follows: firstly, extensive review of the literature for all six projects was conducted to gain information for the purpose of selecting public art, and the stakeholders involved. The literatures are from multiple sources including websites, brochures and trade magazines.

All projects are being reviewed in four criteria; (i) image, (ii) space, (iii) character, and (iv) genius loci. All this criteria are will determine the impact of public art in enhancing the “spirit of the place” and the identification of the most favourable element of the city that inspire the artwork implementation.

3. Findings and discussion

All the data collected are analysed accordingly to the four criteria as mentioned before; image, space, character and genius loci as to exploring the spirit of the place through public art installation at the selected area. From the assessment, the most prominent type of public art integrated is remembrance artwork, expressive artwork and community artwork, which majority of the artworks is mural painting on the wall.

3.1 The Image Reflecting City's Identity

Most of the public art projects reviewed are anticipated to reflect the local distinctiveness, significant history or event and celebrate the diversity of culture. Public art in George Town for instance are influence by the local element that representing the particular area. Figure 1.a show the gigantic mural of an old paddler resting on the trishaw. It is a symbolic of the evergreen transportation that still being used in George Town albeit the advancement of public transport. Furthermore, the steel figurine of caricature that told the history of each street in George Town become one of the functional artwork and really benefits the visitor to familiar with the place (Figure 1.b).



Figure 1. (a) 'The Awaiting Trishaw Paddler' (b) The steel figurine at Pitt Street

The recent public art project being installed in Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur imitates the greenery in the city centre. It is an effort of the local authority with collaboration of muralists to inject the nature element into the concrete jungle (Figure 2.a). Meanwhile, the well-known sculpture in front of the Pavilion Kuala Lumpur inspired by cultural element, which is Chinese Bowl with the national flower engrave on it (Figure 2.b). This expressive artwork represents the diversity of culture and patriotism towards encouraging the sense of belonging.

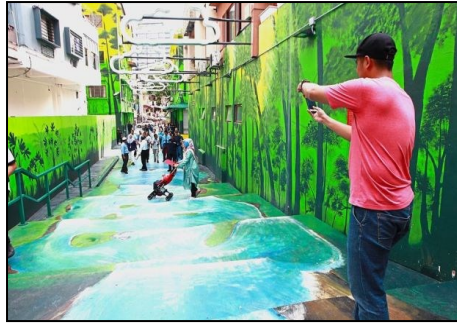


Figure 2. (a) The scenery of public art at Bukit Bintang;



(b) The sculpture in front of Pavilion

Laman Seni Seksyen 7 Shah Alam, Selangor is a project leads by Khazanah Studio, an architecture student committee from Uitm Shah Alam with collaboration from the local authority, Majlis Bandaraya Shah Alam (MBSA). It becomes an opportunity for the public to voice out their aspiration through community artworks and efficient artworks. The participants are allowable to communicate their idea on certain issue such as pollution, waste and environment creatively and integrate the city's element into the masterpieces (Figure 3.a and 3.b).



Figure 3. (a) Laman Seni Seksyen 7 scenery;



(b) Element of the city incorporated creatively into mural

Meanwhile in Kuching, Sarawak, there is a public art project initiated by PetroliaM Nasional Berhad (Petronas) under corporate social responsibility (CSR) program with collaboration of local artists entitled #TanahAirKu. This project celebrates the uniqueness of various ethnics in Sarawak and the endangered species, Burung Kenyalang that become significant for Bumi Kenyalang (Figure 4.a and 4.b). Those artworks enhance the empty and dull wall whilst becoming a landmark for the area and improving the way finding in a city center.



Figure 4. (a) The Harmony #TanahAirKU; (b) The Menua Kitai #TanahAirKU

In Melaka, picturesque scenery is served along the Melaka River during the river cruise amenity. Series of public art being implemented on the building façade and become one of the attraction for the visitor (Figure 5.a and 5.b). Those remembrance artworks and expressive artworks portray the cultural and heritage value in Melaka as the historical city. The elements of design blend well with the custom shop houses and provide an amazing experience for the people to appreciate those art pieces via land or river.



Figure 5. (a) Local delicacies being painted on the façade;

(b) Series of mural along the Melaka River

As the southern gateway of Peninsular Malaysia, Johor Bahru City Centre becomes the first impression for the visitor. The combination of traditional shop houses and modern architecture style building turn out to be a significant place for public art placement. Most of the mural painted on the traditional shop houses area to attract the visitors instead of having leisure in the mall (Figure 6.a). The art on the street have noteworthy value for the user to feel the city as pedestrian. With advancement of the technology, a horizontal digital display called 'Sky Screen' being installed along Jalan Tun Dr. Ismail. The graphic during the night depict the historical and cultural value of Johor Bahru whilst enhancing that area as public realm (Figure 6.b).



Figure 6. (a) Mural at the traditional shop houses.



(b) Digital display- Sky Screen

3.2 The usage of space

Various spaces are utilized to integrated public art in the city. The mundane wall or building façade progressively selected to incorporate artwork in almost area assessed. Instead of having aesthetical value at those areas, suitable themes of the artworks portray the exclusivity of the city and become pin pointing element or nodes. It also attracts more people to come to the passive area and make the city liveable. Besides, the revitalization of back lane as public realm by implementing public art is practical and it turns the unsafe area into user-friendly space. For instance, back lane in the commercial area in Seksyen 7, Shah Alam and Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur had transformed successfully with permeated of expressive and community artworks (Figure 7.a and 7.b).

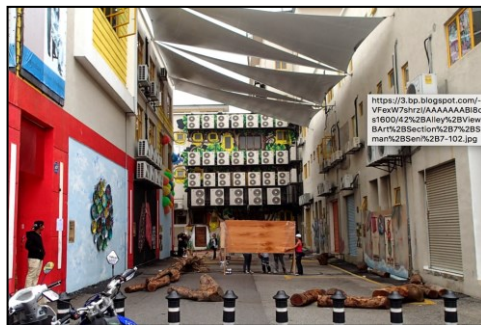


Figure 7. (a) Laman Seni Seksyen 7- from the commercial back lane into public realm



(b) Back lane in Bukit Bintang gets new images that mimic the nature and full utilize the space.

With an imaginative idea and advanced technology, the installation of horizontal digital display in Johor Bahru City Centre had create an enclosure space that provide shading during the day and turn into charmed sky screen during the night (Figure 8.a and 6.b). Furthermore, the space along the natural edges such as river had been converted form the monotonous building façade into colourful and harmonious scenery (Figure 8.b). The river cruise services at

Melaka River become one of the to-do lists for the visitors to enjoy the panoramic of Kg. Morten and traditional shop houses along the riverbank. With additional of remembrance and expressive artworks, it presents a remarkable view along the journey. Thus, the appropriate locality of the artworks in the city contributes to full utilize the spaces that benefit the city and the society.



Figure 8. (a) Sky Screen during the day

(b) Space along the riverbank at Melaka River

3.3 Understanding the Character

Artworks implemented at those six public art projects are mostly contributing to the city's image and create a positive ambiance for its surroundings. Element of cultural and heritage of the local being translated into the art and effectively enhance the aesthetic value. All the parties involved in the public art project are particular on the inspiration of the artwork and did not touch any sensitive issue. However, some of the artwork did not signifying the area although it has a significant value to commemorate. For instance, the graffiti at the Bishopgate, Kuching did not give any momentous to the history of the lane that renowned with products of carpenter and tin crafter (Figure 9.a). Correspondingly, some of the artworks in Laman Seni Seksyen 7, Shah Alam was not carefully done and lacking of awareness of local distinctiveness (Figure 9.b). Consequently, it is vital for the participants involved in any public art project to ensure the artworks suit the space and its narration.



Figure 9. (a) Graffiti at Bishopgate, Kuching;

(b) Mural at Laman Seni Seksyen 7, Shah Alam

3.4 Genius Loci: Discovering the “Spirit of the Place”

From the three criteria reviewed; image, space and character, it show that the artwork executed at the public spaces encourage the appreciation and respond from the user as human being. However, art is subjective and it varies on the level of knowledge, experience and maturity of the individuals to accept and adapt it (Mohd Fabian, 2010 and Muhammad Falihin et al., 2016). The integration of public art in a city centre intensifies the cultural fabric and heritage atmosphere at the particular area. The “spirit of the place” is augmented by activities within the building and its surroundings. Hence, a well planned and governs of the public art inspiration is a good practice to ensure every artwork effectively benefits the city and becomes community’s pride.

Public art in George Town, Penang commemorate the streets history whilst enhance the genius loci by elevated the local character in the artwork. As UNESCO World Heritage City, George Town caters the visitors with informative artwork that enhance the way finding in the old city. In Melaka, the series of mural along the Melaka River brings a reminiscence of Melaka as Historical City to the pedestrian and river cruise user. Besides that, the utilization of back lane at Bukit Bintang and Laman Seni Seksyen 7 Shah Alam creates a new dimension of city experience. Likewise, cultural and heritage of ethnics in Sarawak interpreted in the city landscape thru public art to rejoice the unity in diversity. Nevertheless in Johor Bahru City Centre, notwithstanding of all the mural on the building façade that tell the story of Johor Bahru in a creative way, the evolution of public art technology give a better impression as sense of welcoming at southern gateway. Hence, public art incites people interaction and exploration of spirit of the place.

4. CONCLUSION

The public art integration in a city centre enrich the genius loci through; (i) reflecting the image of the city, (ii) utilizing the spaces for suitable artwork, (iii) understanding the local character, and (iv) exploring the spirit of the place. The most integrated public art typology is remembrance artwork, expressive artwork and community artwork, which celebrate the cultural, historical and aesthetical value. Notwithstanding the type of artworks installed, the awareness among the stakeholders and participants about local distinctiveness is vital to improve the quality of public art implementation in the future that commendably reflecting the city’s identity towards improving the place-making and becoming the community’s pride.

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