

Local Community Perspectives on Authenticity at the ‘Street of Harmony’, George Town World Heritage Site, Penang

Aidatul Fadzlin Bakri^{1*}, Nurulhusna Qamaruz Zaman¹, Zalina Samadi¹

¹Studies of Architecture, School of Architecture and Interior Architecture, College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor Branch, Puncak Alam Campus, 42300 Bandar Puncak Alam, Selangor, Malaysia.

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ABSTRACT

Defining authenticity is challenging, partly due to the Eurocentric bias that shapes its definition and assessment. This power dynamic, combined with the frequent neglect of intangible heritage, complicates the issue and underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of authenticity across diverse cultural contexts. As a site recognised for its multicultural heritage and historical significance, George Town in Penang, Malaysia faces increasing pressure to balance the expectations set by UNESCO with the realities of its local communities. These factors threaten the authenticity of heritage sites by prioritising economic gain over cultural integrity, thereby diluting the sense of place that local communities associate with their heritage. Hence, this study investigates the guiding principles that support authenticity and the nuanced relationships between local and global cultural values, revealing disparities in perceptions of authenticity between local communities and authorised groups at the ‘Street of Harmony’, George Town. The site, characterised by its urban, multicultural, and postcolonial setting, was explored through observational studies and semi-structured interviews. The findings highlight the pivotal role of local communities in shaping the authenticity paradigm and emphasise the importance of strengthening the sense of place to preserve cultural heritage. The research underscores the need to bridge differing interpretations of authenticity and advocates for inclusive strategies that integrate local perspectives, promote sustainable practices, and foster adaptive agreements among stakeholders. It calls for a broader, more inclusive conversation on heritage protection and management.

^{1*} Corresponding author. *E-mail address:* aidatulfadzlin@uitm.edu.my
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'sense of place' is integral to understanding how local communities interpret and value their heritage (Apaydin, 2018; Hawke, 2010; Smith, 2006). Both tangible and intangible elements are important in linking cultural heritage to the sense of place (Smith, 2006; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996), with these dimensions being deeply intertwined (Harrison & Rose, 2010) and interconnected (Taha, 2014a). Heritage, therefore, links not only to the physical environment but also to identity, experience, and a sense of belonging (Smith, 2006). While Skounti (2009) argues that heritage is tied to specific places and their inhabitants, this perspective may overlook the contested and dynamic interpretations of heritage in multicultural or postcolonial contexts, as seen in George Town. Taha (2014b) believes people's experiences, memories, and connections to the place are equally vital. In heritage management, the value of the local communities' sense of place lies in expressing their emotional and psychological bonds with a site. Silva (2008, 2015) highlights that a holistic understanding of the sense of place includes core dimensions that must be preserved, as well as risk dimensions that may be allowed to evolve. Correspondingly, Markevičienė (2012) stresses the need to balance a sense of place with contemporary living demands. Authenticity is therefore crucial in shaping and strengthening the sense of place, fostering emotional and psychological connections between people and their heritage.

Heritage towns in Malaysia face ongoing challenges in reconciling authenticity with the demands of modern development. In George Town, Penang, a designated World Heritage Site (hereafter referred to as WHS), this tension is even more pronounced. The challenge lies in meeting UNESCO's expectations while addressing the lived realities and cultural aspirations of its local communities. This paper addresses gaps in heritage studies by exploring the relationship between authenticity and the sense of place in George Town's World Heritage Site. It also examines how this concept influences the sense of place; reflecting its postcolonial, urbanised and culturally diverse context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity is defined as:

'A culturally contingent quality associated with a heritage place, practice, or object that conveys cultural value; is recognised as a meaningful expression of an evolving cultural tradition; and/or evokes among individuals the social and emotional resonance of group identity.' (Nara+20 document; 2015)

Authenticity is a complex and controversial concept, particularly when examined through the contrasting Eurocentric and non-Western perspectives. Eurocentric frameworks often dominate global heritage discourse, leading to a cultural bias that marginalises non-Western cultures and their distinct interpretations of authenticity. In this context, Western viewpoints frequently shape the definition and assessment of authenticity, establishing standards that do not always align with local values. Zhu (2015) highlights how local communities in China resisted this bias, actively adapting global principles to align with their cultural heritage values. Through this process, policymakers and communities have reshaped cultural influences, generating new meanings and values for their heritage.

Authenticity is at the heart of tensions between international heritage standards and local cultural values. The Nara Document on Authenticity emphasises that cultural heritage must be judged within its cultural context, as values differ across and within cultures (ICOMOS, 1994). The Nara+20 Document (2015), marking the 20th anniversary of the Nara Document, builds on this idea and extends this concept by advocating for periodic evaluations that reflect evolving cultural perspectives rather than relying on

fixed criteria. It emphasises the dynamic and pluralistic nature of authenticity, highlighting the critical importance of community involvement in heritage conservation. Similarly, Boccardi (2019) asserts that heritage values are culturally constructed, context-dependent, and continually evolving, subject to contestation. Therefore, conservation systems must incorporate regular reviews of both value statements and authenticity to remain responsive to global changes and the diverse needs of communities.

A property is deemed authentic if it effectively conveys cultural values that are genuine and reliable. The cultural values can be expressed through these attributes: form and design; materials and substance; use and function; traditions, techniques, and management systems; location and setting; language, and other forms of intangible heritage; spirit and feeling; and other internal and external factors (UNESCO, 2023). Jones (2009) raises concerns about how heritage authenticity is assessed, suggesting that this process depends on the ways heritage objects are presented and how connections between objects, people, and places are maintained across time. In contrast, Khalaf (2021) advocates for alternative concepts like continuity and compatibility, which he argues are more practical and transparent for shaping World Heritage policies and practices.

The discourse on authenticity is profoundly shaped by power dynamics, often reflecting cultural hegemony that imposes Western values on non-Western contexts. These imbalances can lead to the marginalisation or erasure of valid cultural expressions. Deacon & Smeets (2013) argue that the power to define authenticity and heritage values is often centralised among experts, leaving local communities with limited influence in the decision-making process. Similarly, Apotsos (2012) highlights how global pressures, such as expectations from other countries, influence the presentation of heritage sites to international audiences. Authoritative interventions, such as replacing incompatible building materials, may overlook the significance of original materiality and its intrinsic value.

The emphasis on authenticity often prioritises tangible heritage, while intangible heritage is frequently overlooked. The Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2004) challenges this bias, asserting that authenticity is irrelevant when recognising or preserving intangible heritage. However, Ouf (2001) contends that safeguarding urban environments requires protecting the authenticity of heritage. The neglect of intangible heritage raises questions about the priorities and rationale underlying conservation decisions. The inherent ambiguity and subjectivity in defining authenticity necessitate a more inclusive approach that integrates diverse cultural perspectives and challenges established narratives. By doing so, a deeper understanding of authenticity can emerge, encompassing the complexities of different cultural settings and fostering more equitable heritage practices.

The involvement of local communities in the management of WHS plays a crucial role in shaping authenticity. Brumann (2015) identifies two (2) contrasting views regarding community involvement: one recognises local communities as key contributors to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), bringing meaning and authenticity to the site, while the others associate local involvement with risks, such as overdevelopment that could compromise heritage values. Jokilehto (2017) similarly emphasises that although heritage originates from communities, they are frequently excluded from significant decision-making processes. This top-down approach risks detaching authenticity from the lived experiences, memories, and narratives of those who interact daily with the site. The case of the Archaeological Sites of the Island of Meroe in Sudan illustrates this challenge, where defining additional values such as the distinctive features of Meroitic architecture was left entirely to experts (Fahmi, Ahmad, and Hashim, 2018), marginalising community voices. On the other hand, studies like that of Orgaz-Agüera et al. (2025) on the colonial area of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, demonstrate the positive impact of local communities in defining authenticity. Their research shows that perceived architectural authenticity enhances residents' place attachment and local identity, which in turn fosters strong community support for

sustainable tourism practices that protect and celebrate cultural heritage. These findings reaffirm that authenticity is best sustained when local communities are actively involved, ensuring that the heritage remains meaningful and relevant to both present and future generations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on George Town's tourism industry, presenting major challenges for the WHS. Travel restrictions and lockdowns caused a sharp decline in tourist arrivals, affecting local businesses that rely heavily on tourism, such as boutique hotels, restaurants, and heritage-related services. This downturn exposed the city's economic vulnerability due to its overdependence on tourism-driven development. Aris Anuar et al. (2024) identified key challenges faced by the local community during the pandemic, including movement restrictions, health concerns, and financial hardship. However, their findings also emphasise that strong collaboration between local communities and authorities in George Town WHS plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural heritage and its authenticity.

It is essential to acknowledge that authenticity is a dynamic and adaptable concept (Khalaf, 2018). Nakonieczna & Szczepański (2023) argue that the philosophical and imprecise nature of authenticity limits its practical utility in conservation. The inability to define authenticity objectively presents a core challenge, as it requires interpretation rather than rigid categorisation. Rather than being binary, authenticity operates along a spectrum, allowing for flexible interpretations and fostering discussions that deepen cultural understanding within specific contexts. In their analysis of thirty-one (31) WHS dossiers from Asia (2005–2014), Lawless & Silva (2017) underscore the need for UNESCO to adopt more systematic, holistic, and integrative approaches to authenticity standards. Their findings highlight gaps in current practices and call for a re-evaluation of how authenticity is assessed across diverse cultural landscapes. Similarly, Gao and Jones (2020) propose a transformative conservation approach that shifts the focus from material origins to the lived experience of authenticity. This approach emphasises the evolving relationships between people and historical artefacts that shape heritage significance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilising both participant and non-participant observation, alongside semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews involve a diverse group of individuals who not only share a common physical space but also collective interests, obligations, experiences, resources, and values. A total of fifty-two (52) interviewees were selected using purposive sampling, drawn from various community groups, including cultural and heritage activists, workers, residents, religious representatives, traditional and non-traditional business traders, community leaders, and heritage advocates. The two (2) main criteria for selection are (a) being part of the 'Street of Harmony' community, and (b) having direct experience with or active involvement in the area. In this study, local communities are defined as individuals who not only reside or work within the same geographic area but also share collective interests, responsibilities, interactions, and values that shape and influence the character of the place.

Before the interview, each participant was provided with an information leaflet and a consent form. Interviews, lasting between thirty (30) minutes and two hours, were primarily conducted face-to-face. The interviews explored several key themes, including respondents' emotional attachment to the site, their everyday experiences and interactions within the site, their views on its urban, postcolonial and multicultural identity, and their perceptions of its status as a WHS. To encourage detailed and reflective answers, descriptive, open-ended questions were asked, such as "*How would you describe your attachment and feelings toward this place?*" and "*In your opinion, who holds responsibility for preserving and managing this place?*", Probing questions were used to encourage elaboration, and interviews were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim.

The participant observation method required the researcher to immerse themselves in the community events, religious practices and daily activities. This allowed for a first hand understanding of how authenticity is performed and negotiated in public spaces. Observations focused on spatial practices, rituals, interactions among community members, use of heritage spaces, and informal activities that contribute to the lived sense of place. Meanwhile, non-participant observation complemented this by allowing the researcher to observe without interference, focusing on patterns of use, behaviour, and physical interactions with heritage elements. The researcher maintained a distance to minimise influencing participants' behaviour. Throughout both observation methods, field notes and reflective entries were recorded in a research diary, documenting not only what was seen and heard but also the researcher's interpretations and emerging insights.

Data analysis involved transcribing and reviewing audio recordings, followed by the identification of emerging categories. This iterative process enabled data collection and analysis to occur simultaneously. Once key categories were identified, they were compared and connected to uncover underlying themes. NVivo software and manual coding were used to manage data and facilitate analysis. A draft of the findings was then developed.

THE SITE OF STUDY

On 7 July 2008, UNESCO designated George Town in Penang and Melaka as WHS under the collective title Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca. The Penang Heritage Trust (PHT), a non-governmental organisation that advocates for a community-driven approach to the preservation of historic sites, was the driving force behind the undertaking of the road towards recognition in the year 1997. The site is notable for embodying three (3) Outstanding Universal Values (hereafter referred to as OUV). Criterion (ii) identifies Melaka and George Town as exemplary multicultural trading hubs in East and Southeast Asia, emerging from nearly five (5) centuries of commercial interactions among Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, coupled with influences from three European colonial powers; Criterion (iii) emphasises that these cities serve as living testaments to Asia's diverse cultural heritage and traditions, enriched by European colonial legacies; and Criterion (iv) observes that they showcase a unique blend of influences that has forged an unparalleled architectural style, culture, and urban landscape across East and South Asia (UNESCO, 2008).

George Town WHS is administered by the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) and managed by the George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI). The site confronts significant challenges, including managing a vast area, addressing the displacement and decline of the local residential population within the WHS, mitigating the impacts of mass tourism and gentrification, combating deteriorating buildings and vacant properties, and dealing with limited monitoring systems and funding. (Town and Country Planning Department Pulau Pinang, 2016). This study focuses on Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling, commercially known as the 'Street of Harmony' (see Figure 2), which spans approximately one (1) kilometre and is renowned for embodying the principles of harmony, religious plurality, and cultural diversity.



Fig. 1. The Boundary of George Town WHS

Source: Town and Country Planning Department Pulau Pinang (2016)

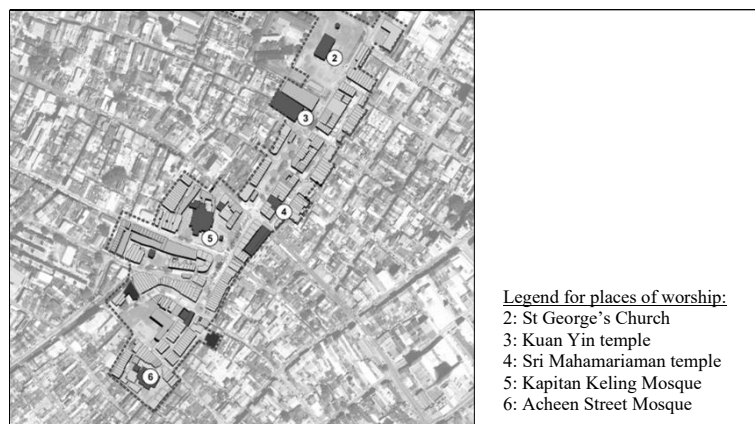


Fig. 2. The Street Is Home to A Combination of Shophouses, Townhouses and Places of Worship

Source: Town and Country Planning Department Pulau Pinang (2016)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed a strong relationship between authenticity and a sense of place. Despite being a WHS for over sixteen (16) years, the site continues to grapple with issues concerning its authenticity. The fieldwork identified several themes that define authenticity.

The Need for A Residential Population

A tour guide observed significant transformations since the city's designation as a WHS. One of the most significant shifts has been the substantial reduction of the residential community. This trend was

largely spurred by the abolishment of the Rent Control Act in 2000, which sharply increased inner-city living costs and forced many long-time residents to move to more affordable areas. She states:

'The city is moving too fast . . . people moved out from the city, not because they want to, but they have to. . . George Town will be an empty city.'

This trend of forced relocation, driven by economic and developmental pressures, raises concerns about the sustainability of the city's vibrant and diverse population. The evolving situation sparks ongoing debates about how to balance heritage conservation, economic progress, and the preservation of George Town's living cultural fabric.

Impact of Tourism-Driven Development

Tourism-driven development in George Town WHS has significantly impacted the site's authenticity by altering the original function and character of heritage buildings. A representative from GTHWI expressed concerns about the adverse effects of tourism on the OUV, particularly regarding the city's multicultural heritage. He lamented the city's transformation into a tourism hotspot, which has led to significant alterations in traditional shophouses. He stated:

'Instead of [a building] serving as a house, it has become a hotel or a boutique hotel. Instead of a home, it has become a museum, for example, which is the main threat [to the city's residents].'

This transformation has profoundly altered the city's architectural landscape, presenting major challenges to preserving its cultural identity and the lifestyle of its inhabitants.

Sustainability of The Site

A historian and heritage preservation advocate in Penang emphasised the critical importance of sustainability in safeguarding a site's values, with the well-being of its residents as a top priority. She argued that the Penang Heritage Trust remains committed to ensuring the continued presence of residents in George Town, advocating for this cause beyond the typical focus on eateries, pubs, and tourist attractions. She explained:

'The 'Street of Harmony' teaches us about the coexistence, but the old city teaches us about how to live in a more sustainable manner because we have climate-appropriate architecture and all that. But if people are not staying there, then it defeats the whole purpose.'

Under the OUV criterion (iii), George Town is recognised as an exemplary multicultural trading town shaped by past colonial influences. Yet, the narrative associated with this criterion relies on the long-term survival of the multiethnic communities. A sharp decline in the Malay population has brought the once-thriving 'Malay town' centered around the Acheen Street Malay Mosque, seen on the Popham's 1798 map, to the verge of disappearing. There has long been concern about the declining presence and future of the Malay community in George Town. In response, relevant stakeholders have implemented various initiatives aimed at preserving Malay cultural heritage and fostering their participation. One effort is the annual George Town Festival, which celebrates the city's UNESCO World Heritage status through themed programmes, workshops, and performances that showcase the city's rich multicultural heritage, including Malay customs and traditions. GTWHI also undertakes educational outreach programs designed to raise awareness and appreciation of local heritage among students and the public. These initiatives aim to

strengthen the role of local artisans, traders, and cultural practitioners by providing training and platforms to sustain their crafts and businesses.

However, addressing population decline requires broader socio-economic strategies. The *George Town World Heritage Site Population and Land Use Census (2009–2019)* by Think City Sdn. Bhd. (2021) highlights the need for continuous improvements in livability through public realm upgrades, enhanced mobility, and better infrastructure, including sewerage and drainage. In addition, the Penang Malay Association (PEMENANG) has proposed a five (5) year plan to resettle up to ten thousand (10,000) Malay families with diverse economic backgrounds and professional skills back into George Town. This initiative envisions the creation of a dedicated Malay enclave, featuring residential and commercial areas as well as mosques, to reinforce the Malay-Muslim identity in the city (The Vibes, 2024).

Authenticity of Design, Utilisation of Materials, And Construction Methods

Most places of worship along the ‘Street of Harmony’ are classified as Category 1 structures, signifying their exceptional historical significance. These buildings and monuments receive official recognition and are safeguarded under the Antiquities Act 1976 and the National Heritage Act 2005. An architect specialising in building conservation evaluated the authenticity of three (3) key places of worship by examining photographs in his collection. He expressed concerns regarding the conservation of St. George’s Church, noting that while the restoration efforts were commendable, the chosen colour scheme did not accurately reflect the church’s historical appearance. To support his viewpoint, he presented a historical photograph of the church showing the base painted green, indicating its original appearance. He also pointed out a colonial-era practice where the lower part of buildings and the five (5) foot way were traditionally painted black to comply with cleaning standards and regulations. In his view, the consultants’ colour choices were incorrect, leading to a loss of the church’s authenticity and historical connection.

Sri Mahamariamman Temple undergoes minor renovations every twelve (12) years through a ritual practice called '*kumbhabhishekam*', which consecrates or re-consecrates the temple, while major restoration occurs every fifty (50) years. Differing opinions arose regarding the authenticity of the temple in the context of its restoration. An architect and building conservator expressed concerns about the approach taken, stating:

‘I think for the Chinese and Indian, they will say that if they are not doing the renovations, they are not glorifying their God ... So, they will try to make it more beautiful, [but] that is conflicting with conservation’

This perspective reflects a cultural inclination to enhance the temple’s aesthetic value, which can sometimes conflict with conservation principles. He noted visible changes at the Sri Mahamariamman Temple and mentioned that efforts by pro-heritage organisations to persuade the temple management to follow conservation guidelines had been unsuccessful. He also criticised the use of cement in the restoration, deeming it inappropriate for the temple’s preservation. In contrast, a representative from GTWHI offered a different viewpoint. He argued that the '*kumbhabhishekam*' ceremony does not pose an issue, as it emphasises the authenticity of intangible heritage such as rituals and practices over tangible heritage.

Concerns about authenticity extend beyond design to encompass site management and project execution. For instance, the architect involved in the Kuan Yin Temple project expressed frustration over the materials and methods employed during conservation, comparing them to original photographs of the building. Emphasising the importance of fidelity, the architect argued that preserving each structure in its original form and function is essential to safeguarding its authenticity. Additionally, he expressed concern

about the local authority's commitment to enforcing building and development regulations in this project. Upon examining the intricate sculptures, it became clear that recent alterations had gone unnoticed by the general public. He further explained:

'For the decoration, they should use the cut and paste technique 'jian nian' but they used the ready-made ones instead ... it carries no meaning, no iconography in Chinese architecture.'

Moreover, the use of contemporary paint was seen as detrimental to the restoration process, potentially compromising the visual authenticity and longevity of the temple.

Authenticity and Gentrification

In the George Town WHS, gentrification occurs when property owners change the use of their buildings in response to economic growth and tourism demands. The conversion of residential spaces to commercial and business uses along the 'Street of Harmony' has significantly altered the street's core characteristics. For example, townhouses on Cannon Street have been repurposed as business premises, which diverges substantially from their original residential function. It is essential to provide clear guidance and oversight during the implementation of these changes to ensure that they align with the principles of the WHS. It is equally essential that the public realm projects outlined in the 2016 Special Area Plan (SAP) remain consistent with and reinforce the site's OUV. The streets function as dynamic spaces for diverse activities, including performances, rituals, and festivals, which collectively enrich the site's distinctive cultural identity and character.

The Dynamic Interplay Between Physical and Non-Physical Heritage

The 'Street of Harmony' faces challenges in preserving both its physical and non-physical heritage, balancing the conservation of physical structures with the protection of cultural practices, traditions, and memories that shape its identity. Several interviewees, including traditional traders on the 'Street of Harmony,' expressed concerns about the challenges in sustaining their businesses, citing factors such as globalisation, rising material costs, and gentrification. These trades may have been displaced due to changes in property use or, in some cases, have been lost entirely due to a failure to pass them down through generations. Lim (2020) reported that traditional trades in George Town have faced additional significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving many ill-equipped to adapt their marketing strategies or develop solutions that align with the 'new normal.' There is also concern over the items sold at the site, particularly in souvenir shops, which are often seen as irrelevant and lacking a local connection.

Townhouses and shophouses possess distinct values derived from both tangible and intangible elements. Tangible heritage includes aspects such as the building's use and purpose, architectural form and style, and the authenticity of materials and construction techniques. Equally important are the intangible elements, including the building's history, the traditional trades conducted within it, and the memories of its occupants. While a traditional trade may continue in a new location, relocating it from its original setting, such as a shophouse, diminishes its historical significance and weakens its ties to the community. As emphasised by Taha (2014a) and Harrison & Rose (2010), the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage is intricately linked and mutually reinforcing, a dynamic that is evident in the 'Street of Harmony.'

Global Values vs Local Values

To align with the specific criteria and standards required for the OUV designation, the State Party has complied with UNESCO's assessment criteria, which are informed by expert opinions. This process

predominantly follows a top-down approach, relying on a Eurocentric perspective to evaluate heritage value (Smith, 2006). While UNESCO's policies increasingly acknowledge the importance of engaging local communities, the organisation has yet to translate them into effective practices at WHS.

Despite the increasing recognition of the site's significance, local developments have arisen that oppose the state government's official position on cultural heritage preservation. The site has suffered from unauthorised renovations, the decline of traditional trades, alterations in use, and a lack of adherence to conservation guidelines. A heritage activist interviewed for this study warned that the leniency of the Heritage Department of MBPP in enforcing regulations could lead to further demolitions, potentially jeopardising the site's OUV. For instance, illegal renovations have been driven by differing values, greed, and a lack of understanding of conservation regulations and guidelines.

Understanding the interaction between tangible and intangible heritage requires a nuanced awareness of values at both global and local levels. The 'Street of Harmony' is shaped by local interpretations, which define its distinctive traditions, festivities, and customs, setting it apart from a universally standardised model. Furthermore, intangible heritage is frequently viewed as more significant and deeply connected to local communities than tangible heritage. Local communities believe that some values associated with the 'Street of Harmony' do not align with the OUV criteria that have been established by UNESCO.

Power Relations

The findings align with Ouf's (2001) assertion that the preservation of both material and immaterial heritage is crucial for the conservation of urban areas. However, debates persist regarding the definition of authenticity, the authority responsible for making such determinations, and the levels of authenticity. Although the 2023 Operational Guidelines provide frameworks for assessing authenticity and determining the truthfulness and credibility of a heritage asset, the task remains complex. At the 'Street of Harmony,' authenticity is influenced by how local communities and authorised groups choose to represent heritage assets, while preserving the dynamic relationships between objects, people, and places over time (Jones, 2009). Given the dynamic nature of the world, it is more fitting to recognise authenticity as a concept subject to continuous evolution (Khalaf, 2018). The rituals performed at the Kuan Yin Temple, for instance, have been altered to accommodate the demands of tourism and to enhance the site's visual appeal for visitors. The temple has implemented a smoke-free policy prohibiting worshippers from lighting joss sticks inside the temple. This decision underscores a troubling lack of awareness among the temple leaders regarding the cultural significance of these rituals, posing a threat to the preservation of traditional practices.

The 'Street of Harmony' is characterised by unique building typologies. Following the 2016 Special Area Plan, guidelines and procedures to streamline modifications that align with cultural values while preserving heritage integrity were formulated. They have also created detailed building inventories and established data to ensure effective monitoring for future restoration and conservation efforts within the WHS. The exteriors of most shophouses are well-preserved and largely intact. Some owners have taken the initiative to maintain their buildings by applying fresh coats of paint and performing minor repairs. However, some tenants and owners lack the financial resources necessary to undertake essential repairs.

A notable feature of the shophouses is the five (5) foot way or *kaki lima*. These five (5) feet ways are often obstructed by permanent and temporary objects, including commercial merchandise, cars, grilles, and plywood panels. As a result, they no longer prioritise pedestrians, despite their original purpose of providing shelter from the sun and rain and serving as communal spaces. To preserve the integrity and authenticity of the shophouses, it is essential to remove these obstructions and restore the five-foot way to its intended functions. Correspondingly, a heritage conservator emphasised the need to balance public access with privacy in the context of private residences such as townhouses. He states:

'It is best to have a continuous five (5) foot way, regardless of whether it is a house [townhouse] or shophouses, but we need to consider privacy for the tenants, [and] for the house members because that is the entrance for their household.'

He recommended that delineating clear boundaries would better distinguish the privacy of a townhouse from the public-facing nature of a shophouse. His views address the complexities of heritage conservation by balancing the preservation of public spaces with respect for private property. The final draft of the SAP (Replacement) for the 2016 Special Area Plan (SAP), completed in 2022, has received public feedback. It is hoped that the final version of the document will be more inclusive and integrated, enabling George Town WHS to evolve into a sustainable city.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the concept of authenticity within the WHS, focusing on the 'Street of Harmony' in George Town, Penang, and how local communities perceive this concept. Authenticity fosters a deep sense of belonging and attachment by preserving a place's true identity, cultural significance, and historical continuity. Engaging local communities with both tangible and intangible heritage establishes them as the true experts of the site, thereby guaranteeing the street's authenticity. The identification of contrasting local values, which diverge from globally accepted standards, has led to challenges and conflicts in the site's management. This study indirectly critiques UNESCO's long-standing approach, which asserts that an authorised group holds the power to assess the value of cultural heritage assets. The ability to create, generate, and define heritage should be entrusted to local communities, as they are the true custodians of the site. This study also demonstrates that local communities are not passive recipients of the imposed concept of authenticity. The reduction in the multicultural residential population presents a considerable risk to the sense of place and the site's World Heritage designation, especially its OUV. Further research should explore the potential of the dynamic concept of authenticity to facilitate more inclusive and dynamic conservation practices that take into account the needs of local communities, living traditions, and the cultural diversity of the site.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that this research was conducted without any personal benefits, commercial, or financial conflicts of interest and declare no conflicting interests with the funder.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Aidatul Fadzlin Bakri conceptualised the research idea, conducted the research, and wrote and revised the article. Nurulhusna Qamaruz Zaman and Zalina Samadi assisted in drafting the article, the review and the revisions of the article.

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