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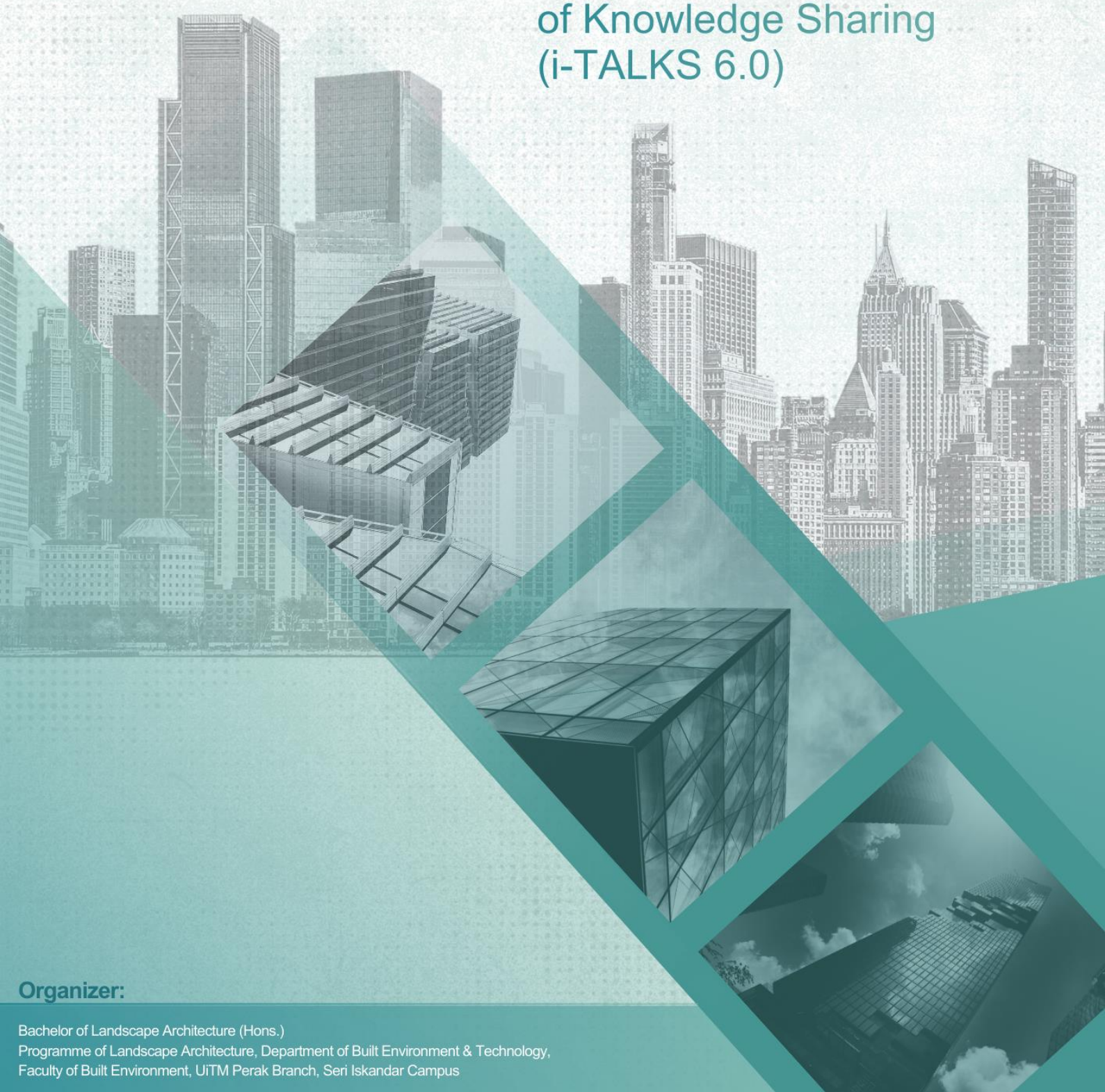
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THE ACCLAIMED LANDSCAPE OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING
"Harmony in Spaces : Blending Heritage, Nature and Design"

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Faculty of Built Environment, UiTM Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus

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Understanding Sense of Place Through Lived-Experience in Heritage Quarters: A Study of George Town

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Abstract

Despite its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, George Town in Penang faces rising pressures in terms of harmoniously integrating heritage conservation with the processes of modernization and tourism development. The unique cultural identity of George Town, which has been developed through its historical shophouse architecture, multicultural streetscape, and established community, is increasingly under threat from commercialization and ill-conceived developments. In this study, the influence of heritage and cultural environments in shaping the sense of place for residents and non-residents is explored by interpreting the everyday experiences of individuals. The study also identifies the tangible and intangible heritage factors that influence people's sense of place. By employing a qualitative methodology approach, this study combines semi-structured interviews with structured observations of sites with a historical comparison study undertaken in the George Town World Heritage Site. The findings indicate that both tangible elements, including heritage architecture and streetscape characteristics, as well as intangible elements such as social interactions, cultural practices, and traditions, significantly contribute to the formation of place identity, attachment, and dependence within a heritage environment. Furthermore, the results of this study have also shown differences in lived experiences of residents with longer periods of residence compared with those with shorter periods of residence

Keyword: Sense of Place,Heritage Conservation,Cultural Identity,Urban Modernization, Lived-Experience.

INTRODUCTION

George Town, Penang, was documented as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 in recognition of its remarkable architectural character, multicultural spatial composition, and enduring intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, n.d.). The historic landscape of George Town comprising colonial-era buildings, traditional shophouses, and distinctive street patterns exists alongside vibrant community life shaped by long-standing customs, festivals, trades, and collective memories. Together, these findings reveal similar results with other research tangible and intangible heritage elements contribute significantly to the city's sense of place, forming emotional and psychological connections that influence how both residents and visitors perceive and experience the historic environment (Shamsuddin, Sulaiman, & Che Amat, 2018; World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

Sense of place in heritage cities is not solely derived from physical form but is deeply rooted in lived experience, everyday social interactions, and cultural continuity. In George Town, residents' emotional

attachment and place identity are closely linked to daily routines, familiarity with the urban landscape, and sustained engagement with traditional practices (Mohamad, S. M. S., Nizarudin, N. D., & Jani, H. H. M. (2024). However, while conservation efforts have been largely successful in preserving the city's architectural fabric, intangible heritage and lived experiences often receive less emphasis in heritage management approaches (Bakri et al., 2021). This imbalance risks reducing heritage environments to visual artifacts rather than living cultural landscapes.

Tourism development and adaptive reuse initiatives have increased economic vitality and global visibility in George Town, yet they have also introduced pressures that threaten authenticity and sense of place. The conversion of historic buildings into boutique hotels, cafés, and commercial spaces, while economically beneficial, has contributed to commercialization, gentrification, and rising property values, leading to the displacement of long-established communities (Malay Mail, 2024; Phua & Tan, 2022). As local residents are gradually replaced by transient users, the everyday cultural practices that sustain emotional bonds with place are weakened, resulting in the erosion of lived heritage and cultural continuity (Chin et al. 2023; Suhaimi and Bustami 2024).

Despite its UNESCO designation, George Town continues to face challenges in balancing heritage conservation with urban modernization (UNESCO, 2021; Said & Musa, 2020). The city's identity, reflected in its multicultural streetscapes and community networks, is increasingly shaped by tourism-driven priorities that often privilege economic returns over cultural and social values. These challenges highlight the urgent need to re-centre the sense of place within heritage conservation discourse. Understanding how people perceive, experience, and emotionally connect with George Town's heritage landscapes is essential for safeguarding authenticity, enhancing residents' quality of life, and sustaining the city's distinctive character for future generations (Lim, 2023; Bakri et al., 2025).

Accordingly, this research examines how heritage environments and cultural settings in George Town influence the sense of place among residents and visitors by focusing on lived experiences, emotional attachment, and key heritage elements that contribute to place identity. By foregrounding lived experience as a critical dimension of heritage conservation, this study seeks to inform more holistic and people-centred approaches to managing historic urban landscapes.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How does the heritage environment (the tangible and intangible heritage) influence George Town residents' sense of place?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage Environment

Heritage conservation plays a critical role in maintaining both tangible and intangible cultural assets that define a community's collective identity. Balancing cultural preservation with modernization in George Town, Penang has become more complex as urban development and tourism continue to reshape the city's historic landscape. Recent studies highlight that while conservation policies have succeeded in

safeguarding many physical structures, issues of authenticity, cultural continuity, and community inclusiveness remain pressing concerns Abdul Aziz, M. F. (2020).For instance, Abdul Aziz, M. F. (2020). found that adaptive reuse of heritage buildings can compromise authenticity when economic motives outweigh cultural intent, while Suhaimi, D. M., & Bustami, M. R. (2024),observed that marginalized communities often feel excluded from heritage management decisions. Omar, S., & Hamid, N. A. (2023) argued that the commercialization and commodification of cultural space, as seen in the use of street arts and tourism branding, may strengthen and weaken local culture and identity dependent on management strategies. Most recently, Bakri et al. (2025) argue that maintaining George Town's sense of place requires community engagement and intergenerational insights.

Sense Of Place: Place identity, place attachment & place dependence

Sense of place refers to the emotional, psychological, and functional relationships that individuals and communities form with environments based on experiences, memories, and social interactions, and in heritage contexts is shaped by both physical elements such as historic buildings and intangible aspects like traditions and social meanings (Rahman et al. (2021); Chin et al. (2023)). Contemporary research conceptualises sense of place through three interrelated components: *place identity, place attachment*, and *place dependence* and has increasingly examined how these findings reveal similar results with other research dimensions manifest in urban and heritage environments (Gifford, 2010). Firstly, *place identity* reflects how cultural landscapes and landmarks contribute to self-concept and belonging, with studies showing that prominent urban elements can strengthen residents' identity and sense of belonging through visual and cultural connections (Zhang et al. (2024).Besides that, *place attachment* describes the emotional bonds people develop, and research demonstrates that stronger attachment is associated with frequent interaction and positive socio-emotional experiences, which influence wellbeing outcomes and civic participation in heritage and urban contexts (Kamani Fard, A., & Paydar, M. (2024); Samsur, Hosni, & Kamarudin, 2025). Lastly, *place dependence* relates to how places support daily needs and experiential continuity, although studies integrating all three components in a singular model remain limited. Methodologically, recent research uses quantitative surveys, in-depth interviews, structural equation modelling, and mixed methods to capture both measurable relationships and rich qualitative descriptions (Shi M, Tan KKH (2025). However, there are still gaps that include a lack of research focusing on long-term residents of heritage cities. At the same time, there is a lack of research related to the integration of identity, attachment, and dependence within a single research piece. Also, there is a lack of research focusing on changes over time related to sense of place.

Lived Experience

Lived experience refers to the ways that people perceive, experience, and interact with the world around them, and it is the emotional, psychological, and social connections that are established through memory, habit, and shared values rather than the physical world itself that are emphasized. In George Town, Penang, it is exemplified through activities such as participating in the George Town Festival, walking through heritage streets like Armenian Street, and maintaining family-run shophouses, which foster a sense of belonging, continuity, and community identity (Phua & Tan (2023); Suhaimi & Bustami (2024)). Researchers have studied lived experience using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, ethnography, and photo-elicitation as well as quantitative surveys measuring

attachment, identity, and place dependence, often combined in mixed-method designs to capture both emotional and spatial dimensions (Ma et al, (2023); Bakri, Qamaruz Zaman & Samadi (2025)). However, despite these initiatives, there are still some gaps in knowledge with regard to the lived experiences of long-term residents, especially the younger ones. Long-term research on lived experiences in terms of their development with time is still rare. In addition, there are minimal research initiatives that have considered tangible heritage together with social practices to provide a holistic view of lived experiences in relation to heritage identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research approaches with two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and site observation with mapping are used to understand the sense of place through how people interpret, experience, and connect with the city's heritage character.

Study Area

The case study was carried out in George Town, Penang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is recognized by its rich architectural heritage, multicultural character, and dynamic urban environment. It is a tourist destination that draws a wide range of visitors, ranging from local residents, domestic tourists, to foreign tourists, hence providing an active and dynamic setting in which to explore emotional and experiential ties to place. The heritage core of George Town is characterized by a unique blend of historical buildings, traditional shophouses, religious buildings, public spaces, roads, and cultural practices, hence providing a setting in which both tangible and intangible heritage come together. Therefore, it is an appropriate setting in which to explore how people experience notions of quality, comfort, identity, and emotional association in a multicultural urban setting.

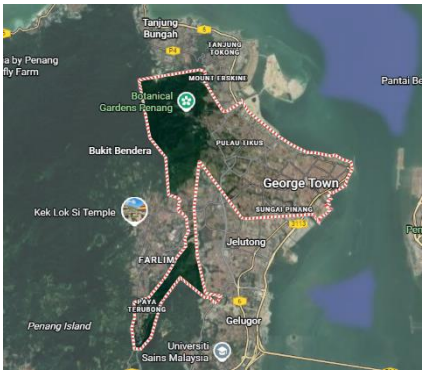
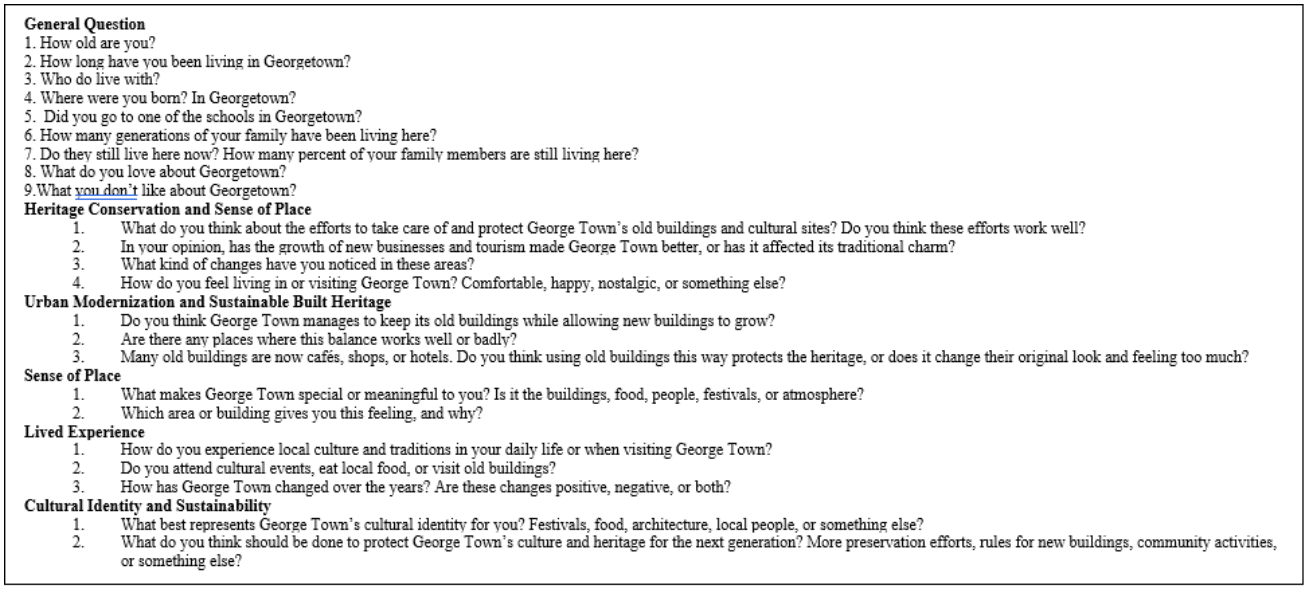


Figure 1. Map of the study area, George Town, Penang.

Data Collection

Before the data collection process, participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the length of residency and involvement in local cultural activities to achieve depth of data reflected in lived experience and everyday engagement with the heritage setting. Then, the data was collected through two phases: semi-structured interview (Phase 1) and site observation (Phase 2). Firstly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local residents to capture their personal emotions, memories, and lived

experiences within George Town as shown in the interview questions in Figure 2. The questions focus on how participants perceive and connect with the city's heritage spaces, as well as the meanings and values they associate with these places. After the interview sessions, site observations and visual documentation were carried out as data triangulation, guided by the participants' narratives in interviews. Photographs were taken according to the locations, features, and cultural elements mentioned by the locals, ensuring that the documentation reflects their perspectives and lived experiences within George Town's heritage area.



General Question

1. How old are you?
2. How long have you been living in Georgetown?
3. Who do live with?
4. Where were you born? In Georgetown?
5. Did you go to one of the schools in Georgetown?
6. How many generations of your family have been living here?
7. Do they still live here now? How many percent of your family members are still living here?
8. What do you love about Georgetown?
9. What you don't like about Georgetown?

Heritage Conservation and Sense of Place

1. What do you think about the efforts to take care of and protect George Town's old buildings and cultural sites? Do you think these efforts work well?
2. In your opinion, has the growth of new businesses and tourism made George Town better, or has it affected its traditional charm?
3. What kind of changes have you noticed in these areas?
4. How do you feel living in or visiting George Town? Comfortable, happy, nostalgic, or something else?

Urban Modernization and Sustainable Built Heritage

1. Do you think George Town manages to keep its old buildings while allowing new buildings to grow?
2. Are there any places where this balance works well or badly?
3. Many old buildings are now cafés, shops, or hotels. Do you think using old buildings this way protects the heritage, or does it change their original look and feeling too much?

Sense of Place

1. What makes George Town special or meaningful to you? Is it the buildings, food, people, festivals, or atmosphere?
2. Which area or building gives you this feeling, and why?

Lived Experience

1. How do you experience local culture and traditions in your daily life or when visiting George Town?
2. Do you attend cultural events, eat local food, or visit old buildings?
3. How has George Town changed over the years? Are these changes positive, negative, or both?

Cultural Identity and Sustainability

1. What best represents George Town's cultural identity for you? Festivals, food, architecture, local people, or something else?
2. What do you think should be done to protect George Town's culture and heritage for the next generation? More preservation efforts, rules for new buildings, community activities, or something else?

Figure 2. Sample of the interview guide.

Data Analysis

After the data collection process, this study uses ATLAS.ti 9 to conduct the thematic analysis. Researchers have used thematic analysis to identify patterns that are emotionally and psychologically linked to place attachment, identity, memory and meaning in heritage (see Ma et al. (2023) and Bo & Abdul Rani (2025)). The analysis process in this study started when the interview transcripts obtained from semi-structured interviews were imported into the ATLAS.ti 9 software. Then, the data were coded using a combination of pre-determined (a priori themes) and emergent themes related to heritage landscapes and sense of place. Key themes include place identity, place attachment, place dependence, heritage conservation, sustainability, cultural identity, lived experience, sense of place, and urban modernization. Finally, the finalised themes were chosen and presented in the following section.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from semi-structured interviews and field observations. Firstly, the purposive sampling has resulted in the recruitment of nine participants comprising six participants who were the long-term locals (age between 22 to 56) and three newer residents and expatriates (ages 19–24) as shown in Table 1. The interviews were carried out in English and Malay, depending on the participants' language preference, and each session ranged from approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. Overall, the length

of residence and daily engagement shape participants' sense of place and lived experience. Long-term residents show strong sentimental attachments and place identity in relation to historical streets, architectural designs, and cultural traditions also shown in Table 1. On the other hand, short-term residents are more functionally or aesthetically engaged with the city. In general, for all participants, physical aspects (buildings, roads, monuments) and intangible aspects (social interactions, traditions, festivities) interact in shaping sentimental attachments. These elements will be explained in detail in the following Phase 1 and Phase sections.

Table 1.0 List of participants and their mentioned George Town tangible and intangible heritage in their interviews.

Participant code	Gender	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Years of Residency in Georgetown	Mentioned Tangible Heritage Elements	Mentioned Intangible Heritage Elements
P1	Male	24	Javanese	5	Heritage buildings and food	Multicultural identity, unity among people and festival
P2	Female	19	Chinese	5	Heritage buildings and food	Family tradition and sense of place
P3	Male	22	Malay	5	Heritage building	Festival and balanced lifestyle (modern and traditional)
P4	Female	22	Malay	22	Heritage shophouses, street food and markets.	Sense of identity and nostalgia,mix of cultural
P5	Female	24	Malay	24	Heritage building and food	Nostalgia and community life
P6	Female	56	Malay	56	Heritage building and food	Pride and happiness, Multicultural harmony
P7	Female	50	Malay	31	Heritage building, food ,and historic place	Nostalgia, cultural pride, festivals, sense of belonging
P8	Female	56	Malay	35	Heritage building, food ,and street art	Nostalgia, cultural pride, festivals, community harmony
P9	Female	41	Malay	41	Heritage building reused as cafe	Atmosphere and friendliness, festival and decoration

Phase 1: Semi-structured Interview: Heritage Environment and Sense of Place

The thematic analysis has identified three key themes: *place attachment, place identity and place dependence,* and *heritage conservation versus urban modernization*.

Place attachment and Lived experience

The findings indicate that George Town's sense of place is predominantly shaped by emotional attachment built through the everyday lived experience and social interactions, rather than by physical heritage alone. Data from semi-structured interviews with residents and visitors (as shown in Figure 3) reveal that

respondents consistently associate the area with memories, familiarity, and daily routines. This is expressed in statements such as: *"George Town is unique because of its combination of people, food, festivals, atmosphere, and historic buildings."* (Participant 7, Quotation 10 and 33) and *"It feels like home."* (Participant 1, Quotation 69).

Emotional attachment and nostalgia strongly influence place meaning. Participants describe reflective experiences such as: *"When I walk through this area, I feel as if I am transported back in time, and it makes me appreciate the value of local heritage more."* (Participant 5, Quotation 13 and 18) and *"For me, George Town is more than a tourist destination; it is the place where I grew up and where many personal memories are formed."* (Participant 3, Quotation 21 and 27). These feelings are reinforced through daily activities and repeated exposure, including walking, commuting, and regular visits.

Examples include: *"Passing through this area daily for work has made its atmosphere deeply embedded in my everyday routine."* (Participant 4, Quotation 12 and 25) and *"Walking here frequently allows you to become more familiar with every alley and building."* (Participant 2, Quotation 38 and 41).

Social interaction further strengthens place attachment, particularly through familiar encounters and neighbourly relationships. This is noted in *"The presence of long-term residents and the ease of greeting one another create an atmosphere that fosters a strong sense of closeness to the place."* (Participant 3, Quotation 21 and 56) and *"Through social interactions like how businesses and sellers still greet and connect with each other when we walk around."* (Participant 9, Quotation 17 and 77).The multicultural character of George Town is repeatedly identified as a defining element of its sense of place. Participants reflect this in statements such as: *"Living in George Town feels unique because of the coexistence of Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities."* (Participant 6, Quotation 12 and 31), *"The nearby Little India adds vibrancy to the area through its spice aromas and bustling crowds."* (Participant 5, Quotation 28 and 32), and *"George Town is meaningful because of the mixture of cultures—Malay, Chinese, Indian, Peranakan, Eurasian—all living side by side."* (Participant 8, Quotation 17).

Food culture and street life further anchor lived experience, contributing to vibrancy and continuity. This is described in: *"Its atmosphere, readily available food, busy crowds, and tourists make the area vibrant both day and night."* (Participant 4, Quotation 12 and 19) and *"I would say the food, the people and the atmosphere make this place special."* (Participant 6, Quotation 24 and 27).At the same time, respondents acknowledge the coexistence of heritage and modern development as sustaining rather than eroding place identity. This is evident in: *"While historic buildings remain, the surrounding area continues to develop and undergo change."* (Participant 7, Quotation 23 and 54) and *"The mix of old shophouses and new cafés creates a lively social atmosphere."* (Participant 1, Quotation 47).

Overall, the findings are consistent with those reported in previous studies. They say that what makes a place special in cities is not just about the old buildings and things. It is about what people do every day and how they feel about the place. It is also about the people they meet and talk to. This is what makes people love a place and feel like it is theirs. We see this in George Town and other old cities in Malaysia. People like these places because they know the streets and the buildings,where they meet people and live with people from different cultures. Collectively, these elements foster a strong sense of belonging and pride in the community. Tan & Ahmad, 2020; Chong et al. (2021) found that the food culture, street life, and informal social interactions function as important ways that keep heritage places alive and interesting. These elements help keep the heritage going as we see in the work of Phua & Tan (2022) and Bakri et al.

(2025). Heritage value builds up through everyday life experience, and is not limited to the preservation of buildings and artifacts.

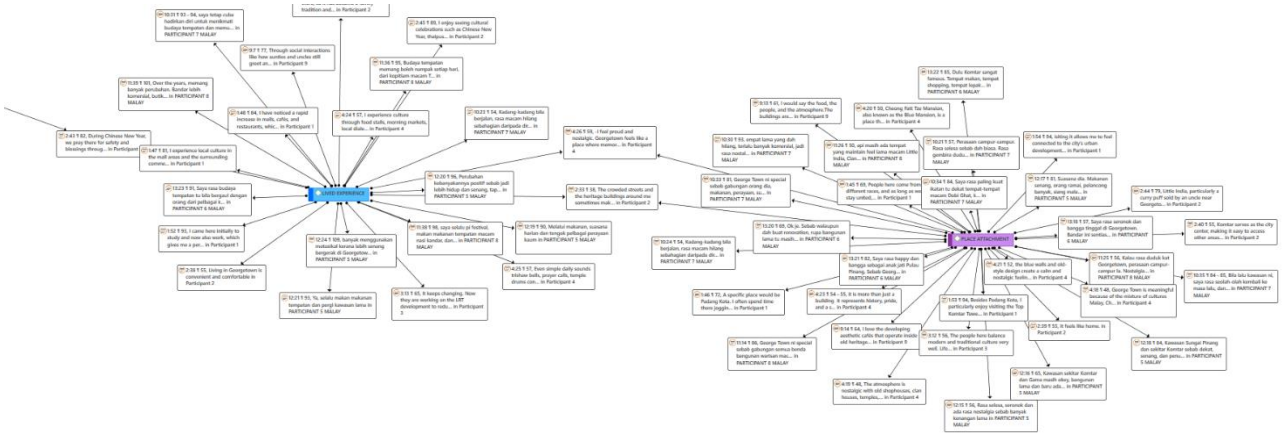


Figure 3. Place attachment and lived experience network.

Place identity, place dependence and Lived experience

George Town's place identity is sustained through lived cultural experiences that are embedded in everyday urban practices, where traditions, customs, and cultural expressions continue to be actively performed rather than preserved as static heritage. Participants emphasised that place identity is most clearly experienced through ongoing activities such as traditional food preparation, religious observances, cultural festivals, and long-established businesses that remain part of daily life as shown in Figure 4. One participant noted that *"George Town is special due to its mix of people, food culture, festivals, atmosphere, and historic buildings."* (Participant 7, Quotation 10 and 33), highlighting how cultural identity is formed through the interaction of multiple lived elements rather than through physical structures alone.

Food culture emerged as one of the most prominent expressions of cultural identity experienced in daily life. Participants frequently referred to hawker stalls, traditional eateries, and culturally specific food districts as spaces where identity is continuously practiced and shared. This is reflected in statements such as *"Nasi kandar is truly an identity of George Town; from the past until now, people continue to seek it out."* (Participant 5, Quotation 11) and *"The nearby Little India makes the area more lively with the smell of spices and the presence of crowds."* (Participant 5, Quotation 28 and 32).

Besides being highly associated with place identity, these food-related spaces and religious sites are not only cultural symbols but also essential for daily routines, illustrating the element of place dependence as participants rely on them for meals, social interaction, and practicing traditions. Participants rely on hawker stalls and cultural districts for everyday consumption and social interaction, making these spaces essential for sustaining both practical needs and cultural identity.

Religious practices and cultural festivals were also described as central to the lived expression of cultural identity. Participants highlighted how religious events and celebrations remain visible and actively practiced within streets and neighbourhoods, reinforcing cultural continuity in everyday settings. For example, one participant explained that *"Celebrations such as Thaipusam, Chinese New Year, and Hari*

Raya continue to be practiced, demonstrating that culture remains a living presence rather than a historical reference." (Participant 8, Quotation 17). Another participant added that"Local culture is visible in everyday life, not limited to festive periods" (Participant 5, Quotation 16). These observations suggest that cultural identity is continuously reinforced through collective participation rather than occasional ceremonial display, illustrating place dependence as individuals rely on local streets and cultural spaces for everyday practices and social interaction.

The multicultural composition of George Town was repeatedly identified as a defining aspect of its cultural identity. Participants described how different ethnic groups coexist and operate within shared urban spaces, contributing to a culturally layered environment. This multicultural presence was expressed in remarks such as *"Living in George Town feels unique because of the coexistence of Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities."* (Participant 6, Quotation 12 and 31) and *"George Town is meaningful because of the mixture of cultures Malay, Chinese, Indian, Peranakan, Eurasian all living side by side"* (Participant 8, Quotation 17). Cultural diversity was further reflected through language use, religious landmarks, traditional trades, and food practices, demonstrating how multicultural identity is experienced as part of everyday life. Participants also acknowledged that cultural identity continues to evolve alongside urban development. While new cafés, businesses, and modern facilities have emerged, traditional practices and cultural elements remain present and functional within the city. This coexistence was perceived positively, as noted in *"While historic buildings remain, the surrounding area continues to develop and undergo change."* (Participant 7, Quotation 23 and 54). Rather than weakening cultural identity, this combination allows traditions to adapt within a changing urban environment, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary life.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with those of prior research, which views cultural identity in heritage cities as a living and evolving phenomenon that is maintained through the everyday practices of people and not through the static preservation of heritage. The previous studies have argued that food traditions, religious observances, cultural festivals, and routine social interactions play a vital role in the continuous reproduction of cultural identity in daily urban life (Tan & Ahmad, 2020; Bakri, 2021). One of the main findings of this study is the prominence of food culture, which is in line with the research that recognises traditional eateries and food districts as the most important venues for the transmission of culture between generations and for the facilitation of everyday social engagement (Phua & Tan, 2022). Intake of food is not only a necessity but a very powerful vehicle in this respect. Religious practices and festivals have likewise been demonstrated to be the means of cultural continuity through the uniting participation that is deeply rooted in the neighbourhood spaces (Abdul Rahman, N., Hashim, R., & Sulaiman, M. 2021). Besides that, study of George Town reveals that the peacefully coexisting multicultural groups within the shared urban spaces are actually the main contributors to the cultural identity that is deeply layered and lived and thus can be experienced through language, trade, and everyday interaction (Bakri, N. M., Qamaruz Zaman, N., & Samadi, Z. 2025). Quite significantly, the cited studies indicate that the changes urban areas undergo, can be helpful and not obstructive to the cultural identity of the place in the case local traditions are maintained and are an integral part of everyday life (Lim, J. W., 2023). Together, these studies support the present research findings suggesting that cultural identity in George Town is primarily an outcome of the lived cultural experience and the ongoing negotiation process.

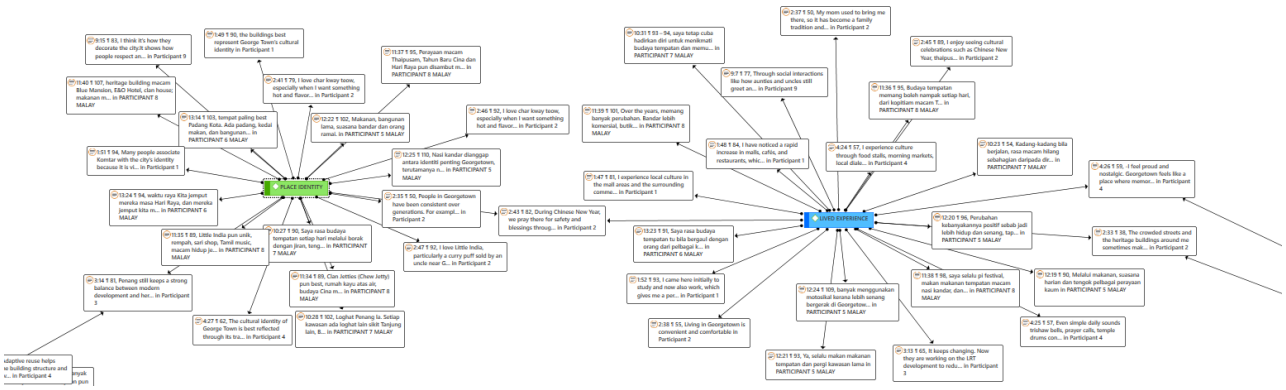


Figure 4. Place identity and lived experience network.

Heritage conservation Versus Urban modernization

Based on Figure 5, the findings show that heritage conservation directly reinforces George Town's sense of place through the preservation, restoration, and continued use of historic buildings. Participants consistently linked conserved heritage structures with the city's character and identity, noting that *"many old buildings are restored beautifully, retaining their facade and historical character"* (Participant 4, Quotation 15) and *"still see a lot of heritage buildings being maintained and restored, which keeps the city's charm alive"* (Participant 2, Quotation 14). Restoration efforts were viewed as evidence of care and responsibility toward heritage, as reflected in *"The mansion was once abandoned but later restored, which shows how much people care about heritage"* (Participant 4, Quotation 22).Conservation was also associated with emotional and symbolic value, where preserved buildings support memory and continuity. Participants expressed feelings of pride and nostalgia linked to conserved areas, such as *"I feel proud and nostalgic. Georgetown feels like a place where memories stay alive"* (Participant 4, Quotation 16).

At the same time, based on Figure 4, the findings indicate that urban modernization in George Town is perceived as sustainable when it maintains a balance between development and heritage protection. Participants acknowledged that physical changes and new commercial activities are inevitable, but emphasised that modernisation should not erase historical character. This is reflected in *"hasn't changed much overall, but new stores have opened, and some old stores have rebranded"* (Participant 2, Quotation 48) and *"Historic buildings continue to be actively used while retaining their original architectural characteristics."* (Participant 6, Quotation 18), suggesting continuity despite functional change.Participants expressed concern that excessive modern renovation could weaken heritage value if not carefully controlled. Some noted that overly modern interventions risk altering the atmosphere of heritage areas, as described in *"Sometimes the renovations are too modern, making the heritage atmosphere feel lost"* (Participant 7, Quotation 30). However, others recognised that when renovations respect original structures, heritage value is preserved, evident in *"doesn't change the heritage value because the structures are still protected"* (Participant 1, Quotation 44).

Overall, the findings align with existing research showing that heritage conservation and urban modernization in heritage cities are shaped by lived experience,everyday cultural practices, and managed urban change rather than physical heritage alone (Tan & Ahmad, 2020; Bakri, 2021). Studies on heritage

conservation and adaptive reuse similarly demonstrate that preserving and reusing historic buildings strengthens emotional attachment and place continuity when architectural character is retained (Abdul Aziz, M.F.2020; Abdul Karim et al., 2022). At the same time, research cautions that insensitive modernisation can weaken heritage authenticity, highlighting the need for regulatory control to ensure sustainable urban development in heritage cities (Rahman et al. (2021); Lim, 2023). At the same time, research also warns against the degradation of authenticity due to insensitive modernization and emphasizes the need for regulatory intervention to ensure sustainable urban development in heritage cities (Rahman et al., 2021; Lim, 2023).

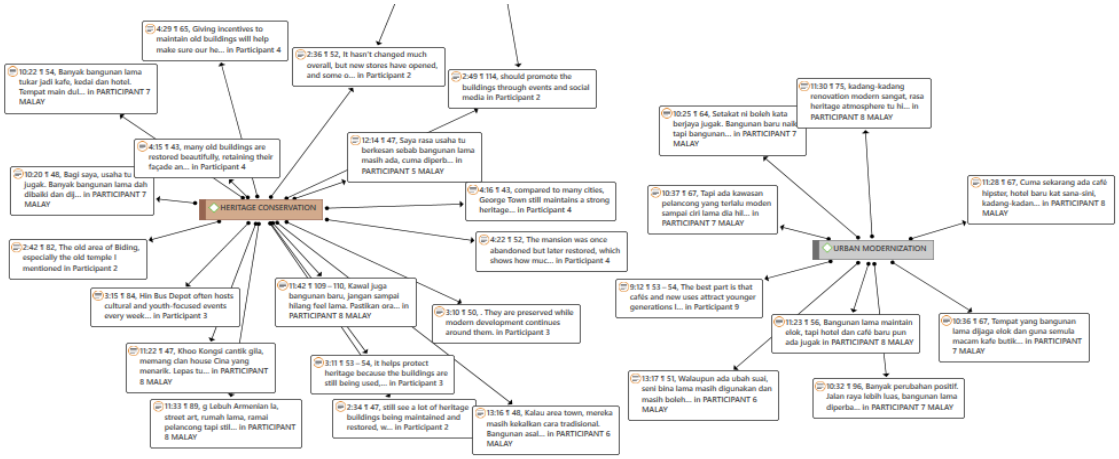


Figure 5. Heritage conservation versus urban modernisation network.

Phase 2: Site Observation Data: Tangible and Intangible Heritage Elements

In the interview sessions, participants mentioned that the tangible and intangible heritage elements influencing their sense of place. The tangible elements such as Peranakan Mansions, traditional shophouses, Padang Kota, and the Blue Mansion, shape their sense of place by providing recognizable landmarks, familiar streetscapes, and social spaces that support daily interaction and emotional attachment. At the same time, intangible heritage elements, including cultural festivals, food practices, and routine social activities, strengthen feelings of belonging, continuity, and identity. Participants also highlighted modern developments such as Komtar Tower and adaptive reuse cafés, which influence the sense of place by creating a contrast between historic character and contemporary urban life. The findings demonstrate that the interaction between tangible and intangible heritage environments directly influences how residents and visitors experience, perceive, and emotionally connect to George Town. Overall, the observation data validate and detail the descriptions of sense of place and the tangible and intangible heritage elements mentioned by participants in the interview sessions.

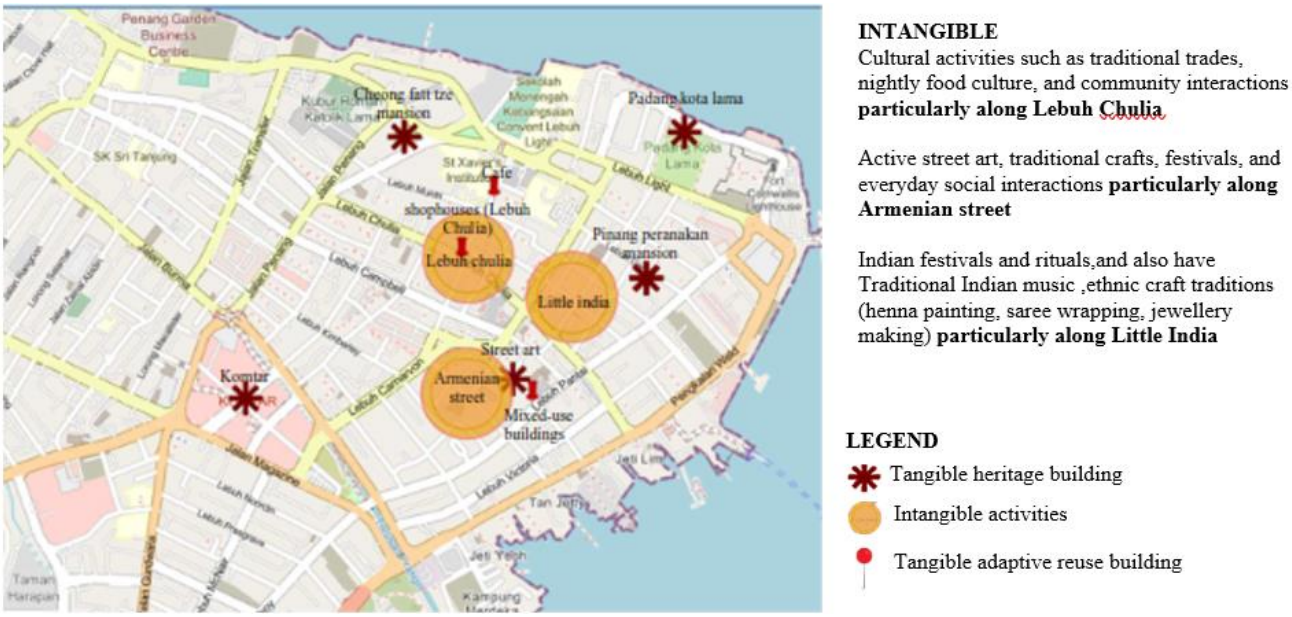


Figure 6. Observation points based on the tangible and intangible heritage elements mentioned in the interviews.
Source: Author (2025)

Tangible: George Town's physical heritage environment

George Town's physical heritage environment has the most impact on Place Identity. The tangible aspects of heritage, namely the Peranakan Mansions, traditional shophouses, Padang Kota, and Blue Mansion, are consistently recognized (1-8) as being the symbols that best characterize its uniqueness. These heritage buildings are more than just architectural diversity with a multicultural twist; they are physical markers that define people's perceptions and understanding of a place's identity. These buildings are associated with George Town's rich history, cultural identity, and its special ambience, thereby establishing that its identity is inextricably intertwined with its conserved built environment. The juxtaposition with modern icons like Komtar Tower (Participants 1-3, 5-8) further emphasizes its identity, thereby establishing that its heritage environment is crucial in defining people's perceptions of its identity. While its intangible aspects, like its cultural activities, are part of its urban experiences, this study clearly shows that its heritage environment is principally responsible for its Place Identity, being the most identifiable aspect that is reflected in its participants.



Figure 7: Penang peranakan
source: Author (2025)



Figure 8: Old Shop House
source: Author (2025)



Figure 9: Padang Kota
source: Author (2025)



Figure 10: Komtar
source: Author (2025)



Figure 11: Blue Mansion Cheong Fatt Tze
source: Author (2025)

Intangible Heritage: Cultural celebrations and multicultural practices

The data analysis of the interviews suggests that cultural festivals and practices of multiculturalism primarily make a contribution to Place Attachment for George Town. Intangible events like lion dances for Chinese New Year (Participants 1 through 8), temple ceremonies, and festive lighting on the streets are constantly portrayed as events that evoke pride, happiness, and warmth, thus promoting community engagement and intergenerational continuity. Similarly, other festivities like Hari Raya, Thaipusam, and Deepavali (Participants 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8) have been recognized as events that symbolize cultural heritage and unite people of different communities, thus creating collective memories and promoting emotional attachment to the city. The festive environment of Little India (Participants 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8), symbolized by its vibrant shops, food stalls, and music, is also recognized as a living heritage environment where intercultural engagements on a day-to-day basis make people feel emotionally attached to the environment. In all, it is clear that research participants recognize George Town's intangible heritage as cultural heritage as well as a source of emotional attachment, thus proving that festivals, ceremonies, and intercultural engagements make Place Attachment the central concept.



Figure 12 : Chinese New Year
source: Google (2025)



Figure 13 : Hari Raya
source: Google (2025)



Figure 14 : Thaipusam
Source: Google (2025)



Figure 15: Little India
source: Author (2025)

Tangible and Intangible Heritage: Food culture

The analysis of participant responses indicates that food culture serves as both tangible and intangible heritage that shapes George Town's sense of place. Iconic heritage foods such as Char Kway Teow and Laksa (Participants 1–3, 6) and Nasi Kandar (Participants 5, 6, 8) were highlighted for their historical significance and continuity across generations, reflecting the city's culinary lineage. Street food stalls and hawker practices (Participants 1–8) were described as daily rituals that foster social interactions, maintain traditions, and connect residents and visitors to the local cultural landscape. Furthermore, adaptive reuse cafés within heritage buildings (Participants 3, 6, 9) illustrate the integration of modern culinary experiences into historic spaces, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between preservation and contemporary use. Collectively, these findings suggest that George Town's culinary heritage both in everyday practices and iconic dishes contributes to emotional attachment, community identity, and lived experience, showing how tangible and intangible heritage jointly influence people's sense of place and directly addressing the research question.



Figure 16: Char koeytew generation stall
source: Author (2025)



Figure 17: Restaurant Nasi Kandar
source: Author (2025)



Figure 18: Street Food Stalls
source: Author (2025)



Figure 19 : Adaptive reused café
source: Author (2025)

Heritage vs Development: A Place Attachment Perspective

Participants highlighted how their place attachment to George Town shaped their perceptions of the tension between heritage preservation and urban development. Komtar Tower and nearby shopping malls (Participants 1–3, 5–8) were frequently mentioned as symbols of modernization that disrupt the historic streetscapes to which residents feel emotionally connected. The adaptive reuse of heritage buildings into cafés and boutique hotels (Participants 1, 3, 6, 9) demonstrated how modern functions can coexist with conserved structures, helping sustain attachment by keeping old buildings relevant. Street network changes and ongoing LRT construction (Participants 3, 5–7) were viewed as visible reminders of rapid

transformation that threatens the familiar character of the city. Overall, participants expressed concern that unchecked urban development could weaken their emotional bonds to George Town, emphasizing the need to balance modernization with heritage preservation to protect the city's cultural identity.



Figure 20: Building
source: Author (2025)



Figure 21: Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings (Café)
source: Author (2025)



Figure 22: Street Network changes
source: Author (2025)

Place Dependence in Everyday Life and routines

Participants emphasized that George Town's sense of place is strongly shaped by everyday interactions and routines. Crowded heritage streets (Participants 1–3, 6, 8) foster multicultural social interactions, while family routines at hawker stalls and public spaces (Participants 2–3, 6–8) reinforce continuity of tradition. Padang Kota (Participants 1, 6, 7) was noted for leisure, jogging, and socializing, and youth-focused events at Hin Bus Depot (Participants 3, 6) illustrated how heritage spaces adapt to contemporary activities. Overall, most participants associate their emotional attachment and sense of belonging with both tangible heritage spaces and the everyday cultural practices that animate them.



Figure 23: Crowded heritage streets with interations
source: Author (2025)



Figure 24: Family routines at hawker stalls / public spaces
source: Author (2025)



Figure 25: Youth events at Hin Bus Depot
source: Author (2025)



Figure 26: Padang Kota activities
source: Author (2025)

CONCLUSION

The significance of the George Town heritage environment, encompassing both its tangible and intangible aspects, is shown to be essential to the development of a sense of place. The results indicate the significance of tangible heritage aspects such as George Town's historic shophouses, Peranakan mansions, Padang Kota, and restored streetscapes in the reinforcement of the sense of place. The same tangible aspects are shown to be significant to the sense of dependence on the place because these aspects enable the performance of various daily activities.Apart from the physical surroundings, intangible heritage like cultural events, religious events, foodways, multicultural interactions, and everyday routines of

communities was identified to play a crucial role in place attachment. All participants associated their emotional connections to engagement in events like celebrations, experiencing hawker culture, interacting with local communities, and creating memories through everyday engagements in heritage spaces.

Furthermore, the above study strengthens the idea that the lived experience is the primary link between heritage environments and the perception of a sense of place. Residents with longer durations of residence are more likely to exhibit a heightened sense of place identity and attachment as a result of their continued interaction, memory, and cultural continuity. Visitors, on the other hand, will have a more aesthetic or functional experience of the heritage environment, resulting in a weaker attachment. Although urban modernization is important to the economic vitality of a heritage environment, the above study also suggests the dangers of over-commercialization.Indeed, the research question posed in this study has been satisfactorily answered, as this research has been able to show the sense of place in George Town arises from the interplay between change, evident in urban development and contemporary lifestyles, and similarity, reflected in its preserved heritage and cultural practices, which is place identity (tangible heritage), place attachment (intangible heritage), and place dependence (dependence on the heritage environment). This interaction underlines the importance of having a balance between preservation and development in order to retain the identity of George Town.

However, this study has several limitations. The interviews were conducted with a limited number of participants, primarily from the Malay community. Future research can enhance depth and representativeness by incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, including participants from different ethnic backgrounds such as Chinese, Indian, and Peranakan communities. Additionally, the study has only explored one heritage city. Similar research could be extended to other UNESCO World Heritage Sites and heritage cities to examine how heritage values influence sense of place in different physical and socio-cultural contexts. Comparative studies across multiple sites would provide broader insights into the relationship between tangible heritage, intangible cultural practices, and lived experiences in shaping place identity and attachment.

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