

From Slum to Tourist Attraction: Mural in India Street Kuching, Sarawak

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Abstract

The City of the Cat or better known as Kuching is a city that is rich with cultural diversity and tourist attractions such as cultural events, monuments with the essence of local culture, historical buildings and public arts. There are abandoned areas in the heart of the City that pose a potential threat to the tourism industry. The researchers, with the help of Kuching North City Hall, have identified the spot that is located at the corner of Indian Street to be the perfect location for the artistic makeover. This is because the area is abandoned, filthy and known as the 'back alley' where the drunks hang out and dirty the place with rubbish and urine. This paper focuses on the transformation of the area from 'slum' to tourist attraction using art. It is a collaboration project between Kuching North City Hall and the Faculty of Art & Design, UiTM Sarawak, to enhance the artistic ambience of the city. Since Tourism is one of the key sources of the state's income, this project hopes to yield more tourist attractions to Sarawak. Furthermore, the project aims to revitalize the 'forgotten' areas in the city through art to add to the repertoire of tourist attractions in the city.

Keywords - Mural, India Street, Slum Area, Tourist Attraction

1. Introduction

The prime purpose of this project is to use public art, (Mural) to 'revive' the abandoned corners in the city in order to transform it into a tourist attraction. This is due to the fact that tourism in Sarawak has been an ever-growing industry. According to an online article from the Borneo post, there were 3.27 million tourists, both foreign and domestic who visited the state back then in 2010. The number steadily rose to 4.86 million visitors in 2014. Now, in 2017, the numbers are expected rise. Visitors come to the city to enjoy and experience the culture, art, the beauties of flora and fauna and the post-war architecture that adds aesthetic value to the city.

However, as the city celebrates its cultural endeavor, there are minor issues that lie in the heart of the city itself. One of the issues is the abandoned areas that needed to be upgraded as it could jeopardize the image of the city. The project was funded by the University Community Transformation Centre (UCTC), Kuching North City Hall provides the location and the Faculty of Arts & Design (UiTM Cawangan Sarawak) lend their creative expertise to transform the area 'from slum to tourist attraction'. The Mayor of Kuching North City Commission (DBKU) Datuk Abang Abdul Wahab Abang Julai said that this new addition to the repertoire is also in line with our CBS (Cantik, Bersih, Selamat) Plan to make Kuching is beautiful, clean, safe and popular city by 2017. (Adrian Lim in The Borneo Post, 11 April 2015)

2. Background of the Study

Sarawak is one of the largest states in Malaysia besides Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Penang. Rapid development has made the state become a tourist destination both domestically and abroad. It becomes one of the unique and exciting tourist attraction, historical buildings, and monuments with the essence of local culture, cultural diversity, authentic local cuisine, fascinating eco-system and much more.

Kuching or better known as Cat City is the center place of tourist besides Miri, Sibul, Sri Aman, Bintulu, Samarahan and more. The famous part of Kuching is at the Main Bazaar. It's located at the heart of the city where it has historical Chinese shop houses along the Kuching Waterfront in front of Sarawak River. The tourists and locals will come here for antiques and handicrafts. Some of the most popular locations are Indian Street and Carpenter Street.

One of the famous street in Kuching occupied shops operate by Indian from the southern and northern part of India is The Kling Street. Sir Charles Brooke, The Third White Rajah of Sarawak, has changed the street name from Kling Street (1950's) to Indian Street in 1928. There is the oldest mosque in Sarawak built by Sarawak's Indian Muslim community in 1837 known as Masjid India located in between India Street and Gambier Street. It has a huge drum (*bedok*) which accompanies the call the prayer.

Meanwhile, on the wall of India Street facing the main road, there is mural of Orang Utans sitting in a wheelbarrow. The mural was painted on April 2014 by Ernest Zacharevic usual interactive style, the actual wheelbarrow was cut into half and fixed to the wall to allow the public to take selfies while holding onto the handle. On the other side, the baby orangutan was painted over a nail on the wall, where people could 'position' things in their hand. Zacharevic was recognised worldwide because of his series of six street art for the George Town Festival in Penang, Malaysia in 2012.

Street art is a visual art form created in public spaces. Thus art became popular in the early 1980s and is still used for the following incarnations to this day. Street art requires the positioning in public places of unassigned artwork. Some see street art as a modern type of graffiti, while others see it as a new art trend and a professional participation in illegal activities.

This project were use an interactive mural (public art) to transform the selected location into a tourist attraction. On top of that, the interactive mural also intended to document the culture, icons of Sarawak as well as the people and activities that once flourished in the city.

3. Public Art: Mural

According to Robinson (1904) and Bach (2001), public art does not exist exclusively as a visual aid or creative expression, but it is freely accessed by public to appreciate and enjoyed the public space. The influence of public art to the community is invaluable. It can contribute to the quality of urban life, promoting its culture, showcasing the history and enhancing the economic impact of a city. (Ramlan Abdullah, 2009). Public art (mural) will also continue to be an integral part of urban town planning strategies as well as educate the community to appreciate the work of art.

Any work of art painted or directly painted on a wall, a ceiling or any other surface called mural. A unique aspect of wall paintings is the harmonious integration of the architectural elements of the given space into the painting. Besides being able to embellish the environment, the mural is used as an interactive way to communicate or delivering a message to the public. Since prehistoric drawings have been found on the walls of caves that display the story of living at that period.

Murals play an important role that bring art into the public sphere. It is either the local government or the corporation commissioned the artist to beautify the public wall due to the size, cost and work involved in painting the mural. There are certain rules and circumstances that need to be followed by the artist before paint. Sometimes, the subject and visual effects on the wall an enticement to draw public attention to appreciate the

art. Public art expressions, particularly murals, often serve as a means of propaganda. However, some of them still have an artistic value considering the propaganda aspect of these works.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, murals can effect the public attitudes when viewed places where people live and work. The presence of large public murals may also contribute to the aesthetic enhancement of the everyday lives of residents or workers of corporate location. They have functioned as an important means of communication for the public socially, ethically, and racially communities. They also proved to be an effective tool in establishing a dialogue and hence solving the public issue on a certain space. Many rural towns have begun using murals to create tourist attractions in order to boost economic income.

4. Significant of Study

The project is to expand the repertoire of public art, particularly on promoting it as a boost to the tourism industry. It is important for the documentation and preservation of culture in Sarawak in an alternative art form. The big picture is this project will be a gateway for other researcher or artist in Sarawak to move further with the development on how interactive mural can be utilized to document the local cultures thus contributing to the tourism industry.

In recent years, Malaysia's street art has picked up a lot and we can find both local and foreign artists' mural paintings. Today, numerous cities across the country, followed the footsteps of Penang, call on locals of all ages to beautify their walls. This makes it easier to find these open-air museums very easy for visitors; because they are normally in high tourist areas and large scale.

In 2008, George Town was designated a World Heritage Site. As a result, George Town has become a vibrant street art showcase. The project Marking George Town started this transformation in 2009, presenting a space for the social and street history of George Town through drawings that embellish physical properties. The rapid growth of street art, however, created a modern and unique art in George Town that attracts the attention of many tourists. Moreover, this town became famous due to its progressive street art. (Ngiom, 2011; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015)

Kuching is a lively city that is not only surrounded by rainforest but also adorns the cityscape with the vivid pastel hues of old Chinese shop houses. And more recently, Kuching has become a renowned street-art haven. Thanks to local arts festivals and even corporate sponsorships, lively murals are rapidly taking over more and more of the town's blank walls.

This 'City of Cats' is a center of tourist must visit place. Because of its architecture, waterfront, cultural activities became on of the best thing to explore. One of popular the public art placed in the center of Kuching is a Cat Statue as a symbol of the city. The uniqueness of Kuching's street art around the city portrays scenes from local life style, wildlife and culture.

5. Methodology

5.1 The Interactive Mural

The objectives of using interactive mural are to transform the abandoned and decaying corners in the city into a tourist attraction and as a documentation of cultures, icons and the history of the city. The method of using the interactive mural will invite participation from the visitors or tourist that will impose a memorable experience that can be shared through social media as a mean of indirect promotion for the city and the essence of cultures from Sarawak can be documented through the interactive mural.

5.2 Learning Content

The interactive mural will create awareness to the locals to appreciate public art. In the interactive mural, the artists have inculcated visuals and icons of local culture that provides visual information to the visitor or tourist

at Indian Street, Kuching Sarawak.

5.3 The Process

The process of the interactive mural includes: ideations, preparation of the venue, fabrication of the metal items and painting the mural.

5.3.1 Ideation

Lecturers from the Faculty of Art & Design (UiTM Sarawak) presenting the idea, followed by presentation of visuals and sketches for the Interactive Mural. The images were chosen based on local images, human activities, local flora and fauna, and popular images at the place before.



Figure 1. Meeting with DBKU, Local committee for the collaboration



Figure 2. Design proposed

5.3.2 Preparation of the Venue

The team is cleaning the location. The processes involving, scrapping the wall of the old building in the area, wash the floor of the venue because it is littered with sewage and urine.



Figure 3. Cleaning

5.3.3 Mural Process

Students preparing the stencil items getting the right angles and measurements for the interactive mural.



Figure 4. Tracing Image

5.3.4 Mural Process: Fabrication

The lecturer briefing the students on how to treat the surface of the wall and stencil the subject matter before overlapping it with layers of paint. Selecting and arranging the stencil board according to the plan. Students scrapping and applying the base layer of paint for the mural.



Figure 5. Applying the design on the wall at Indian Street

5.3.5 Mural Process: Applications of Paint Layer

The image has been detailed up and fills with colors.



Figure 6. Detailing process on the image

5.3.6 The Mural: The Semi-finishes Product



Figure 7. View from Indian Street



Figure 8. Some part of the design on the wall

5.3.7 Feedback

During the process, the artists were approached by tourist and locals that gave us positive feedbacks on the project. One of the visitor said he really appreciates the imagery of the past used in the mural because it reminded him of the memories attached to the location. A tourist said that the interactive mural definitely will make Kuching the 'next Penang'.



Figure 5.9: Tourist taking pictures with the mural

6. Conclusion

This collaborative project is another success in the local art industry. It showed that the state government, city hall, the public and the educational institution have worked together to prove the importance of public art in contributing to various industries especially the tourism industry. It can be a unique contributor to a quality urban living environment that celebrates its community, highlights memories and even increases the economic impact of a city. Thus, public art will continue to be an essential part of the urban development strategies and educate the community to appreciate the work of art. In conclusion, the main objective has been achieved. To turn the India Street area from slum to tourist attractions and enhance the artistic ambience of Kuching city.

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