Research Note

George Town’s Street Mural Art and Tourism Impact

Clement Liang C. M.*
Penang Heritage Trust

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of street mural art on tourism in Penang, based on data sourced from literature reviews, news portal reports and a street survey. The paper attempts to look at the development of street mural art in the context of the world art scene and how it has evolved into a trendy and contemporary art form, and in some places - like George Town in Penang - its popularity is now being exploited to boost tourism while being turned into local iconic symbols. This paper also attempts to analyze the collected data related to the major events, impact on tourism and sustainability of street mural art in George Town. Street mural art is copied by other cities and towns in Malaysia, and Thailand recently, with the intention to emulate the success of George Town in promoting it as a tourism product. This is perhaps a new phenomenon in the Asian tourism field and one which differs from the Western world in its context and purposes.

Keywords: Street mural art, George Town World Heritage Site, Shophouses, Inner city, Tourism, Economic impact, Asian phenomenon

Introduction

The origin of street mural art can be traced back to the prehistoric sculptures and cave paintings. Human beings have a creative instinct to express their artistic talent in the public space and used open blank surfaces as the canvas for earlier art expressions and memories. This form of popular art has appeared in almost all civilizations and marks a process in human evolution history; from living on basic survival instinct to art appreciation.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of street mural art on the heritage and tourism industry in Penang, based on data sourced from literature
reviews, news portal reports and surveys on the street mural art tourists. The paper looks at the development of street mural art in the context of the world art scene, and how it has evolved into a trendy, local and contemporary art form in places like George Town in Penang, where its popularity is also being exploited to boost tourism, at the same time as being turned into local iconic symbols. The street mural art trend is being copied by other cities and towns in Malaysia and Thailand with the intention of emulating the success of George Town in promoting it as a tourism product, and is perhaps a new phenomenon in the Asian tourism field and one which differs from the Western world in its context and purposes.

The Street Mural Art and Living Space

Street mural art as an urban art form has evolved in recent decades at an accelerated pace. Beginning in the ghettos of New York in the 1970’s, the themes, technique and styles of street art are continually changing and evolving but the aims remain the same: to express, to draw attention, to communicate and to provoke ideas (Campos 2012). The artists generally prefer to be anonymous or maintain a low profile, although their artworks seek to gain recognition (or some sort of understanding) from passers-by on the social message expressed. For years, street mural art belonged to the realms in back alleys, blank walls, abandoned vehicles and subway stations etc.; painted without the approvals of the owners or authorities and treated more often as graffiti waiting to be white-washed over.

In the late 1990’s, street mural art was largely transformed and began to be accepted as mainstream art, as more galleries, books and magazines in Western countries focused on this contemporary art form and gave it proper recognition. Perhaps one of the most controversial street artists in the world, from Bristol, Banksy, has developed an entire street art subculture devoted to his graffiti artworks (Baker 2008). Posters and pictures of his street art at popular sites can be easily searched within social media, and public discussions of the creative paintings are hot topics. In the 21st century, the status of street art painters has been further elevated and their paintworks need not be confined to the hidden corners of the streets any more.

Although street art remains illegal in most places around the world, some cities have begun to recognize the positive effects the artwork has on local
communities and city environments. In cities like New York, Bristol and Berlin, city authorities and advertising agencies have supported street art by commissioning works of art on the walls of public and private buildings. Compared to duplicated billboards, each piece of street art is unique, can grab public attention easier and give better mileage for the advertisers. Painting murals on the sides of buildings also brightens neighborhoods. “Street art has the visual and cognitive effect of commercial advertising, and many of its brand dynamics, but carries messages of enjoyment, ideological critique, and activist exhortation rather than of commercial consumption” (Borghini et al. 2010). The presence of street art painters, is seen to enrich the cultural scene of public places and they are deemed to be good for the diversity of art expressions in the town.

Recent trends in global city’s urban design call for the “Creative City” regeneration approach; policy makers and town planners are reviewing and shifting away from the conventional methodology of designing living spaces based on tangible infrastructure development, towards that of ‘creativity’ in towns and communities, to provide spaces for creative industries and cultural development (Khoo et al. 2015). Art is being used for urban revitalization and the concept to “live, play, work, invest” in a post-industrial city is the new mission and vision employed by some city councilors to revive lackluster or sterile inner city living, to rejuvenate dwindling neighborhoods and to attract crowds back to cities through more interesting public art work, street murals and cultural events etc. (Rocha 2008). Berlin, Buenos Aires, London, New York and Melbourne are some of the global cities joining the bandwagon; experimenting using street art to boost the local art scene and enhance the identity of a place. The last decade has seen the promulgation of street mural arts in Asia as well. Together with rap music and Black American culture, street art is copied by the younger generation in this region as a fashion statement and symbol of trend setters.

**George Town – From Inner City Decline to the World Heritage Listing**

George Town, Penang, was founded by the British East India Company in 1786 and groomed to be an entrepôt for trading spices and local produce. For centuries, it thrived as a regional trade hub with its strategic location at the northern entrance of the Straits of Malacca, a vital waterway connecting the Far East to India and Europe. Penang Island enjoyed tax-free status since the
British colonial period and became a magnate to attract traders, shoppers and tourists from near and far. Known as the “Pearl of the Orient” in the 1960’s, Penang offered cheap shopping and pristine tropical beaches, was a well-known beach resort in the region and at one stage rest and relaxation destination for the American soldiers taking their breaks from the Vietnam War (Khoo 2007). However, when the island’s tax-free status was revoked in 1969, it triggered the gradual downward slide of the island’s economy.

For years, the pre-War shophouses in George Town were protected from urban development due to the national Rent Control Act enacted in 1966, which prohibited landlords from arbitrarily increasing the rent and ensured affordable social housing to the lower income groups in Penang’s inner city (Tjoa-Bonatz 2000). The Act was repealed in 2000 and it led to a big change in the demographic distribution of the population, and disrupted the economic activity of George Town. House rentals shot up overnight, forcing tenants to move out of their homes and resettle in suburban areas and reclaimed coastal lands where new flats emerged. The gentrification of inner city population accelerated and the derelict buildings led to more demolitions (Mok 2016). Many pre-War shophouses in the city’s peripheral areas were replaced by the high-rise apartments and modern office buildings built during the booming years in the early 1990’s. The narrow streets in the core zone of George Town were still saddled with rows of old buildings waiting for new development opportunities, but the ensuing recession years following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1998 dampened the property speculations in the old town area, leaving fewer residents and more empty houses (Filmer 2015).

The looming crisis facing the dilapidating inner city area of George Town prompted concerned citizens, social media, opposition parties, and non-government organizations, like SOS and Penang Heritage Trust, to highlight the issues and heighten awareness of the danger of losing the built and living heritage of the traditional neighborhood in the inner city, where dwindling numbers of trades artisans and residents are staying. In order to address the further decline of George Town and to save its rich multi-cultural heritage, and to boost its tourism potential, the state party began the process of listing George Town as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site (WHS), together with Melaka, another historic city in southern Malaysia facing a similar dilemma since
2000. The application was successful on 7th July, 2008, when UNESCO officially inscribed both George Town and Melaka as a cultural World Heritage Site in its annual conference in Quebec, Canada.

The three Outstanding Universal Values which enabled George Town (and Melaka) to be inscribed were:

Criterion (ii): George Town and Melaka represent exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns in East and Southeast Asia, forged from the mercantile and exchanges of Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures and three successive European colonial powers, each with its imprints on the architecture and urban form, technology and monumental art. Both towns show different stages of development and the successive changes over a long span of time and are thus complementary.

Criterion (iii): George Town and Melaka are living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life.

Criterion (iv): George Town and Melaka reflect a mixture of influences which have created a unique architecture, culture and townscape without parallel anywhere in East and South Asia. In particular, they demonstrate an exceptional range of shophouses and townhouses. These buildings show many different types and stages of development of the building type, some originating in the Dutch or Portuguese periods. (UNESCO 2008)

The integrity of the nominated areas in both towns is related to the presence of all the elements necessary to express their Outstanding Universal Values (OUVs) ¹, where these properties have retained their authenticity; listed monuments and sites have been retained with regards to the design, materials, methodologies, techniques and workmanship.

UNESCO commented that protective measures for the properties are necessary for George Town, which has exhibited a generally acceptable state
of conservation, although more efforts are required to ensure the conservation of shophouses, and can be enhanced through the continuing conservation programs of the State Party (UNESCO 2008).

The importance attached to the conservation of shophouses is stressed by this world body and as a state party, Malaysia is obliged to follow the UNESCO guidelines to protect and preserve the old buildings with proper conservation guidelines and enforcement of regulations.

In April 2010, the Penang State Government set up George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) to protect, promote and preserve George Town as a sustainable heritage city. GTWHI works in cooperation with the federal, state, and local governments, as well as several non-governmental organizations to monitor and execute heritage conservation related activities.

To ensure the importance of the WHS is understood, the state agency is tasked to work with many partners and collaborators, from conservation specialists to various government agencies for better planning, conservation and management of the physical site; consulting historians and arts practitioners on a program of educational and cultural activities. Research, impact studies, site usage, public awareness, branding, promotion, public transport, tourism, and security must all be given equal attention (GTWHI 2016).

Eventually a comprehensive Conservation Management Plan and Special Area Plan on the George Town and Melaka World Heritage Site was drafted and submitted to UNESCO in January 2011 (Ministry of Information Communications and Culture Malaysia 2011). Measuring 485 pages, it details every aspect of the conservation, management, implementation, monitoring and guidance expected from a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its broad objective is to facilitate the proper management of the WHS, including the use and development of all buildings, and measures that would enhance the integration of the physical environment, economic wellbeing of its people and the demands of growth. The management plan outlines the much needed strategies and guidance that would enable and allow changes to take place within a framework of conservation and protection, and at the same time, give recognition to the residents and communities living in the site to continue to live and follow their cultural and social practices. The management plan’s strategies and measures are flexible to allow for changes and further improvement.
This is where the contentious issue of the wall mural art in the WHS is raised and addressed accordingly. The old walls of the shophouses represent an integral part of the cultural landscape of George Town and any attempts to alter, demolish or deface any part of the old walls can be deemed a violation of the conditions stipulated in the guideline (AJM Planning and Design Group 2011). Thus, various conditions imposed on the wall mural paintings in the WHS of George Town were later thought out and executed; in particular, the process to secure a wall space to paint a picture on would require official sanction, with proper vetting and approval procedures made by the Heritage Department of the Penang Municipal Council.

**George Town, Penang: A Case Study of Using Street Mural Art to Boost Heritage Tourism**

Towards the end of the 20th century, a noticeable trend in global tourism emerged. More “new wave” tourists now preferred to have real cultural experiences; visits to the UNESCO World Heritage Sites and appreciating art or learning a skill in a local setting become the ‘in-thing’ in what is termed as “Heritage Tourism” (Heng et al. 2010). In the case of Penang, the focus of tourism also shifted from the early days’ theme of “Sun, Sea and Shopping” to the current “Heritage Tourism”.

Since its inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, George Town has been drawing the attention of tourists who arrive in droves to observe and experience the old world charm of this historic town, where colonial-style bungalows and traditional shophouses tipped with red terracotta roofs are mostly found intact and in large numbers. Despite the increasing number of tourists to the inner city, the city’s lifeless old street scene in the early days of its WHS listing often failed to encourage tourists to stay on for longer periods of time or to spend money. Souvenir stalls and cafes were few and far between, and years of gentrification still had its grip on the lackluster life of the inner city.

A quote from the American Journal of Advertising aptly described street art as “the visual and cognitive effect of commercial advertising, and many of its brand dynamics, but carries messages of enjoyment, ideological critique, and activist exhortation rather than of commercial consumption” (Borghini et al. 2010). While some local people and conservationists prefer the old town
remains untouched, the authorities, traders and artists are trying hard to push George Town forward as a place where culture is not just embedded in the past but progresses to accept new ideas. Historically, George Town boasts itself as a two-hundred-year old melting pot of cultures between the East and the West, having developed a rich multi-cultural heritage with the influx of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. In recent years, alongside globalization and the popularity of Asian pop art and American street culture, the local community’s art scene has inevitably started to absorb these new elements. The city is at a juncture, looking for a direction of new growth and a new identity, and the timely expansion in the tourism industry gives an opportunity for cultural revitalization and economic regeneration that can sustain the livelihoods in the inner city. George Town is seeking a balance; to guard the main features of its unique traditions and allow new transformation to take place.

In an effort to turn George Town into a more livable and interesting city, in July 2010, the State Government of Penang launched the George Town Festival, a month of celebrations filled with international and local cultural events as a way to reinvent the city as a place of arts (GTF 2016). With some conservative public skepticism, the festival started with full funding from the state government and managed to grow to regional fame due to the mastermind and hard work of a Creative Art Director named Joe Sidek, who attracted world class artists and music performers to hold world class cultural events in George Town in conjunction with its anniversary celebration of the WHS listing.

**Figure 1.** Lifeless derelict shophouses of George Town.
Source: the author.
In 2011, street art became a prominent addition to George Town’s cultural scene when 52 welded wrought iron metal sculptures were introduced and erected in front of the walls or at corners of the streets (with minimal nailing, in order to avoid violating the UNESCO guideline on protecting the old buildings) (Penang Global Tourism [PGT] 2016). With the theme “Marking George Town”, the sculptures show Penang culture and people in humor-laced stories and caricatures, drawing visitors and locals alike to appreciate the images and stories of Penang in the past.

![Figure 2. ‘Marking George Town’: The Wrought Iron Artwork, erected in 2011. Source: the author.](image)

In 2012, as part of the officially hosted George Town Festival events, a Lithuanian artist, Ernest Zacharevic, was commissioned by the event organizer to create a series of six wall paintings depicting local culture, inhabitants and lifestyles, under the theme “Mirrors George Town” (Lim 2015). While some conservationists raised concerns over the officially sanctioned “graffiti art”, which could mar the traditional old streetscape, and the risk of using improper painting materials that could damage the delicate wall’s surface, an advisory body Public Art Review Panel (PARP) set up by GTWHI and the authorities came out with specific guidelines on how these wall mural artworks would be allowed: 1) The paint used had to be silicate based to allow “wall breathing” or moisture to escape the wall surface; 2) The artwork was non-permanent and had to be easily removable with no structural damage caused and; 3) Special permission had to be obtained in advance to
put up the mural art in public spaces (Lee 2014; GTWHI 2014). These measures were taken to minimize the risk of wall damage and to limit the number of wall mural arts allowed in a specific area. They also effectively halted further criticism of supposed non-compliance to the WHS guidelines, as silicate paints were recommended for use on the old lime-plaster walls. Opposition voices were few and they did not cause any major obstacles to the street mural art appearing on the old walls.

![Image](source):

**Figure 3.** ‘Mirrors George Town’ by Earnest Zacharevic. Source: the author.

Ernest Zacharevic painted pictures of Asian children on the walls, with extra gadgets such as half bicycles and a chair mounted in front the pictures to create illusive, three dimensional art works in several strategic spots across George Town. Minimal or virtually no damage was caused to the old walls and the painting process was widely reported in local newspapers. Many tourists found such expressions of Asian faces on the wall refreshing and unique to this part of the world. One artwork, ‘Boy on Motorcycle’ which combined a real bike installation and a child wall painting, allows spectators to interact with the art work. The masterpiece, ‘Children on a Bicycle’, at the junction of Armenian Street and Beach Street, has become one of the most photographed spots in Penang and has been voted as one of the best pictures in the world by The Guardian (Spender et al. 2013). The street artwork now stands as a celebrated cultural landmark of George Town, complete with name plaques and often long queues of people waiting to have their photograph taken with these pictures.
Zacharevic received worldwide recognition after creating these street art murals, using images depict scenes of everyday life using local people as the models, with the BBC calling him Malaysia's answer to Banksy (BBC Trending 2013).

Figure 4. The immensely popular mural art: “Children on a Bicycle”. Source: the author.

In the following years, different groups of artists were commissioned to paint a limited number of street murals, with themes like “101 Stray Cats”, in other parts of George Town. The artistic charm and the social messages conveyed by these murals have successfully promoted Penang’s contemporary culture onto the international platform, while Zacharevic’s mural paintings are fast gaining popularity among locals and overseas tourists, especially those from Asian countries. So synonymous is the street mural art with George Town’s tourism icon, that the state government tourism board, Penang Global Tourism, and private advertisers, printed thousands of free tourist maps based on the artworks, for tourists to follow and embark upon suggested trails while they discover the wall murals scattered in George Town (PGT 2016). Tourists tend to pose with the wall pictures and upload their photographs to Facebook.
or other social media platforms as proofs of being there. Meanwhile, souvenir stalls and shops on every street corner sell notebooks, T-shirts, fridge magnets, key chains, postcards and every other imaginable knick-knick bearing one or all of Zacherevic’s creations.

![Tourist map and souvenirs to trace the street mural arts.](image)

**Figure 5.** Tourist map and souvenirs to trace the street mural arts.  
Source: the author.

On the Tripadvisor website, the Street Art in George Town is rated No. 4 out of the 199 things to do in Penang, with an average rating of 4.5 out of 5, a testimony to its tremendous popularity among tourists (Tripadvisor 2017). More than 400 reviews are recorded under this particular entry, higher than most other tourist attractions in Penang. Some of the comments found on this website are:

Really great idea to have the street art dotted around so you can explore and tick them off as you go along. Really enjoyed looking for them and taking photos. Some of the streets have really trendy cafes and shops - a great area to explore and look for the art!

Street was interesting and quite varied. Sometimes there was a bike in the wall or cats in window frames, art pieces everywhere you went. It was quite hot so definitely wear protection. You can hire bikes for 1 or up to 6 people to ride around the area to see all the art work.

Penang Street Art has become famous and is now being imitated in a few other Malaysian cities as well. Most pieces of well-known street art work in Penang were executed by Lithuanian born artist Ernest Zacharevic.
A tasteful and diverse range of art lives between the walls and buildings of Penang. It’s a delight to see the city appreciate its street art culture. A casual stroll of many streets reveal surprising installations.

Came to Penang for the street art and was not disappointed! You really feel like you are participating in a treasure quest along with other tourists, camera and map in hands. A little tip would be to start a bit early to beat the crowd, and bring a hat and water with you, or just stop by the numerous coffee (sic) (ibid.).

Reading from the comments above, a common reaction from the tourists is the surprise and excitement as they discovered the street mural paintings with strong local Asian flavors. Themes like children on a bicycle, stray cats, and a sleepy trishaw man are common scenes in George Town but in the eyes of outsiders, they represent the unique features of local culture. Taking photos with the mural art is considered a fun way to appreciate local culture.

![Figure 6](image)

**Figure 6.** Total international visitors via Penang International Airport, 2007 – 2014. Source: George, 2015.

As expected, there was a large hike in tourism arrivals after the WHS listing in 2008. Figure 6 lists the 2007–2014 statistics, compiled by the Immigration Department at Penang International Airport on the number of direct arrivals of foreigners (excluding transit via Kuala Lumpur International Airport). As
is the case with many UNESCO World Heritage Sites, George Town now had a big draw card to attract tourists and it saw an unprecedented increase in tourist arrival numbers.

A marked increase in arrivals is noticed between 2013 and 2014, where double digit growth was recorded from several Asian countries. The popularity of the street mural art could be one of the contributing factors, as a search on social media finds numerous reporting and sharing of the street art starting from 2013, a year after Zacharevic completed his series of mural paintings in George Town.

The table below shows the visitor arrivals according to the top source countries.

**Table 1.** Number of Top Direct Arrivals via Penang International Airport 2010 - 2014.

| Arrivals by Direct Flights | 2010  | 2011  | 2012  | 2013  | 2014  | Increase btw 2013-2014 | Ave. Increase over 5 years |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Indonesia                  | 192404| 238643| 230395| 232423| 286896| +23%                   | +49%                      |
| Singapore                  | 96400 | 113993| 104855| 110323| 144368| +30%                   | +50%                      |
| China                      | 31325 | 46517 | 45598 | 43934 | 61095 | +39%                   | +95%                      |
| Japan                      | 22668 | 29015 | 25215 | 26325 | 30927 | +17%                   | +36%                      |
| Thailand                   | 16442 | 17009 | 17930 | 17685 | 19590 | +11%                   | +19%                      |
| Australia                  | 16687 | 20053 | 18395 | 19218 | 20712 | +7%                    | +24%                      |

Source: Penang in Numbers, 2014/2015.

**A New Cultural Phenomenon in Asia?**

To gauge the interest and perception of George Town’s tourists on the street mural art, a street survey was conducted on Sunday morning, 16th April, 2017, where the well-known “Children on a Bicycle” is located on Armenian Street. The tourists were counted according to their ethnic background, i.e. Asian or Caucasian and separated into those who took the photos with the “Children on a Bicycle” and those who did not. The statistics were compiled as follows.

An interesting observation can be made based on the enthusiasm of the tourists who posed and snapped photographs with the street mural art in
George Town; a higher percentage were found to be Asians, at 58%. On the other hand, Caucasian tourists showed much less interest in posing with the street art.

Table 2. Number and Type of Tourists posing for photos with Wall Mural Art.

| Photo-taking with “Children on Bicycle” mural art on 16/04/2017 | Number of Asians who took photos with the mural art | Number of Asians who passed by without taking a photo | Percentage of Photo taking by Asian tourists | Number of Caucasians who took photos with the mural art | Number of Caucasians who passed by without taking a photo | Percentage of Photo taking by Caucasian tourists |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Total                                                          | 478                                                | 346                                               | 58.0%                                       | 12                                                   | 82                                                   | 12.7%                                                      |

Overall, the tourists found the street mural art interesting and integrated well with the open public space, providing appropriate meaning and a local cultural flavor to the area. Posing and taking photograph with the street mural art was an interesting behavior, observed of many Asian visitors, especially those who were willing to queue up patiently to take their photos. This long-queue photo-posing phenomenon contrasts sharply with the street mural art.

Table 3. Respondents’ Answers (can be more than one).

| Response                                                      | Number of Respondents |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Yes, I looked cute with the mural art                          | 13                    |
| Yes, it was like posing in a movie scene                        | 9                     |
| Yes, since others are doing it, I’m queuing as well             | 18                    |
| Yes, I want to show my friends that I have been to this famous place | 18                    |
| Yes, I have heard so much about it and it is fun to be seen with it | 21                    |
| Yes, it represents the culture of Penang                        | 23                    |
| No, the queue is too long                                       | 8                     |
| No, I look silly with such wall murals                          | 4                     |
| No, I’m not the type to take my own photo in a street           | 12                    |
Overall, the tourists found the street mural art interesting and integrated well.

Number and Type of Tourists posing for photos with Wall Mural Art.

Table 2.

Table 3.

George Town; a higher percentage were found to be Asians, at 58%. On the one hand, there seems to be a culture of cute photo-taking and pose-for-cute-picture phenomena, where tourists are not afraid to queue up to partake in this behavior. In a street mural art context, this is particularly evident in the famous ‘I’ve been there’现象, a behavior that is especially noticeable among Asian tourists. Thirty random tourists were interviewed on the reasons why they posed with the street mural art and why not. The common answers are summarized below.

Spill Over Effects of Street Mural Art in George Town

One of the consequences of the popular street art phenomena in George Town, is the burgeoning number of art galleries that attract tourists to take photos with objects or illusive wall murals painted with three-dimensional effects. Since 2012, the Made-In-Penang Interactive Museum, 3-D Art Gallery, Time Tunnel Museum, Trick Art Museum, Upside Down Museum and other fun art galleries have established their footholds in Penang, to cash in on the ‘selfie’ and photo-posing craze of tourists (Anuar 2017). Some of the interior walls of budget hotel rooms, backpacker hostels, cafes and restaurants in the old town area are also donned with street mural art designs, something that was unimaginable a decade ago. In addition, increasing numbers of bicycle rental shops are operating in the old town area, providing tourists with the opportunity to ride in the narrow streets searching for the various street mural artworks. There are free maps and occasionally tour guides or taxi drivers that can lead the tourists to locate the street mural paintings; something akin to a treasure hunt.

Contemporary art culture began to blossom in George Town, and the annual George Town Festival seemed to catalyze a new set-up of arts centers, and increasing numbers of cultural events. Popular venues like Penangpac, SinKeh, the Hin Bus Depot, State Museum and Art Gallery, and Whiteaway Arcade, host frequent art exhibitions and cultural performances with artists coming from overseas and other Malaysian states. In addition, the street mural art scene has grown beyond the boundaries of George Town. Similar styles of street mural art depicting the lives of the local populace is noticed in neighboring towns like Taiping, Ipoh, Alor Setar in Northern Malaysia and Songkhla in Thailand; all trying to emulate the success street art has had in attracting tourists and revitalizing old town cultural activities.
The booming street art phenomenon does not come without a price as there have been reports of vandalism to the mural art, suspected by annoyed residents (Tan 2015). However, the slight damage to Zacharevic’s famous mural art was quickly reported and fixed by the authorities. Traffic congestion in tourist areas and dangerous riding on bikes by ignorant tourists are also contentious issues and much resented by the local residents, and no effective action to resolve these problems has been taken so far. The new street art scene also has its share of adverse effects. Spiraling rent and increasing tourist arrivals have made inner city living expensive. Many of the old shophouses have been converted into trendy boutique hotels and cafes, depriving the original residents of their places of dwelling and further eroding the heritage of the community. Although many of the poorer local inhabitants will not be able to locate back to the old town for dwelling, work opportunities are aplenty and it is not uncommon to see the hawkers or souvenir sellers commuting daily to carry out their business in the same areas they used to live.

**Conclusion**

Street mural art is no longer confined to personal expression or individual creation. It embraces a wider role and diverse scope that is capable of rejuvenating urban spaces and cultivating a creative artist realm. In the case of George Town, Penang, it helps to define the city’s identity by looking at its past and present, and injecting new artistic elements into the interpretation of local culture in public spaces. The difference of street mural art when compared to the other forms of artwork, is that it has a limited lifespan,
exposed to the weather and at risk of fading into oblivion, a point which the artists expect (Lim 2015). The beauty of street mural art lies in its transitory nature, and its ability to convey social messages and images of local life at a particular time. It challenges its spectators to capture the images and interpret in their own ways, what they are and how they chose to relate to them. The artwork can be abstract, yet not considered unapproachable or complex like expensive modern art paintings displayed in art galleries.

Nowadays, a tour of George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, would not be complete without looking at its street mural art. Visitors and locals alike discover the uniqueness of the city’s culture through the fun artwork, sharing their interest with friends at home via social media and indirectly promoting George Town’s tourism in an effective and costless way. Some tour packages include guides explaining the street mural art, and a Google search on the tourist attractions of Penang or Malaysia would invariably return the street mural art in George Town. Formerly lifeless old streets of George Town have been transformed, and come alive with throngs of tourists and locals returning to the inner city for rest and relaxation, especially during weekends and public holidays. The old town is often full and crowded, a reversal of the quiet and dying quarter it used to be.

Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of the successes of street mural art are the local business stakeholders. From the street stalls selling souvenirs, boutique hotels to the fine-dining establishments in George Town, every supply-chain in the tourism industry has reported booming business that had previously been unseen. Local artists and painters have also benefited with more employment opportunities and work orders to furnish visual artwork on the business premises.

The street mural art phenomenon experienced in George Town is seen to be positive, in general, and synergizes the city’s vision to be a creative and artistic place. In the long run, the regeneration of the inner city, via this new art expression in public spaces, may bring sustainable and tangible benefits by driving inner-city economic development through various commercial and cultural activities that relate to the rich heritage of George Town.
Notes

*Clement Liang Chow Ming* was born in Penang and graduated from the University of New South Wales in Australia. As a social history researcher, he is active in several NGOs in Malaysia including Penang Heritage Trust, a local conservation society to promote heritage conservation and heritage tours, where he writes articles and brochures for the tourism board. Email: clement@pht.org.my

1. Outstanding Universal Values are a set of criteria specifying the inscribed site with "Cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity” (ICOMOS, 2008).

References

AJM Planning and Design Group (2011). *George Town and Melaka, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca - Drafted Special Area Plan*. Penang: The Government of Penang, pp. 284.

Anuar, M. (2017). More Amazing and Amusing Museums. *Penang Monthly*, 8(17), pp. 54-56.

Baker, L. (2008). Banksy: off the wall. *The Daily Telegraph* [online] 28 March. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3672135/Banksy-off-the-wall.html. [Accessed 8 November, 2017].

BBC Trending (2013). Trending: Ernest Zacharevic, Malaysia’s answer to Banksy. *BBC News* [online] 13 November. Available at: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24924283. [Accessed 23 April 2017].

Borghini, S., Visconti, L.M., Anderson, L. and Sherry, Jr. J.F. (2010). Symbiotic postures of commercial advertising and street art: rhetoric for creativity. *American Academy of Advertising*, 39(3), pp. 113-126.

Campos, C. (2012). *The Graffiti Wall, Street Art from Around the World*. Barcelona: Promopress, pp. 1-4.

Filmer, A. (2015). Is Penang’s tourism on the right track?. *Penang Monthly*, 10(15), pp. 25-30.
George, S. (2015). *The tourists keep coming!* Penang Monthly, 10(15), p.35.

GTF. (2016). *George Town Festival* [online]. Available at: http://georgetownfestival.com/about/ [Assessed 12 December 2016].

GTWHI (2014). *Public Arts Review Panel (PARP)* [online]. Available at: http://www.gtwhi.com.my/regulate/public-arts-review-panel.html [Accessed 10 November, 2016].

GTWHI (2016). *What we do?* [online]. Available at: http://www.gtwhi.com.my/introduction/what-we-do.html [Accessed 16 October 2016].

Heng, C.K., Low, B.L., and Limin, H. (2010). *On Asian Streets and Public Space: selected essays from Great Asian Streets Symposiums (GASS) 1 & 2.* Singapore: Ridge Books, pp. 85 – 89.

ICOMOS. (2008). *What is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties* [online]. Available at: http://www.icomos.org/publications/monuments_and_sites/16/pdf/Monuments_and_Sites_16_What_is_OUV.pdf [Accessed 15 December 2016].

Khoo, S.L., Samat, N. and Badarulzaman, N. (2015). The Promise and Perils of the Island City of George Town (Penang) as a Creative City. *Urban Island Studies*, 1(1), pp. 20-34. doi: 10.20958/uis.2015.2

Khoo, S.N. (2007). *The Streets of George Town.* Penang: Areca Books. pp 5-7.

Lee, K. (2014). Should mural art be controlled, let it be judged objectively. *Sinchew Daily* [online]. Available at: http://www.sinchew.com.my/node/1013551 [Accessed 12 November 2016].

Lim, S. (2015). The good, bad and ugly of street artist Ernest Zacharevic’s murals. *Today Magazine*, 24 April.

Ministry of Information Communications and Culture Malaysia (2011). *Conservation and Management Plan and Special Area Plan – Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca.* KL: The Government of Malaysia.
PGT. (2016). *Street Art in George Town* [online]. Available at: http://www.tourismpenang.net.my/pdf/street-art-brochure.pdf [Accessed 11 November 2016].

Penang in Numbers (2014/2015). *Number of tourist arrivals from ten leading countries transiting through Penang Airport 2010 – 2014*. Penang: Penang Institute, p.109.

Rocha, G. (2008). *Development Economics Research Trends*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, pp. 97-121.

Spender, R, and Guardian readers (2013). Graffiti around the world – Guardian readers share their best photos. *The Guardian*. [online]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/guardianwitness-blog/gallery/2013/oct/25/graffiti-around-the-world-best-photos [Accessed 15 November 2016].

Mok, O. (2016). As rentals surge, more residents quit Penang’s heritage capital. *The Malay Mail* (4 March) [online]. Available at: http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/as-rentals-surge-more-residents-quit-penangs-heritage-capital [Accessed 10 October 2016].

Tan, R. (2015). Penang mural defaced with ‘#4.0’ graffiti. *The Star* (19 August) [online]. Available at: http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/08/19/mural-in-penang-defaced [Accessed 1 November 2016].

Tjoa-Bonatz, M.L. (2000). Penang’s Historic City Centre before the Repeal of the Rent Control Act. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 73(2), pp.53-69.

Tripadvisor. (2017). *Street art in George Town*. [online]. Available at: https://www.tripadvisor.com.my/Attraction_Review-g660694-d8803053-Reviews-Street_Art_in_George_Town-Penang_Island_Penang.html [Accessed 1 February, 2017].

UNESCO. (2008). *Melaka and George Town, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca*. [online]. Available at: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1223 [Accessed 15 December, 2016].