

# **STREET ART SPARKLE AS A NEW ECONOMIC DRIVER IN PENANG**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the contribution on street art as a new economy driver in Penang based on secondary data collected from literature review. This paper attempts to reveal the state and private initiatives in development of Penang street art. This paper provides a conceptual discussion about the role of street art and artists in Penang towards urban regeneration and creative place-making. The fame of street art started to flourish in Penang since 2012 when the Lithuanian artist, Ernest Zacharevic started painting a collection of murals within the inner city of George Town to portray local culture and heritage elements. Since then, sculptures, murals and other street art installations started to proliferate within George Town and other places around Penang Island. This has not only drawn the attention from the local communities but also attracted global visitors. Nowadays, Penang is not only well-known with its rich heritage and street food but also with its vibrant showcase of street art. Besides being a new key tourism product, street art is also playing a vital role in cultivating creativity and innovation among Penang's community. Consequently, this generates impact in stimulating cross-sectors collaboration to strengthen the local economy. The discussion in this paper highlights the economic dividends generated from public art or street art through an artistic and creative public place-making process in a city. Based on the literature and relevant texts and documents, the finding in this paper provides an overview about the existing impact from Penang street art in driving or regenerating the local economy. This finding contributes as a reference for researchers who attempt to investigate the potential of art strategy or creative city strategy as a viable urban regeneration strategy.

**Keywords:** Street Art, Economy, Penang.

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to Albert Einstein, the key aspect to measure a city's vitality is in fact not lie on its commerce but on its ART. Art and artists are rarely being colligated to the topic of city or urban development until the emergence of the concept of 'Creative City'. The popularization of this concept has shifted the development trend of global cities or spaces. Urban planners and policy makers are now looking into the new competitive demand on 'creativity' of their cities and communities.

Based on Landry's studies (2012), there are nearly 100 global cities name themselves a 'Creative City' referring to their vibrant arts and cultural infrastructure.

The influential model of concentric circles by Throsby (2001) has clearly identified creative arts as the core creative industries. As the result, art has now gained its legitimate stake in policy-making for creative economy. This is even found significant in the post-industrial cities where the local art and cultural assets are strongly promoted to foster the local creativity capacity. The researches on arts impact have highlighted the economic as well as the social dividends contributed from art projects or art initiatives.

Besides of revitalizing neighbourhoods and promoting economic prosperity, art also contribute in individual health and well-being enhancement through direct and indirect mechanisms (Shaw, 1999; Reeves, 2002; Markusen & King, 2003; Arts Victoria, 2008). Today, the power of art or art strategy is well recognized by the national arts council in many countries including the Western countries (i.e. England and Australia) and Asian countries (i.e. Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Korea and Indonesia).

Art is now found being employed as the key driver for urban or place revitalization. Creative artists are found playing the vital role in creating the vibrant and attractive spaces or places to "work, live, play and invest" in many cities. For instance, public art including street murals, sculptures and public art installation are playing the significant role in creating landmarks and creative spaces in cities such as London, the city of Melbourne, Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand. In Malaysia, the significant contribution from public or street art in urban revitalization is noticeable in Penang Island. Penang's street art has started to sparkle as a new economic driver. Other than contributing as a new tourism product, Penang's street art also helps in boosting local creative industries and other related industries (i.e. local art industries, retails, restaurants, cafes, hotels, souvenirs and etc.) through economic multiplier effect. Besides, it also brings in positive economic spin-offs like engaging local residents, promoting new social connections among local communities.

This paper aims to discuss about the economic dividends generated from Penang street art through an artistic and creative public place-making process in the city. Based on the literature and relevant texts and documents, the finding provides an overview about the existing contribution from Penang street art in driving or regenerating the local economy.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENTS**

The adoption of the concept of 'Creative City', particularly through the art and cultural strategy, as the viable urban regeneration strategy has been widely tested in many shrinking or declining industrial cities (i.e. cities in Europe, Australia and United States) (Reeves, 2002; Markusen & King, 2003; Landry, 2005; Renew Australia, 2012).

From these experiences, art especially the public or street art plays the important role in creative place-making towards the making of creative city.

In order to compete with the intensive global market, Penang's future development requires new catalyst for sustainability. Following by the listing of George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage City in 2008, the local art and cultural elements started to attract the global attention.

In conjunction with George Town Festival 2012, a collection of local public art installations including street murals by Ernest Zacharevic, a Lithuanian artist, were created within the streets in the heritage zone. Since then, Penang's street art, particularly Zacharevic's murals are fast earning its popularity among locals and tourists from all over the world. The artistic charm and the social meaning carried by his murals have successfully promoted Penang's culture to the international platform. One of his murals, titled "Little Children on a Bicycle" was recently featured in *The Guardian* as one of the best in the world (Yeoh, 2013). Nowadays, Penang's street art has converted many of the almost dying streets within George Town back to live and vibrancy. Those streets are now become the favourite visiting spots and are often crowded with visitors during weekends or public holidays. Other than revitalising the street atmosphere, Penang' street art also regenerate local tourism and spawn other related economic activities or domestic businesses. The multiplier effect has remarkably synergizes the local economy.

## **LITERATURE REVIEWS**

### **Origin and Development of Street Art**

According Smith (2007), humans started to share and express themselves in a public way by drawing on cave walls since early days. Smith perceives the cave graffiti as the first evidence of guerrilla art, which is a street art movement that first emerged in United Kingdom. Since then, place marking is emerged as an evocative form of place making. Some are purely for expressing resistance and contestation (Stenson, 1997; David & Wilson, 2002) while others are meant for public place beautification (Banksy, 2006). As summarised by Visconti, Sherry JR, Borghini and Anderson (2010), street art including street decorations and inscriptions are originally transformed from the prehistoric cave graffiti to the Roman cities rich in signs, adornments, and writings. It was then seen in colours on churches and noble buildings in the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, it was seen employed for beautifying public place. Until the late twentieth century, street art comprise aesthetic imaginary for the cultivation of peoples' creativity and innovation.

Nowadays, street art playing the vital role in creative place-making in cultivating a creative city. By conceiving urban landscapes as the canvas or screens, street artists creatively transform the public settings including the walls, floors, metro stations, traffic lights, signposts, public transports and etc. into lively artistic artworks. Some of these artworks carry meaningful messages for the public awareness on various issues that happening globally.

Therefore, street art is now also an alternative media for public education other than being a form of creative place-making.

### **Public or Street Art for Creative Place-making leading for Urban Regeneration**

According to Bengtsen's (2014) recent publication of "The Street Art World", street art has embedded as part of today's popular culture. Besides receiving growing attention from the art market, street art has also drawn the attention from the city makers or urban planners who are advocating for creative place-making or creative city-making. Nowadays, street art or public art is widely accepted as positive input for cities or places. It contributes towards artistic and attractive public cityscapes by adding aesthetic values to public spaces or streets. This consequently elevates the overall image of a city, revitalises neighbourhoods and promotes economic prosperity (Newcastle City Council, 2002; Reeves, 2002; Arts Victoria, 2008; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). One of the direct significant economic dividends generated from public or street art is boosting the local tourism industry. Subsequently, the increased population of tourists or visitors promotes other related economic activities such as souvenirs trading, retails, transport services, hotels, food and beverage businesses. This multiplier effect has significantly synergised the local economy.

Lately, the role of street artists is not only limited at the public streets, lanes or alleys. The production by street artists has entered galleries, auction houses and museums. Some artists have even participated in large-scale public art projects (Bengtsen, 2014). According to Sereemongkonpol (2014), street art in Thailand is not merely playing the role in public place-making. It is now popularly employed in interior design for hotels and restaurants around major cities in Thailand. For example, the newly operating Beat Hotel in Bangkok is popular as the art hotel with rooms designed and furnished artistically by six local urban artists, graphic designers and illustrators.

Based on some studies on arts impact in urban development, the vibrant art activities in a city not only generate dividends to the local economy, but also contribute towards enhancing community well-being for rebuilding resilient and inclusive communities through direct and indirect mechanisms (Reeves, 2002; Arts Victoria, 2008, Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Many developed countries (i.e. United States, Australia and England) as well as developing countries (i.e. Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia), which acknowledged the power of art and culture in urban development, are now putting public art at the centre of regeneration investment. One of the successful examples is the city of Philadelphia which is once plagued by graffiti. Through the Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, headed by founding muralist Jane Golden, the city is now successfully transformed into the City of Murals. Every year, twelve thousand residents and visitors tour the artworks within this city (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).



**Figure 3.1** *Design in Motion in 2009 under City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*  
(Source: extracted from “Creative Placemaking: Case Studies”, a White Paper for The Mayors’ Institute on City Design by Markusen & Gadwa (2010) (Photo by Steve Weinik)

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is written based on secondary data and information collected through literature review. Relevant documents such as government publications/ statistics, published reports, news articles, related websites, blogs, research papers and presentation materials are referred for the conceptual discussion.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Penang’s Street Art: an Overview**

The streets in George Town heritage zone have become a canvas for street art with the approval from the local authorities. This was begun with the state government’s project of ‘Marking George Town’ in 2009. The project was started with showcasing series of caricatures by the cartoonists such as Tang Mun Kian and Baba Chuah at various streets within George Town heritage zone.

Following by this, Sculpture at Work, a company which creates steel-rod sculptures, was also involved in the project. The ultimate objective of the project is to generate public awareness about the rich heritage and cultural assets within George Town.

These caricatures provide the eye-catching dioramas depicting the history of life in George Town. Besides of visually attract the public attention, the caricatures also creatively deliver the voices from the past telling about the stories of streets as well as the local communities who used to resided there.

This project targets to install a total of 52 public street sculptures within George Town progressively (Penang Global Tourism, n.d.). With reference to the brochure published by Penang Global Tourism by December 2013, all 52 street sculptures have successfully installed within George Town city (Penang Global Tourism, 2013).

Later in 2012, in conjunction with the 2012 George Town Festival celebrations, Ernest Zacharevic, the London-trained Lithuanian artist, was commissioned to paint 'Mirrors George Town', a collection of street murals within the inner city of George Town. His simple yet meaningful murals have successfully transform George Town into an interesting city to visit, with its attractive streetscape. His murals have not only attracted the local appreciation but also captured the global attention.

According to the brochure, "Marking George Town", published by Penang Global Tourism in December 2013, tourists and visitors are now being offered to a great expanded collection of street art to explore the local heritage and culture of George Town. There are total 52 wrought-iron caricatures with anecdotal descriptions of the streets in George Town and 18 wall murals that mirroring the life and practices of the local community.

### **Role of Penang's street art in cultivating a creative city as an urban regeneration strategy**

Today, Penang's street art positively contributes in promoting Penang, particularly the George Town city as a creative city. Penang started to strengthen its international position at the global tourism market with this new tourism product. Nowadays, tour around George Town to discover the unique and meaningful street art is widely promoted as a must tour under the local as well as the international tour packages. As a result, the almost dying streets within George Town city have now become the lively and vibrant visiting spots, which found crowded with visitors during most of the weekends and public holidays. Other than successfully revitalise the local streets atmosphere, this also significantly benefitted the local business operators. The business activities of the local retails, hotels, restaurants, cafes, souvenirs shops and other related industries, especially the local arts and cultural industries are remarkably revived. Many new creative hotels, cafes and restaurants as well as commercial art galleries and museums are increasingly found within the city.

Recently, street art is not merely employed for public place-making in Penang. We can now spot some cafes, restaurants, hotels and shops that widely employed street art including wall paintings and sculptures or crafts for the interior design and decoration. Furthermore, we can now seeing stakeholders from local art or related industries started to capitalise street art as commercial visual art products. For example, the Made In Penang Interactive Museum, which started to operate since 2013, is currently a flourishing private museum in Penang. It offers new experience to Penang's art appreciators by showcasing three-dimensional wall and floor murals. Its popularity has remarkably showed the potential of business in art museum.

Overall, the fame of Penang's street art has significantly promoted the local demand on visual artworks. Other than generating profits for marketers or vendors, this also

opens up more jobs opportunities to local artists and other related parties. It positively synergises the local art and cultural industry and cultivates Penang's creativity capacity towards the making of a creative city. Consequently, this brings in multiple benefits in regenerating the local economic development through direct and indirect mechanisms.

## **Challenges & Issues**

As the public and street art projects growing vigorously in Penang, it is crucial for the local government to consider the challenge in managing the artworks and also dealing with any side impacts which might arise. A well-planned practical guideline or policy are urgently called for to regulate, preserve or maintain, facilitate as well as support the public and street art projects in Penang. The guideline or policy should at least practically outline details to answer the following questions:

- 1) How to differentiate public or street art with street vandalism?
- 2) Who entitled the permission to installed public or street artworks within the city? What are limitations or restrictions?
- 3) Who will the owner of the public artwork?
- 4) Who or which party is liable or responsible for the public liability associated with the artwork?
- 5) Who will be the carer that responsible to maintain and preserve the artworks?

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, it is remarkable that street art is playing an outstanding role as a new tourism products and creative asset in Penang. It significantly contributes as a new economic driver in Penang. It contributes in regenerating the local economic development through the cultivation of the local creative industries. Also, it helps in revitalising the declining places or neighbourhoods in Penang, particularly within the George Town city through the increasing public engagement with public art. Nevertheless, it is crucial for the local government to rethink deliberately on the ways forward to govern and regulate beside of facilitate and promote the flourish of Penang's street art.

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