

Review Article

Towards Integrating Public Art in Malaysian Urban Landscape

Mohd Fabian, H.^{1*}, Osman, M. T.¹ and Mohd Nasir, B.²

¹*Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Department of Architecture, Faculty of Design and Architecture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

Public art is an art form that exists in public area for public view. It can be in the forms of sculpture, mural, sculpture fountain and even stabile or mobile inside shopping mall. Its existence breaks the mundane environment and engages some kind of social flux towards public spaces. As urban landscape serves as urban retreat place, it is a much boost of a better quality environment when art approach is becoming part of urban landscape components. Seeing that the combination of site, art and people as one organization, it generates the aura of sustainability towards the urban landscape. However, a paradox situation happens in Malaysia as all the components function solely as different units. This paper focuses on an investigation on the potentials and issues of public art in Malaysian urban landscape. Literature review, document analysis and interview were also done to help justify the findings of the investigation. The first part of the paper examined public art as a contributor towards quality urban living environment. Subsequently, issues and problems which shield the Malaysian urban landscape and to be fully integrated by public art will be highlighted as well. It is argued that the process which artworks fusing with the urban landscape leads to an awareness and an understanding of the public issues to the notion of public art. Therefore, this paper will help to generate the society's awareness and understanding of the effort of integrating public art in the Malaysia urban landscape.

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E-mail addresses:

mohdfabian@gmail.com (Mohd Fabian, H.),

osmanmt@putra.upm.edu.my (Osman, M. T.),

ibnuqalam@gmail.com (Mohd Nasir, B.)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The increase of Malaysia's urban populations is shown by the current census carried out by the Department of Statistics. It is observed that the total population of Malaysia has reached 28.31 million compared to 23.71

million in the year 2000 (Department of Statistics, 2009). This situation thus urges this country to have better urban retreat places in order to provide its population with a better quality environment. In addition, the Minister of Tourism Malaysia, YB Dato' Seri Dr. Ng Yen Yen, had announced the 1Malaysia Contemporary Art Tourism 2010 or MCAT 2010 which would be held from July till September annually (Corporate, 2010). This would be the launch pad for the public art to make its debut in generating liveliness, public participations and improvement in the urban environment.

In a research by Osman (2005), urban landscape is claimed to act as a purification of health, social and environment issues. However, without any interesting element, those spaces are rather dead or will not serve their functions as they should be. This was also argued by Tibbalds (1992) who suggested that a space should be visually stimulating, and rich with vibrant elements and multifunction.

In addition, public art, as mentioned by Robinson (1903), exists not solely as

a visual aid but it also serves as a public enjoyment. Therefore, it is observed that there is a great potential in integrating public art in the Malaysian urban landscape as it could provide a transparent image of a city's soul and also improve the quality living environment in the country. In carrying out this study, literature review, document analysis and interviews were therefore done to provide a comprehensive background study on public art and its importance in the urban landscape.

DEFINITION OF PUBLIC ART

Art is usually associated with privatization. The audience is commonly from the elite groups and it is normally placed in a gallery. However, public art functions the opposite from this exclusive world. It is an artwork that is specifically commissioned to the public which it welcomes to engage and interact with (Chang, 2008). Moreover, according to Bach (2001), public art is an art expression that is positioned in a freely accessed public space for the public to use



(a)



(b)

Fig.1: Good examples of public art in public spaces; (a) The National Monument, and (b) the mural at National Museum

and enjoy. As indicated by Chang (2008), public art refers to any form of artistic expressions from the artist to the people, such as sculpture, mural, street furniture, mobile, stabile in the shopping mall, and cultural events which are located or take place in free accessed sites.

According to Sharp *et al.* (2005) and Hein (1996), however, one cannot label an art expression, just because it is located outside. It requires the act of absorbing the locality spirit and the appearance of the locality in the public art. This is supported by Doezema (1977) who suggested that to fully understand the functions of public art, ones should mull over the chemistry between the content and the audience. Moreover, as asserted by Philips (1992), art only becomes fully public when it takes the idea of public as the origin. In other words, the art becomes public when it resembles its locality and when it blends well with the public and the surrounding, and not because of its accessibility or volume.

PUBLIC ART AS A CONTRIBUTOR TOWARDS QUALITY LIVING ENVIRONMENT

The impact of public art on the community is invaluable. It can be a unique contributor to a quality urban living environment which celebrates its community, highlights past memories and even increases the economical impact of a city (Ramlan, 2009). Thus, public art will continue to be an essential part in the urban development strategies.

Aesthetical Value

In term of aesthetical value, public art carries the basic notion of art which is to beautify spaces. As argued by Hall (2003), art has traditionally been placed in the public realm for reasons of aesthetic enhancement and memories container. In addition, Baker (1998) claims that art is seen as a way to rejuvenate cities by enhancing public spaces. This beautification of cities by public art encompasses vibrant street life by



Fig.2: The importance of public art towards quality living environment

giving an aura of quality on places (Hall & Robertson, 2001). However, Leslie (2005) argued that aesthetical value will neglect the true meaning of art when it is too much pondered upon.

Basically, art expression urges an intimate relationship with the audience. Therefore, aesthetical value and meaning should mull together in order to pull the audience to appreciate it.

Promoting the Sense of Community

Public art can promote a sense of community by promoting community exploration and awareness. According to Swales (1992), the success of public art projects in the public realm requires four fundamental community values, such as shared history, identity, needs and aspirations.

In addition, Hall and Robertson (2001) claimed that public art develops the sense of the community with common identity, values, or culture. Hence, it is an important revitalization in the public sphere when public art highlights the sense of community.

Celebrating the Sense of Place

Public art has been identified to have the ability to transform the quality of a place that has vanished or has been ignored from place by celebrating an event and a local history (Himid, 1994). According to Hall and Robertson (2001), public art typically influences towards the sense of a place, in two ways. First, the public art triggers the awareness of tradition and emerges the unique identity of a place. Secondly, it evokes the sense of place using distinctive physical identities through the creation of artwork.

Addressing Community Needs

Addressing community needs can be associated with the usage of public art. A simple example is the street furniture. It could diversify its use as an art object to a very utilitarian usage (Peto, 1992), contributions to environmental regeneration (Allan *et al.*, 1997), improvement of city ecologies (Guest, 1992), as well as individual and communal empowerment (Baker, 1992; Clifford, 1990; Cross, 1993; Walwin, 1992;



(a)



(b)

Fig.3: *The Cloud* by Anish Kapoor; it enhances the aesthetical value to the overall space

Willet, 1984). At the same time, public art does not only serve as an elitist art, it is also deployed to address as part of healing process within the healthcare (Baron, 1995; Duffin, 1992; Malkin, 1990; Miles, 1994).

Social Implication

Public art can also provide a means of tackling the social exclusion issue. Blaney (1989) posited that the issue can be tackled in two ways. First, personal participation can expand their art commission to a broader social life of urban areas. Secondly, he also argues that the themes, contents and concerns of art expression are able to forge diverse cultures and traditions. Majority of the public are alienated of art; however as art stimulates the mind of the public, it will slowly lead them to the full participatory in the society (Blaney, 1989).

Educational Value

Besides highlighting its beauty, public art also subconsciously promotes educational value to the community. Art education is crucial in making the public understand, in surface or perhaps in depth, the art knowledge. As asserted by the Public Art Consultancy Team (1990), educational benefits should be planted in public art programmes.

ISSUES OF PUBLIC ART IN MALAYSIAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

The identity and image of a city's soul can be reflected and shown by public art (Chang, 2008). In Malaysia, however, the situation of public art differs from the way it should be. The understanding of public art among the society and related professions is still low. Through the literature search, several critical issues of the public art which are



(a)



(b)

Fig.4: Example of the public art which shares common history, identity, needs, and aspirations. Pictures were taken in Putrajaya (a), and Bukit Jalil Stadium, Malaysia (b)



(a)



(b)

Fig.5: (a) *The Merlion* and the *Celebration* sculpture in Singapore (b) evokes the sense of place



(a)



(b)

Fig.6: Examples of utilitarian public art which provide and address community needs. Pictures were taken in Singapore

happening internationally and locally, as well as the reasons for the lack of public art in Malaysia, have been identified.

Lack of Art Education

The mundane situation of public art may rise from the lack of understanding of public art among the society and related professions in Malaysia. Artists in Malaysia have long blamed this antipathy on the lack of emphasis on art education and public discussion (Shunmugam, 2006). The relevance of Shunmugam's article is clearly

supported by the current situation, which still has insufficient public art programmes and also the lack of quality of this art in this country.

Placement of the Public Art

The issue of placement is crucial in Malaysia; public art in this country is mostly done to fill the empty spaces which contradict with the ultimate objectives of public art as public objects. Several public arts in this country are situated at isolate places, whereby it leads to vandalism and less



(a)



(b)

Fig.7: Members of the public participated in the *Arca Malaysia* programme at the National Art Gallery. It promoted a sense of community within the social sphere



(a)



(b)

Fig.8: Examples of the public art which promote educational values. Pictures were taken at the National Planetarium in Malaysia and Singapore.

public interaction. Moreover, most of the chosen sites do not reflect the place history and other humanistic factors. A recent study by Senie (2003) reported that each place has its own evolving history, visual, social and other uses.

Placement plays an important role in highlighting the existence of public art in public arena. Placement can be categorized into two categories. The first category of placement is in the scope of physical location, while the second category is more to the placement within the public sphere.

Therefore, the public art erection in public spaces should eventually mould chemistry with the public. Taken altogether, these findings suggest that the right placement for public art in the public spaces may welcome an extra ordinary impact.

Lack of Quality

The issue regarding quality has been one of the main obstacles of public art in this country. The recent evidence in the article of Shunmugam (2006) shows that some of the sculptures were suspiciously been

selected by bureaucrats who do not know much about art. This statement is supported by a Malaysian painter and educator, Redza Piyadasa, who was quoted in the article by Shunmugam (2006) as saying that that most Malaysia's sculptures were unable to command people's attentions and evoke deeper feelings. In addition, most city godfathers are proudly presenting tacky, kitsch public art that reflect poorly on sophisticated and cultural mores. There is, therefore, a definite need for improvement in term of selection and appearance of public art. Fig.9 below shows one of the examples of common public arts that dwell in Malaysia.

Lack of Community's Participation

Malaysia faces the problem of the lack of community's participation in public art commission. A previous study has reported that the public has to be involved in the process of developing the public art right from the beginning (Shunmugam, 2006). The local authority nowadays does not put

full effort in bringing the community in the process of public art commission, which has compounded the problem of getting the public to have the interest in the public art. However, much is still needed to be looked into when it comes to community's participation, specifically at the beginning part of the public art erection.

Lack of Collaboration

In Malaysia, major public art projects have been shown the neglect of artists' functions. In fact, it has been noted that the local councils in Malaysia seldom consulted the artists or art historians in putting up public art works (Shunmugam, 2006). There is also a court case between a sculptor, Dato Syed Ahmad Jamal and Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur or DBKL (Ooi, 2010). The local council allegedly modified the artist's sculpture entitled '*Lunar Peaks*' without his consent. As a result, the artist had been compensated with RM750,000 and the opportunity to replicate the work anywhere in Kuala Lumpur. Even worse,



(a)



(b)

Fig.9: Examples of common public art in Malaysia

as stated by Redza Piyadasa in the article by Shunmugam (2006), is that the town council did not have special committee to decide on what is best to be put and what is not in Malaysian urban landscape.

Lack of Pertinent Memories and Identity in the Public Art

Malaysia has a lot of historical and culture values, starting from the tale of the Malay archipelago to the opening of Malacca, the invasion of the Portuguese, the British and the Japanese, the opening of Kuala Lumpur, and many others which are very pertinent for the next generations to remember. During the 1980's and 90's, Malaysia had one of the biggest building booms in the world but nobody ever bothered to fill these new spaces with artworks that are pertinent to Malaysia's culture and history. Nowadays in the Malaysian urban landscape, there are very few public arts that can revive our pride of the nation and national spirit.

THE NEED TO INTEGRATE PUBLIC ART IN MALAYSIAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

The integration of the public art in landscape, especially urban landscape, will enrich the image of places, heighten the nationalism spirit, celebrate the culture and rejuvenate the sense of place. However, integrating the public art in an urban landscape is not an easy task.

Interviews with 10 experts were done to get their opinions regarding the need to integrate public art in Malaysian urban landscape. The result is solidly encouraging,

with over 90% of the respondents agreed that there is a need to integrate this approach and only 10% responded that the issue of public art is not much of importance.

In order to integrate public art in Malaysian urban landscape, several moves need to be taken, as suggested by the respondents. As asserted by AR1, the number of public art in this country should be increased, specifically in the form of street furniture. He further explained that the integration of public art would elevate the understanding towards as it highlights related issues and history in a visual form. Moreover, the exposure to new ideas can be illustrated to the people as this will further encourage more creative and critical thinking of the messages brought about by the public art and it will also amplify the awareness of the people towards the art.

Moreover, as suggested by LA1, the cultural aspects need to be acknowledged by documenting them in the form of public art. Meanwhile, ways of celebrating the rich and diverse culture of Malaysia need to be done because the culture accelerates the sense of place and it also evokes the spirit of nationalism. The impact of cultural devoid in the community is that they will not know the roots of the culture, and thus, obstructs them from experiencing and implanting it as part of their way of life.

At the same time, AC1 and AR3 recommended that Malaysia should setup a special committee that will specifically handle public art. They further explained that this special committee would link with other professional bodies, such as

architects, landscape architects, planners, etc., so that with this linkage, they will have a peer review regarding the work of art. By having the special committee, each gap of constraints can be compensated by the strength of the other. In the case of public art, however, artists should be the key players because they are the persons who value about creativity, which is more specifically into value and philosophy.

In addition, the leaders of this country play a major role in the development of art. This is supported by AC1 who stated that the leadership should have the vision to weave the art within the development of this country. In this matter, the government has run several programmes that are related to the art scenes, such as art tourism. With the support from the leaders, artists will have wide open opportunities to exuberate art to its highest potential.

AR3 also suggested that educators be responsible in educating the public to have a greater awareness regarding public art as a need to improve the quality of life, and not solely as an aesthetical improvement. This is important to ensure that the people will not have the thought of art as being worthless and that in term of the development of art, it will lead to unimportant and lack of art explorations. AR3 also stated that public art could contribute to the development of economy in the country because it has a mutual character that can attract the people to enjoy its creation.

According to LAR2, the placement of public art is important to attract more attention to it. She further suggested

that public art be located in special zones or themes which are demarcated by the government. Places with large open spaces are recommended for the public art as these will welcome more pedestrians to appreciate the work of art. However, public art should not stand alone, but it should be integrated with other landscape elements to uplift its potential and to evoke the public's feeling to interact with it.

Public art should be more interactive rather than merely monumental, as mentioned by LAR3 who stated that it could nurture tangible interactions between the public and the public art. Nonetheless, it still requires some relationships with the identity of the surrounding areas to inculcate the sense of place. This is further supported by LAR2 who claimed that the impact of the public art in term of interaction could be seen when the selected locations and suggested public art comprised the entire humanistic elements, such as the sense of place, attractive form and interactive characteristic. Moreover, a big scale of public art will trigger the attractive sensation and evoke the sense of sublime. As the result, the need to integrate public art in this country is inevitable. Public art could offer more than aesthetical value, as it gives the vibes in large aspects of creating quality living environment.

CONCLUSION

In summary, public art can contribute to the quality of life as it serves numerous advantages towards the community. Its contributions uplift the place environment,

improve the social characteristics, and elevate the standard of education. These studies have found several issues and problems that seem to be the culprits of public art to be integrated into Malaysian urban landscape. Taken altogether, the issues and problems of public art in this country have been covered in every aspect, and this is because the community, professionals and the authority still lack the necessary collaboration and have low understanding of the notion of public art.

Hence, more emphasis given on developing creative, innovative and quality environment will encourage further research on integrating art in urban landscape. This will be the best launch pad for the public art to go much further, especially in Malaysian urban landscape.

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