

# A Psychogeographical Exploration on Visual Communication: Preserving Cultural Heritage Through Urban Street Artworks in Shah Alam, Malaysia

Mohd Fadhli Shah Khaidzir<sup>1\*</sup>, Saiful Akram Che Cob Ab Ghafar<sup>2</sup>, Mafarhanatul Akmal Ahmad Kamal<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Pusat Pengajian Citra University, University Kembangan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>College of Creative Arts, University Technology MARA, Puncak Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>Academy of Language Studies, University Technology MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of street artworks in urban areas has been growing over the years. What was once confined to back alleys or hidden streets is now publicly visible and easily accessible to society. From graffiti to murals, street art is evolving through various techniques and concepts. However, there remains a lack of understanding and appreciation for the establishment and existence of street art, particularly regarding the content and messages behind these creative works. This research aims to utilize Psychogeographical exploration methods to discover how street artworks in Shah Alam, Selangor preserve cultural heritage through their designs, engaging and connecting with the public. The findings reveal that street artworks in Shah Alam incorporate at least one element of cultural heritage in their creative interpretations. Through Psychogeographical exploration, the public can better understand cultural heritage preservation by examining the designs of these artworks.

**Keywords** – Exploration, Psychogeography, Street Artworks, Urban

## INTRODUCTION

Walking through urban streets provides pedestrians with a wide variety of experiences, emotions, and perspectives. Throughout their everyday lives, people come into contact with various architectural types, landscape designs, and the lively activities of urban life. Nasa et al. (2021) indicated that street artworks, initially associated with the graffiti movement, originated in the 1960s in suburban regions of Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Despite its aesthetic, social, and political importance, it was not initially considered worthy of preservation until recent efforts to preserve it. In the present days, street artworks, which is the term used to describe the artistic designs and images that can be found on buildings and walls, has become one of the prominent elements of urban landscapes.

Street artwork includes many visual art forms produced in public settings, frequently beyond the limitations of conventional art galleries. Opoku-Asare (2013) defined street artwork as a medium for enhancing visually appealing environments. In addition, Mezzadri (2021) highlights that its purpose is to convey social messages and to be seen by the public. Despite its increasing prevalence in urban areas globally, street artwork frequently receives insufficient recognition and appreciation for its functionality and purpose. Responses to street artwork vary from appreciation to criticism, with some categorising it as vandalism or politically motivated propaganda.



It is essential to reassess the function of street artwork in urban environments, especially in fostering place identification and preserving cultural history, traditions, beliefs, and parts of national heritage. The integration of street artwork into the urban landscape has expanded in Malaysia, particularly in areas such as Selangor, Penang, and Melaka, where these artworks are shown on building facades and public amenities. Penang and Melaka have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Siti and Norizan (2016) contend that these artistic creations encapsulate local essence, providing novel experiences for pedestrians and the broader public. Mural art exemplifies public art that improves urban aesthetics and cultivates community pride and ownership (Erickson, 2015; Siti Rasidah, Azrul, & Khalilah, 2016). Since 2012, local governments have progressively acknowledged the capacity of street artwork to enhance urban landscapes in heritage zones, drawing both domestic and foreign artists to participate in these environments.

Nonetheless, the admiration of street artwork frequently emphasises its aesthetic qualities, overlooking its intangible cultural and anthropological impacts. This oversight emphasises the necessity of a more thorough examination of the role of street art in the preservation of cultural identity and the engagement of communities.

### **Problem Statement**

Street artwork is a multifaceted social phenomenon created within diverse contexts and timeframes. It integrates signs and symbols that collectively construct narratives reflecting, informing, and shaping collective identities and the spaces we inhabit. Kendall (2011) describes street artwork as "a window into a city's soul," emphasizing its potential to reveal cultural and social dynamics.

Despite its significance, prior research on street artwork has predominantly focused on topics like urban identity politics, masculinity, othering, self-presentation, political resistance, and other sociopolitical dimensions. While society has gradually embraced the presence of street artwork in urban environments, differing perceptions persist regarding its value and contribution to communities. Certain segments of the population continue to view street artwork, including graffiti and mural art, as contentious or illegitimate artistic expressions.

In the Malaysian context, the growing presence of street artworks, particularly in Shah Alam, offers an opportunity to explore their role in preserving cultural heritage. However, there is limited research investigating how street artwork contributes to cultural heritage preservation and engages with the public to foster a deeper understanding of local identity and history. Hence, this study aims to identify the elements of cultural heritage embedded in street artworks in Shah Alam and to assess the extent to which the Psychogeographical approach can be used to explore these artworks, enhancing the understanding of cultural heritage preservation. This research seeks to fill the gap in existing studies by utilizing the Psychogeographical approach to analyses street artwork in Shah Alam, shedding light on its cultural, historical, and social significance.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Street artwork comprises various artistic expressions produced in public spaces, fulfilling aesthetic and cultural purposes. It serves as a creative innovation by integrating historical tales and revitalizing urban environments (Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015). Emerging from the graffiti movement of the 1960s, street artwork has developed into a significant manner of artistic expression in contemporary urban environments. Urban art, as defined by Syafril Amir et al. (2022), encompasses artistic activities occurring in urban settings, where building surfaces and walls frequently function as principal canvases. Graffiti, comprising paintings, symbols, and markings, is among the most prevalent forms of street artwork. It entails designating areas with certain inscriptions or symbols (Nor Izana et al., 2017). These works embody the identity and defiance of urban existence, representing a notable contribution to the urban landscape.

Street artwork significantly contributes to the establishment of a sense of place, especially through visual depictions like murals. Suriati (2024) emphasises that murals facilitate connections to and recollections of



places, while simultaneously embodying the cultural history and backgrounds of the artists. Consequently, street artwork transcends mere expression; it serves as an avenue between artistic practice and cultural preservation, rendering it an essential component of the urban landscape. These artworks frequently function as symbols of identity, preserving the cultural narratives contained within them.

The connection between street artwork and cultural history has garnered significant interest in recent years, particularly in towns such as Georgetown and Malacca, which were designated UNESCO World history Sites in 2008. Both cities employed murals to enhance and modify their urban landscapes, seeking to retain their cultural legacy while attaining international prominence. Syafril Amir et al. (2022) observe that the implementation of murals to improve the urban landscape has prompted other cities to pursue like approaches. Nonetheless, despite their importance, murals encounter difficulties from environmental influences, including climate change, as well as vandalism. Nonetheless, they are progressively acknowledged as significant heritage works of art that enhance urban identity and cultural preservation (Poon, 2016). These artworks communicate tales and significances that resonate with both residents and visitors, making them a crucial component of cultural tourism (Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015).

UNESCO (2003) defines cultural heritage as comprising both concrete and intangible aspects of human creativity, with street artwork situated at the convergence of these two domains. Tangible heritage encompasses physical artefacts like buildings and monuments, whereas intangible heritage comprises activities, expressions, and knowledge. Street artwork, as a modern expression, encompasses both physical and abstract components, frequently mirroring the urban landscape and cultural identities. Liu (2022) asserts that natural surroundings, including landscapes and geography, influence cultural heritage. In this regard, street artwork constitutes not merely a visual phenomenon but a dynamic mode of cultural production, shaped by the surrounding environment. Contemporary technologies are transforming the preservation of cultural heritage, as observed by Yang and Greenop (2023), with street artwork serving as a prime example of this evolution through innovative mediums and techniques, hence aiding in the conservation of cultural identities within urban environments.

Psychogeography, the examination of how geographical environments affect individuals' emotions and behaviours, offers a valuable framework for comprehending the relationship between street artwork and its urban context (Debord, 1955). Psychogeography fosters a profound appreciation of street artwork, especially murals, by analyzing their impact and resonance with observers. Arnold (2019) posits that psychogeography, when integrated with photography, functions as an aesthetic discipline that links sensory experiences to artistic creativity. It also fosters an appreciation for figurative street artwork, such as murals, in contrast to more ephemeral forms like tagging, which are sometimes perceived unfavorably. Walking, a fundamental aspect of Psychogeographical exploration, enables individuals to interact more closely with street artwork and attain a profound comprehension of its cultural and historical importance. Prieur (2022) notes that walking allows individuals to engage with the urban environment, feeling the emotional and cultural ties that street artwork cultivates within the city.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research strategy, utilizing exploration, observation, and documentation to examine street artworks in Shah Alam, notably at Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7. The research is based on the concept of Psychogeography (Debord, 1955), which explores the effect of geographical environments on human emotions, behaviours, and perceptions. The study began with the identification and classification of cultural heritage components associated with visual communication. The aspects encompass tangible components, including physical artefacts and designs; intangible components, such as cultural narratives and practices; environmental elements, comprising flora and landscapes; and digital influences, represented by contemporary technological themes integrated into the artworks.

Psychogeographical walking entailed the documentation of cultural heritage components present in street artworks through meticulous observations and visual records. The Psychogeographical notion of wandering was fundamental to this approach, promoting an immersed exploration of the urban landscape. This strategy allowed researchers to observe and document cultural heritage pieces more efficiently, enhancing



comprehension of their significance in preserving cultural heritage.

The phytogeographical walking methodology was executed in six stages:

1. **Move:** The researcher roamed the urban landscape, namely at Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7 in Shah Alam, actively exploring the study sites without predetermined routes.
2. **Observe:** Close attention was paid to the street artworks, emphasizing the cultural and creative aspects evident in the murals and graffiti.
3. **Notice:** Researchers identified several characteristics of the artworks that include cultural history, encompassing symbols, themes, and contextual messages.
4. **Collect:** Visual data were obtained by photographs and comprehensive field notes, documenting both the artworks and their environments.
5. **Analyze:** The gathered data were thoroughly reviewed to identify reoccurring themes, patterns, and representations of cultural heritage.
6. **Reflect:** Insights obtained from the observation and analysis were synthesized to formulate conclusions regarding the significance of street artwork in the preservation of cultural heritage.

This approach facilitated an extensive examination of street artwork in Shah Alam, highlighting the cultural, historical, and social aspects inherent in the urban art scene. The study utilized psychogeography to offer a comprehensive view of the importance of street artwork in safeguarding and embodying cultural heritage.

## DISCUSSION

Table 1. Elements of Street Artworks

Location	Colours	Black & White	Typography	Symbols	Language	Imagery	Total
Laman Seni 2	7	3	2	10	2	10	10
Laman Seni 7	20	4	10	22	10	24	24
Total							34

Table 2. Cultural Heritage Elements Based on Artwork Themes

Location	Tangible	Intangible	Natural	Digital	Total
Laman Seni 2	7	1	1	1	10
Laman Seni 7	10	4	9	1	24
Total					34



Figure 1. Flora and Fauna as the Element of Cultural Heritage



Street artwork incorporating national symbols, such as orangutans and tigers, cultivates popular appreciation and reinforces national identity. These artworks function as powerful mediums, employing their visual allure to attract public interest and promote awareness of cultural heritage. Grodach (2019) emphasises the significance of public art in mirroring collective values and traditions based on geographic location and local identity.



Figure 2. Tangible Aspect as the Element of Cultural Heritage

This is apparent in Shah Alam, where artworks frequently emulate prominent structures and flags linked to the city and state, integrating cultural identity into the urban environment.



Figure 3. Daily Encounters as the Element of Cultural Heritage

The artwork above showcases the national pride courier Malaysia Airlines plan which symbolizes the tangible cultural heritage of our nation. The pride of the symbol on the plane helps to evoke the spirit of nationalism and identity which are closely related to a sense of belonging and appreciation towards one's cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the artwork represents a very deep and emotional meaning which is related with the tragedy of MH370 which went missing in March 2014. This artwork represents hope and prayers which audience can connect and relate this, preserving the feeling of love and attachment to our heritage

With the cultural heritage elements found in the street artworks of Shah Alam, it enables one to act as an agent of a person's experiences, practical skills, emotions, memories, embodied movements, and performances. This is also in line with Tolia-Kelly et al. (2017) that suggested spaces of heritage (in this context, the Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7) allows connection between humans with their physical environment that garner the affective and emotive values. According to Byrne (2019) people's affective responses to heritage sites do not engage in an understanding of the human experiences and feelings that are attached to these sites.

Thus, the street artworks with cultural heritage elements embedded in the concepts allows the audience to interact and embody the experiences. This is because artworks explored in Shah Alam have powerful representation of the unity, peace, harmony, and cohesive relationship that exists within the shared group of society.





Figure 4. Intangible Aspect as the Element of Cultural Heritage

The cultural heritage components in Shah Alam's street artwork function as catalysts for experience, memory, and emotion. Tolia-Kelly et al. (2017) contend that heritage spaces, like Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7, facilitate relationships between persons and their surroundings, promoting affective and emotional values. Byrne (2019) asserts that heritage sites elicit responses that surpass the physical, profoundly connecting with human experiences and emotions. The street artworks enable audiences to engage with and embody collective cultural tales, providing a concrete link to heritage.

Despite the abstract imagery and playful colour combinations, the historical importance of these artworks is apparent. They convey the city's narrative with modern themes, making it relevant to present social, economic, and political circumstances. Vivid hues and elaborate patterns in murals augment their authenticity while safeguarding cultural heritage, enabling the community to engage with its roots in an approachable and visually captivating way.

These artworks serve as narrative instruments that unite communities, commemorate advancements, and impart lessons for future generations. They advocate for cultural diversity by showcasing the legacy of diverse communities in communal public spaces such as Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7. This depiction promotes mutual understanding, respect, and a sense of belonging among the populace, unifying disparate groups into a unified metropolitan identity.

Street artworks visually embody Shah Alam's cultural legacy, serving as testaments to the city's variety and past. They encapsulate the quintessence of cultural narrative, symbolizing togetherness, peace, and harmony, while fostering respect and appreciation for cultural diversity among audiences. These creations serve as indicators of historical accomplishments and symbols for future ambitions, connecting tradition with modernity.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this research, the street artwork in Shah Alam demonstrates a strong commitment to cultural heritage preservation through its content and thematic creativity. The street murals effectively serve as instruments for promoting cultural heritage and identity. However, greater emphasis should be placed on encouraging phytogeographical exploration among audiences in their daily routines. This method allows individuals to engage their senses, observe their surroundings, and interpret their experiences, leaving a lasting impact on their perceptions and behaviors.

The visual representations in Shah Alam's Street artwork preserve cultural traditions and foster a sense of community and belonging. By leveraging street artworks as a medium for cultural heritage preservation, the city reflects its cultural and artistic identity while ensuring that these values are passed down to future generations. In order to strengthen a Psychogeographical exploration of visual communication particularly in Shah Alam other places, future research should include various methods which results in extensive findings that connect individuals with the exploration of street arts. This can be achieved by triangulation process between Psychogeographical exploration and interviews with artists, community members and cultural experts to provide richer context and validation.



With the support of local authorities and the public, it is essential to maintain and safeguard the street artworks in Laman Seni 2 and Laman Seni 7. Enhancing these efforts could inspire other streets to adopt similar approaches, positioning street artwork as a valuable tool for promoting cultural heritage and fostering an appreciation for diversity.

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