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## **INTERPRETATION OF HERITAGE SITE: VISITORS’ SATISFACTION ON THE INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS IN DATARAN BANDAR**

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### **Abstract**

Interpretation of a building or a site could be made easier using interpretive exhibits. While protecting the built heritage and conserving the traditional and cultural values present a real challenge for conservation stakeholders, making sure that the history is being told clearly is also a must. This study aims to investigate the existing ‘realities’ on heritage interpretive exhibits at Dataran Medan Bandar, Alor Setar. The study assessed the existing presentation quality of the exhibits, whether they served the purpose of telling the history of the objects or monuments. The assessment revealed almost half of the respondents believed that improvement is needed. The findings reflected important aspects to be considered in the interpretation and presentation of comprehensive knowledge of and awareness in presenting the story of the place. The incorporation of integrated approaches of inculcating heritage values that are conveyed to visitors through effective presentation strategy supported by sustainable philosophy is proposed.

**Keywords:** Heritage interpretation, cultural mapping, heritage awareness and storytelling

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The most common reasons often associated to visiting heritage places are to see and listen to the values of historical appreciation and experience. Traditional settlements are one of the key cultural land-uses and landscape assets in terms of history, customs, culture, and architecture, and are physical evidence of the past (Harun et al., 2021).

Significant interpretive and wayfinding signages play an important role in transferring knowledge to visitors. An interpretive exhibit makes a topic “come to life” through active visitor involvement and extreme relevance to the daily life of visitors. Nevertheless, providing complicated interpretations have resulted in visitors experiencing frustration or misunderstanding of the meaning of the heritage or feeling disconnected from the message received. They might become unaware or ignorant of the cultural heritage’s significant values. Subsequently, they would not know how to appreciate their own heritage, let alone to love it.

Heritage refers to many assets or group of assets, natural or cultural, tangible or intangible, that a community recognises for its value as a witness to history and memory. There is a need to safeguard, protect, adopt, promote, and disseminate such heritage (Heritage Council, City of Montreal, 2005).

Tilden (1977) defined interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings and relationships using original objects, by first-hand experience and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information. His statement is aligned with ICOMOS (2008), which referred to interpretation as the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage sites. These can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself.

Many scholars have defined heritage interpretation as the communication process. Shalaginova (2018) quoted Ham (1992), Veverka (2000), Murphy (2000), and Interpretation Australia (2005), and described that interpretation is simply a means of communicating ideas and feelings that help people understand more about themselves and their environment. As Murphy (2000) explained, heritage interpretation is an interactive communication process involving the visitor, through which heritage values and cultural significance are revealed, using a variety of techniques to enrich the visitor’s experience and enhance the enjoyment and understanding of the site.

This research examines the existing ‘realities’ on heritage interpretive exhibits at Dataran Medan Bandar, Alor Setar and assesses the existing presentation quality of the exhibits, whether they serve the purpose of telling the history of the objects or monuments. The objective is to assess the visitors’ expectation and perspective regarding heritage presentation at heritage sites of the Dataran and their perceived awareness.

## LITERATURE STUDY

### Historic Royal Malay Town of Alor Setar

Alor Setar, the 8<sup>th</sup> Administrative Centre and Capital of Kedah, was founded in December 1735 by the late Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin Muadzam Shah, the 19<sup>th</sup> Sultan of Kedah (1710 – 1778). Early establishments in Alor Setar included Istana Kota Setar, Balai Besar, Balai Nobat, and Masjid Zahir, which were built around a centralised open field known as Padang Court.

Alor Setar became a traditional royal town before a new palace was built in Anak Bukit, which then turned into a new royal town of Kedah in 1738. The establishment of the town is in compliance with the concept of development of a Malay royal town. The concept of development of the royal town can be interpreted using the following factors:

- i. **Religious:** The belief and faith formed through the unification of religious teachings and wise practices (evidenced by Masjid Zahir, a royal mosque).
- ii. **Symbol of powers:** The existence of the ruler's powers can be clearly seen and sensed in the royal town area (evidenced by Kota Setar Palace, Royal Audience Hall or Balai Besar, Palace Gateways, Nobat Hall or Balai Nobat, and Clock Tower).
- iii. **Defence:** This former royal town area took into consideration all aspects of defence and was always ever ready for any disaster that might occur (evidenced by the fortress wall of Kota Setar with Kota Kuala Kedah as the first line of defence).
- iv. **Pragmatic:** Practical action that helps make the royal town a more effective and efficient settlement that provides comfort, safety, and well-being for both permanent residents and visitors (evidenced by residential settlements within the palace compound, public open space or 'Padang' area, Pekan Melayu and Pekan Cina as old towns or marketplace, jetty or river landing facilities along Anak Bukit River at Alur Setar, Tanjung Cali, and Kuala Kedah).
- v. **Boundary demarcation:** A physical form is evident that clearly notifies the public on the enforcement of the border line demarcation of the sovereign royal town area (evidenced by the protection wall built around Kota Setar Palace's compound).

(Syed Ariffin, 2019)

### Heritage Interpretation

The goal of interpretation at heritage sites is not only an instruction, but also to change the attitudes and behaviours of visitors towards the history and cultural heritage. The storytelling should motivate and inspire visitors by making it meaningful and exciting. The key to successful presentation of heritage sites

depends on the appropriate media selected for heritage interpretation. According to Harun (2021), this can be achieved in various ways, which are as follows:

1. Face-to-face verbal interpretation – guided tours, talk sessions, performance shows, workshops, and demonstrations.
2. Printed materials – articles, brochures, guides, signboards, interpretive panels: maps, infographics photographs and images, layout plans, banners, asset signs with dedicated and specially designed photo spots using specific assets as background, short videos, various choices of gifts/mementos/souvenirs that are attractive or handy or with delivery package.
3. Multimedia interactive: slide shows, digital screens, film shows, audio applications, websites, touch screens, etc.
4. Specially designed/designated/purpose made interpretation: monuments, statues, sculptures/artworks/images, scale models, wayfinding/road signages, guided trail signs, etc. Such physical interpretation or geography characteristic can be a heritage area's cultural landmark (*mercu tanda budaya*).

Ineffective interpretation and presentation of heritage sites would result in visitors experiencing negative perception that can lead to ignorance of heritage significance. The activities and physical characteristics of the site's physical features contribute to the unique identity of the historic space (Mohd. Lazim & Said, 2020). In general, old towns in Malaysia have many significant attributes that preserve various unique heritage values that should be shared with visitors. This story should be narrated through good interpretive exhibits.

Besides, unawareness or awareness for the wrong reason among visitors and local communities lead to the historical, cultural, or natural heritage evidence being completely forgotten or left in ruins, or disrupted in the ecosystem of heritage setting, or worse, a total loss, resulting in a loss of identity and pride of local communities, as well as a loss of opportunities for economic generation in the tourism industry. Yusoff et al. (2013) clearly affirmed that a nation's heritage resources will face extinction in the pursuit of modernisation and physical development if concrete, concerted, and timely efforts are not made to prevent it. Therefore, education strategy has an important role in creating heritage awareness among the society.

Although interpretive exhibits are often not considered in the whole development proposal, the impact of good and modern interpretive signages could trigger an efficient tourism promotion through word-of-mouth (WoM) and social media. Besides, using the storytelling methodology when describing the history of a

place or monument could provide contextual heritage education information to all.

## METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION:

### Effectiveness of Interpretive Exhibits in Dataran Bandar

The data collected during the study involved a questionnaire survey with a total number of 90 respondents who visited Dataran Bandar and some of the areas within the heritage trail route of the city. Randomized sampling methods targeting maximum 100 respondents were carried out between 1<sup>st</sup> March 2020 to 15<sup>th</sup> March 2020 at the peak of pandemik Covid 19. The number of tourists decreases due to pandemik and the country were shut down a few days later. Earlier, observations were also carried out, whereby a total of 16 places of interest or 'POI' were identified throughout the area. Out of these 16 POIs identified, only 10 were provided with interpretive signs (Table 1). The remaining six buildings or sites without interpretive panels were Sungai Anak Bukit, Monumen 250 Tahun Alor Setar (250 Years Alor Setar Monument), old shop houses, Bangunan Lama Mahkamah Syariah, Bangunan Wan Mat Saman, and Wisma Negeri.

**Table 1:** Places of interest at Dataran Bandar

No.	Places of Interest (POI) at the Dataran Site	Cultural Relevance	Interpretive panels
1.	250 Years Alor Setar Monument	Monument	No
2.	Kedah Art Gallery; Origin: Magistrate Building	Cultural heritage – building	Yes
3.	Medan Bandar (the square); Origin: Padang Court	Cultural heritage – site	Yes
4.	Royal Museum; Origin: Kota Setar Palace	Cultural heritage – building	Yes
5.	Royal Grand Audience Hall	Cultural heritage –building	Yes
6.	Nobat Hall	Cultural heritage – tower and traditional royal music	Yes
7.	Sultan Abdul Halim Gallery; Origin: High Court	Cultural heritage – building	Yes
8.	Zahir Mosque	Cultural heritage – building	Yes
9.	Anak Bukit River	Natural heritage – river	No
10.	Clock Tower	Cultural heritage – tower	Yes
11.	2-Storey shop houses	Cultural heritage – building	No
12.	Alor Setar Beginning site	Natural heritage – creek	Yes
13.	Archway replica of Kota Tengah Palace	Monument	Yes
14.	Wisma Negeri @ Former State Secretary Building	Cultural heritage – building	No
15.	Wan Mat Saman Building	Cultural heritage – building	No
16.	Old Syariah Court	Cultural heritage – building	No

## FINDINGS

### Visitors' Perception on the Interpretive Panels

In order to establish the effectiveness of the interpretive panels found on the site, assessment on the level of knowledge and understanding of the area's history was conducted.

In general, the result indicated that a majority of the respondents had slight knowledge of each site before visiting the Dataran heritage sites. More than three-quarters or 77% of the total visitors fell into the combined group of 'no knowledge-slight knowledge-neutral' on heritage awareness level before visiting the sites (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Respondents' knowledge on the history of the area

Heritage Sites	No knowledge	Slight knowledge	Neutral	Moderate knowledge	Full knowledge
i) Balai Besar	13	38	20	17	2
ii) Istana Kota Besar	17	35	18	18	2
iii) Balai Seni	13	37	19	18	3
iv) Balai Nobat	13	39	16	18	4
v) Galeri Sultan Abdul Halim	18	33	17	20	2
vi) Gerbang Istana Kota Tengah	26	33	17	12	2
vii) Masjid Zahir	8	33	18	23	8
viii) Menara Jam Besar	13	32	19	19	7
ix) Bermulanya Alor Setar	13	37	19	18	3
x) Dataran @ Padang Court	14	40	20	14	2
xi) Bangunan Wan Mohd Saman	23	33	18	14	2
xii) Wisma Negeri	19	30	18	20	3
TOTAL	190	420	219	211	40
Average – number of respondents (Total/12)	15.83	35	18.25	17.58	3.33
Percentage	18%	39%	20%	19.5%	3.5%
		77%		23%	

In addition, the result proved that they had high expectation on the storytelling style of the interpretive panels provided at the sites. The respondents categorised it as an 'extremely important' attribute during the visit. It is a strong indication that visitors' source of awareness and knowledge-gaining came from the story that they read on the interpretive sign. However, most of them felt

neither 'satisfied' nor 'dissatisfied' after reading each interpretive presentation signage at the respective sites. The majority perceived their satisfaction level as 'neutral' or 'status quo'.

Having read the story, almost two-thirds or 60% of the respondents who completed the visit formed the group that perceived 'very dissatisfied-dissatisfied-neutral' experience (Table 3). It clearly showed that the existing storytelling concept was unable to meet their expectation or improve their knowledge.

**Table 3:** Respondents' satisfaction level on the interpretive exhibits post-visit

Number of respondents against satisfaction level	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
i) Balai Besar	3	14	40	27	6
ii) Istana Kota Setar	14	13	38	16	9
iii) Balai Seni	5	10	33	34	8
iv) Balai Nobat	3	16	36	27	8
v) Galeri Sultan Abdul Halim	5	10	32	32	11
vi) Gerbang Istana Kota Tengah	3	13	41	26	7
vii) Masjid Zahir	6	11	26	28	19
viii) Menara Jam Besar	4	14	32	30	10
ix) Bermulanya Bandar Alor Setar	5	16	36	24	9
x) Dataran @ Padang Court	3	17	35	27	8
xi) Bangunan Wan Mohd Saman	4	16	36	27	7
xii) Wisma Negeri	3	16	37	25	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>111</b>
Average - number of respondents	4.8	13.8	35.2	26.75	9.25
Percentage	5.3%	15.3%	39.1%	29.9%	10.3%
		60%		40%	

Moreover, only 8% of the visitors considered their visit as 'awareness experience'. The 'wow' factor or narrative strategy is possibly missing from the story content. For example, Wisma Negeri's storytelling should include the lost heritage of Istana Kota Tengah and its gateway or Gerbang Istana Kota Tengah. It will be the central point where the information of heritage complexes within

Dataran Bandar should be narrated. Other than that, interpretative panels of Bangunan Wan Mat Saman should include a description of Wan Mat Saman as a state figure and all of his contributions to the state. The building could be converted to a functional tourist-related building such as a café or information centre.

### **Getting the Story Right: The Contents of the Interpretive Exhibits**

Storytelling plays a significant role in heritage interpretation. The storytelling must offer a powerful and productive way of raising awareness, especially of intangible heritage. With proper descriptions and adequate narrations of notable heritage values, effective storytelling can promote visitors' knowledge and understanding, and make history as an interesting subject. The findings from the study indicated that 49% of the respondents agreed that improvement of the storytelling or narration and even content should be carried out in order to deliver effective interpretive exhibits (Table 4).

Besides, a relation has been established between 'interpretive signage' and 'enjoyable/informative/awareness creation' experience, which would then result in willingness for return visits and word-of-mouth (WoM) reference to visit the heritage sites at the Dataran. However, the storytelling content plays a more important role in relaying history.

This result of reduced percentage indicated that only 17% had improved their heritage awareness level and were satisfied with what they read. This result corresponded with the outcome of 'type of experience gained', whereby a very low percentage, i.e., only 8% of the respondents, believed they experienced 'awareness' after the visit.

The result showed that almost half of the total respondents (49%) believed that improvement of 'storytelling content creation' is needed at the Dataran (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Area of improvement at Dataran Medan Bandar

	<b>SUGGESTION FOR AREA FOR IMPROVEMENT ON INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS</b>	<b>RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b>I)</b>	Storytelling content creation	44	49%
<b>II)</b>	Include storytelling presentation via performance show	19	21%
<b>III)</b>	Interpretative signage design to be more creative and attractive	18	20%
<b>IV)</b>	Tour guide to be available if needed	4	5%
<b>V)</b>	To provide heritage trail with continuity and clear direction	4	4%



<b>VI)</b>	Detour the vehicles along affected stretch	1	1%
	Total	90	100%

On the top of the list on reasons for dissatisfaction turned out to be ‘storytelling is not interesting’ (30%), and ‘lack of emphasis on storytelling of the strength/uniqueness of the Kedah Sultanate’ (21%) (Table 5). All these reflect important aspects of interpretation and presentation of comprehensive knowledge and awareness, which are required when presenting the Dataran site to visitors.

**Table 5:** Dissatisfaction as perceived by visitors on the current signage

	REASONS FOR DISSATISFACTION	PAX	PERCENTAGE (%)
<b>i)</b>	Storytelling is not interesting	27	30
<b>ii)</b>	Lack of emphasis on storytelling of the strength/uniqueness of the Kedah Sultanate	19	21
<b>iii)</b>	No direct pedestrian link – Mosque, <i>alur</i> (stream) and Clock Tower area separated by Lebuhraya Darulaman	12	13
<b>iv)</b>	Not enough time	11	12
<b>v)</b>	Others	8	9
<b>vi)</b>	No clear guidance on flow of direction	6	7
<b>vii)</b>	No clear way finding signage	4	5
<b>viii)</b>	There is no narration on the original historical relationship of the establishment of Alor Setar town of Kedah	2	2
<b>ix)</b>	No descriptive panel for storytelling	1	1
	Total	90	100%

There was a substantial number of significant historical facts and messages or notable images or old photographs that were available but did not appear in the storytelling content. Scholars are of the opinion that aspects of local living culture and cultural landscape in the past could offer new aspects of heritage interpretation of cultural heritage sites surrounding the Dataran.

The factor of ‘uninteresting storytelling’ that resulted in ‘dissatisfaction’ as perceived by the visitors was almost similar to the high numbers of ‘ineffective heritage interpretation’ status of the existing storytelling method identified by scholars as a result of interviews. Information gathered on the scholars’ views covered various aspects of ‘heritage interpretation’. There are much more notable and factual ‘stories’ that are hidden and have yet to be told. The result showed that their attached heritage values were interconnected with their presence within the heritage site. The result in a way revealed that the storytelling approval process was vague. It clearly demonstrated that the final

narration had not gone through a proper ‘validation process’ for approval before it was displayed on the panel.

### **Bringing Out the Best of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage Using Interpretive Exhibits**

Unexpectedly, only 6% of the total visitors came with the purpose to explore the local culture, which is supposed to be one of the main objectives of heritage interpretation. Possibly, the site is unsuccessful in creating awareness on the intangible aspects of local culture and past living culture to the visitors.

Despite a direct narration of site history, it is probably time for the state government to enliven this past tradition of ‘clock and nobat sound’ as an attraction element for visitors. Besides, due consideration should be given to other aspects of local culture with the same potential as suggested by the scholars:

- Using trishaw rides as a sightseeing attraction for Alor Setar, similar to Malacca, which used to be the means of public transportation back then until circa the 1970s.
- River cruise along Sungai Anak Bukit to create awareness of its presence as a natural cultural site with beautiful scenery that used to be a very essential waterway during the establishment of Kota Setar.

Interpretive interpretation of heritage sites must be able to convey heritage values by various means, not only via interpretive panels, as criticised by Veverka (2018) regarding pictures, graphics, and text within a usually square box stuck on a stick panel. Producing purposeful interpretive products, interpretive panels, exhibits, and other media should be pre-tested (evaluation) to observe if they accomplish their stated objectives (ibid). The importance of writing a good and effective story must be taken seriously by having them vetted by an approval committee consisting of members from various stakeholders. An effective storytelling strategy should include establishment of a proper process flow diagram to be followed.

### **CONCLUSION**

Storytelling on interpretive panels plays an important role in raising historical awareness and understanding. The history of how the town was founded has been well-narrated, but without experiencing the heritage setting associated with the actual view of cultural landscape and settlement journey, visitors will find it difficult to understand. The given examples of ways to provide additional learning motivation to visitors can be suggested as the solution in answering the question as quoted by Veverka (2018), “when is ‘interpretation’ NOT ‘interpretation’?”

Therefore, it is prudent for future heritage site conservation efforts to consider certain qualities that are a response to local traditions, architectural context, and cultural landscape, which include nature, flora and fauna, topography, and climate. From the results of this study, it can be concluded that satisfied visitors produce positive WoM that would lead to return tourists and also bring more new visitors. For that reason, it is important to provide heritage sites with effective heritage presentation. Heritage tourism creates economic activities that generate income. As highlighted by Said (2011), 'preservation of heritage' contributes to the local area, the sustainability of the heritage, and the benefit of the nation in general.

The existing 'realities' on heritage interpretations at heritage sites from the study revealed the uninteresting storytelling content and ineffective interpretive panels that were used as media to convey heritage values as discussed through the findings in Table 5. The real task is to create heritage interpretation through the use of 'tangible to intangible to universal' (if any) linkages and the links that reveal meanings, which help create awareness about the site.

Besides, most of the respondents called for integration of interpretive exhibits in the form of interactive media at the Dataran. It showed that interactive media have a positive benefit that can help to attract visitors to the heritage sites. Lighted interpretive signages with other elements of landscape/street lighting will enhance safety and allow for easy reading, which are currently unavailable. Since the Dataran is able to pull the crowd at night, it is prudent to consider interactive light, sound, and music shows on selected building façades facing an open area with ample crowd capacity of the Dataran. The interactive screen façade will provide visitors with a glimpse of the virtual heritage or history lessons, using fun and education to remind them of the past. Furthermore, with purposeful narratives that highlight the importance of heritage conservation, the audience will have greater understanding, care, and appreciation of preserving and maintaining the local heritage.

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