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PUBLIC ART AS A CATALYST FOR CULTURAL REVITALIZATION AND TOURISM IN SMALL TOWNS: A CASE STUDY OF PEKAN PARIT, PERAK

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformative role of public art in promoting tourism and fostering community engagement in Pekan Parit, Perak. Adopting a mixed-methods approach combining surveys and site observations, the research reveals that 88.3% of residents perceive murals, sculptures, and installations as valuable in preserving cultural identity and attracting visitors. However, challenges such as inadequate maintenance and a lack of thematic alignment with local heritage remain significant. Beyond aesthetic value, public art emerges as a conduit for expressing collective memory, identity, and cultural narratives embedded in everyday life. The findings highlight the importance of cultural relevance and active community participation in the artistic process. To support sustainable implementation, the study proposes an integrated framework encompassing community co-creation, systematic maintenance strategies, and curated tourism initiatives. These insights contribute to broader discourses on creative place making and sustainable cultural tourism, offering practical implications for policymakers and urban planners engaged in small-town revitalization.

Keywords: Public Art, Cultural Tourism, Community Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Public art encompasses a wide range of artistic expressions in public spaces, including murals, sculptures, installations, and monuments. Beyond aesthetics, it serves as a medium for cultural reflection, social commentary, and community storytelling, embedding creativity into everyday life (Hunting, 2005; Zakariya & Azhari, 2017). As towns and cities modernize, public art increasingly functions as a placemaking tool that reinforces local identity, civic pride, and cultural continuity. This is particularly relevant in heritage-rich regions such as Perak, Malaysia, where modernization must align with cultural preservation.

From an anthropological perspective, heritage is a socially constructed and dynamic process rather than a fixed legacy (Smith, 2006). Public art thus becomes a contested arena where narratives of identity and history are negotiated and reinterpreted. In Pekan Parit, a small but historically significant town in Perak, public art has emerged as both a creative intervention and a reflection of local tensions between modernization and heritage authenticity. While some initiatives have successfully enhanced the town's visual appeal, others risk detachment from local culture and community values (Jasmi & Mohamad, 2016). In Malaysia's small towns, where economic stagnation and limited tourism programming persist, public art offers a strategic avenue for revitalization. It can transform neglected spaces into cultural landmarks, promote walkability, and strengthen community identity through shared narratives. However, challenges such as inadequate maintenance, superficial participation, and lack of institutional support hinder its long-term impact.

This study examines the role of public art in promoting tourism and community engagement in Pekan Parit, Perak. Using a mixed-methods approach involving surveys and field observations, it explores public awareness, emotional engagement, and perceptions of cultural and economic value. By focusing on a small-town Malaysian context, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how public art can serve as a sustainable and inclusive tool for cultural revitalization and tourism development in heritage settings undergoing socio-economic transition. While previous research has examined public art in metropolitan settings, this study uniquely situates the discourse within a small-town Malaysian context, contributing to the understanding of how public art facilitates cultural revitalization and tourism in heritage towns undergoing socio-economic transition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public art has increasingly been recognized worldwide as a strategic component of urban development and cultural regeneration. Once viewed primarily as decorative or commemorative installations in public spaces, it is now understood through a more expansive lens that highlights its capacity to shape place identity,

foster civic dialogue, and drive socioeconomic development (Miles, 1997; Cartiere & Willis, 2008). In rapidly transforming urban environments, public art functions not only as a visual landmark but also as a participatory and symbolic practice that embodies community values and shared narratives. This broader perspective reconceptualizes the notion of place, not as fixed or singular, but as continuously shaped through dialogue, negotiation, and the selective construction of collective memory.

Public Art and Place Identity

Public art plays a vital role in expressing and reinforcing place identity. By visually narrating local histories, cultural values, and community stories, it contributes to a distinctive sense of place that differentiates one locality from another (McCarthy, 2006). This function is especially pertinent in smaller towns, where the preservation of local heritage is often threatened by modernization and urban homogenization. When public art reflects local traditions and aspirations, it can act as a form of cultural resistance embedding identity within the physical landscape and countering the forces of erasure. Miles (1997) highlights that public art participates in the “cultural production of space,” transforming ordinary public areas into sites imbued with memory, meaning, and symbolic resonance. In doing so, public art fosters emotional attachment to place, reinforcing a sense of collective belonging and continuity amidst social or spatial change.

This role is particularly significant in historically rich towns like Pekan Parit, where local identity is deeply intertwined with the built environment and cultural legacy. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that identity and memory are not monolithic. Artistic interventions may privilege certain narratives while marginalizing others, depending on who participates in the decision-making process and whose voices are amplified. As such, public art becomes part of a continuous cultural negotiation unfolding not only in the physical environment but also through the everyday experiences and interactions of the community (Hall, 1990).

Public Art and Community Engagement

The success of public art initiatives often hinges on the degree to which communities are meaningfully involved in their planning, design, and interpretation. Community participation not only empowers local residents but also enhances the perceived legitimacy, relevance, and long-term value of the artwork (Cartiere & Willis, 2008). Rooted in social practice theory, this approach emphasizes that the creative process is as important as the final product, particularly when artists collaborate with communities to co-create site-responsive and culturally resonant works. In multicultural and pluralistic societies like Malaysia, inclusive public art practices can function as platforms for dialogue

across ethnic, cultural, and generational divides, fostering civic engagement and strengthening social cohesion.

McCarthy (2006) found that public art projects grounded in local participation were more likely to be embraced and sustained over time, as communities identified with them as reflections of their collective identity and shared values. However, participatory processes are often more complex than they appear. Communities are not homogeneous, and divergent perspectives on heritage, aesthetics, or representation may emerge. Furthermore, participation is not always equitable or empowering; local dynamics such as informal leadership structures, generational hierarchies, and cultural norms can influence whose voices are heard and how public art is interpreted and maintained (Cornwall, 2008).

Public Art in Tourism Development

From a tourism perspective, public art enhances the appeal of destinations by improving the aesthetic and experiential quality of public spaces. In an increasingly competitive tourism landscape, towns must distinguish themselves through unique and authentic cultural offerings. When strategically integrated into tourism planning, public art can serve as a catalyst for cultural tourism, attracting visitors who seek place-specific and immersive experiences (Richards, 2018). Mathews (2014) contends that public art can revitalize economically declining areas by drawing tourists, stimulating local businesses, and generating media attention.

This aligns with the principles of the Experience Economy Theory, which suggests that contemporary tourists prioritize emotionally engaging and memorable encounters. Art installations that reflect local culture, heritage, or contemporary social themes not only enrich the visitor experience but also provide visually compelling, photogenic sites that are frequently shared on social media amplifying a town's visibility and appeal. In small towns like Pekan Parit, public art can complement heritage tourism by creating visual anchors that guide visitor movement, link disparate heritage sites, and enrich the town's interpretive landscape.

However, integrating cultural narratives into tourism strategies requires thoughtful consideration. Over-curated or overly sanitized representations may simplify complex local histories, favoring themes that cater to tourist expectations while marginalizing everyday lived realities. Balancing local authenticity with tourist engagement is key. When done sensitively, public art can support more inclusive, meaningful storytelling that resonates with both residents and visitors, strengthening cultural identity while contributing to sustainable tourism development.

Challenges of Integration and Sustainability

Despite its many benefits, the integration of public art into small-town environments presents several challenges. A primary concern is the authenticity of the installations, particularly when artworks are perceived as externally imposed or disconnected from local cultural contexts (Evans, 2005). Such interventions risk being viewed as symbolic intrusions rather than genuine expressions of community identity, resulting in limited public ownership, weak engagement, and eventual neglect. This challenge is further intensified when public art appears to cater more to external audiences such as tourists or funding bodies than to local residents, raising important questions about whose narratives are represented and whose are marginalized.

Another critical issue is the long-term sustainability of public artworks. Zebracki (2012) emphasizes that ongoing maintenance and stewardship are essential to preserving the aesthetic, cultural, and symbolic value of public art. Yet, many small towns lack structured funding mechanisms, institutional support, or dedicated policies for upkeep, often leading to physical deterioration and diminished public interest. Beyond maintenance, sustainable public art initiatives also require sustained collaboration among municipal authorities, artists, and community groups to ensure that artworks continue to fulfill their intended social and cultural roles over time.

Furthermore, the absence of clear policy frameworks or integrated master plans for public art often results in fragmented, ad hoc efforts with minimal coordination among stakeholders. This disconnect weakens the overall coherence and long-term impact of public art as a tool for community revitalization and cultural continuity.

STUDY AREA

Pekan Parit is a small heritage town located in the Perak Tengah district of Perak, Malaysia (see Figure 1). Strategically positioned between Ipoh and Lumut, it once served as an administrative and commercial hub during the colonial era. The town retains distinctive British-era architecture, traditional shophouses, and civic buildings that form a unique cultural identity—an ideal setting for public art interventions that enhance heritage preservation and tourism appeal. In recent decades, Pekan Parit has faced economic decline due to regional development shifts and urban migration, leading to reduced commercial activity and underutilized heritage assets. Yet, this condition also presents opportunities for revitalization through creative urban strategies, particularly public art that reconnects the community with its cultural roots. The town's compact, walkable layout and closely knit community provide a strong foundation for participatory public art planning. Notable examples, such as the murals along Memory Lane and installations near the riverfront, have already revitalized public spaces and

drawn growing tourist interest. These initiatives visually narrate the town's history and local trades, transforming everyday settings into cultural landmarks. Pekan Parit was selected as a case study because it represents many Malaysian small towns rich in heritage yet underrepresented in national tourism planning. Its early adoption of public art demonstrates both the promise and challenges of cultural revitalization at a local scale. This study explores how public art can strengthen community pride, stimulate economic renewal, and offer practical insights for integrating creative placemaking in small-town revitalization across Malaysia.

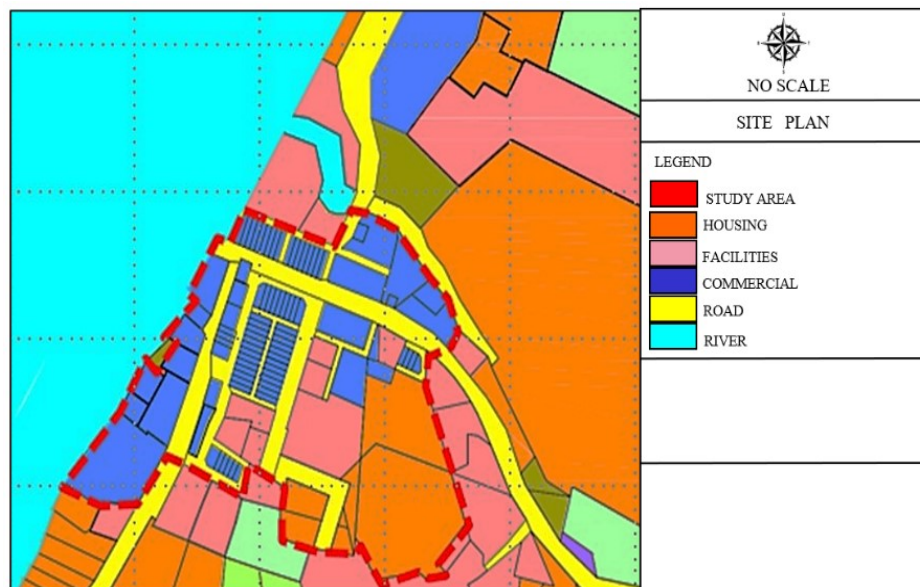


Figure 1: Site Plan

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of public art on tourism development and community engagement in Pekan Parit, Perak. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how public art is perceived and experienced within a small-town context. This approach aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) recommendation that mixed methods are particularly well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed to measure community awareness, perceptions, and the perceived influence of public art on cultural identity and tourism appeal. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale and was administered to 103 respondents using

convenience sampling during site visits to key public art locations, such as Memory Lane and the town square. While non-probability sampling limits generalizability, it is widely accepted in exploratory research targeting geographically bounded populations (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Survey items were adapted from validated instruments in prior studies on public art and urban identity (McCarthy, 2006; Zebracki, 2012), and a pilot test was conducted to ensure clarity and relevance. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded values above 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2016).

Concurrently, qualitative data were gathered through non-participant observations over a two-week period at prominent public art sites in Pekan Parit. Observations focused on the physical condition of artworks, spatial integration within the urban landscape, and patterns of community interaction, guided by principles of urban ethnography (Whyte, 1980; Creswell, 2014). Field notes and photographic documentation were systematically recorded to support subsequent interpretive analysis. An interpretive lens was applied to examine symbolic meaning, identity narratives, and cultural values embedded in the artworks and their spatial contexts.

The data from both strands were analysed independently. Quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis and cross-tabulations, while qualitative data were analysed thematically to identify emergent patterns related to symbolic value, community engagement, and tourism potential. The findings were then triangulated to enhance the validity and credibility of the results by corroborating evidence across multiple data sources (Denzin, 1978).

The use of convenience sampling, while suitable for exploratory research, limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population. To mitigate this limitation, the study triangulated quantitative data with qualitative field observations, enhancing the robustness and contextual validity of the results. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and ethical protocols concerning anonymity and confidentiality were strictly observed in accordance with established standards for research involving human subjects (Bryman, 2012).

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of Universiti Teknologi MARA's Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and data confidentiality was strictly maintained.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the quantitative survey and qualitative field observations conducted in Pekan Parit, Perak. The analysis

is organized thematically around three core dimensions: (1) community awareness and perceptions of public art, (2) the perceived contribution of public art to tourism development and local identity, and (3) practical concerns related to maintenance, cultural relevance, and spatial integration. These thematic categories provide a structured lens through which to interpret the data and assess the multifaceted role of public art in a small-town context.

1. Community Awareness and Perception of Public Art

The data indicates that a substantial majority of respondents are aware of public art in Pekan Parit. Of the 103 participants surveyed, 88.3% (n = 91) reported having encountered public art installations in the town, reflecting a relatively high degree of spatial visibility and public exposure. In contrast, only 11.7% (n = 12) had not observed any such installations, highlighting potential areas for improving accessibility or enhancing community outreach and awareness initiatives. Overall, respondents expressed strong appreciation for the aesthetic and cultural value of public art. As presented in Table 1, the highest mean score (M = 4.13) was associated with the belief that public art raises awareness about the sustainability of local culture and heritage. This was closely followed by perceptions of its contribution to the town's aesthetic appeal (M = 4.12) and its enhancement of cultural ambiance (M = 4.12). In contrast, statements reflecting concerns about the cultural relevance of certain artworks (M = 2.50) and the unsuitability of their placement (M = 2.64) received the lowest mean scores. These findings suggest that while public art is generally well-received, respondents prefer installations that are contextually grounded and culturally aligned with the local heritage. These results affirm that public art is widely perceived as both culturally enriching and aesthetically meaningful, aligning with the findings of McCarthy (2006) and Cartiere and Willis (2008), who emphasize the symbolic significance and placemaking potential of community-responsive art installations.

Table 1: Community Awareness and Perceptions of Public Art

Statement	Mean (M)	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Public art raises awareness of local culture and heritage	4.13	0.67	Very High Agreement
Public art enhances the cultural ambiance of Pekan Parit	4.12	0.68	Very High Agreement
Public art adds aesthetic value to the town	4.12	0.69	Very High Agreement
I am aware of the concept of public art	3.84	0.72	High Agreement
Public art is poorly maintained in Pekan Parit	3.68	0.85	Moderate Agreement

Statement	Mean (M)	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Public art in the town is not suitably placed	2.64	0.90	Low Agreement
Public art does not reflect the history or culture of the town	2.50	0.88	Low Agreement

Source: Field Study (2024)

2. Perceived Impact on Tourism and Local Economy

Respondents also acknowledged the economic and tourism-related potential of public art in Pekan Parit. As shown in Table 2, the highest-rated statement (M = 4.34) reflected strong agreement that public art can attract tourists and visitors to the town. This was followed by similarly high ratings for public art's perceived role in contributing to economic growth (M = 4.32) and revitalizing the town's image (M = 4.26). These findings align with perspectives in cultural tourism literature, which suggest that art-based placemaking can enhance destination appeal and stimulate local economic activity (Richards, 2018; Mathews, 2014). Interestingly, typical concerns associated with increased tourism—such as overcrowding, discomfort, or safety risks were not widely shared among respondents. The lowest-rated statement, “The arrival of more tourists will cause discomfort if public art increases,” received a mean score of just 2.33. This suggests that residents perceive minimal disruption from tourism growth and, overall, support public art as a vehicle for tourism-driven revitalization. These findings reflect strong community support for the continued integration of public art as a catalyst for tourism and local development. They further suggest that public art enhances the visitor experience without negatively impacting the town's functionality or livability, which is an important consideration in the context of sustainable cultural tourism planning (Zebracki, 2012).

Table 2: Perceived Impact of Public Art on Tourism and Economy

Statement	Mean (M)	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Public art can attract tourists and visitors to Pekan Parit	4.34	0.60	Very High Agreement
Public art can positively contribute to local economic growth	4.32	0.61	Very High Agreement
Public art can help to revitalize Pekan Parit	4.26	0.65	Very High Agreement
The town has seen more visitors due to existing public art	3.31	0.78	Moderate Agreement
Existing public art installations are unattractive	3.11	0.85	Neutral

Statement	Mean (M)	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
Public art causes traffic congestion and delays	2.45	0.89	Low Agreement
Public art has contributed to safety hazards for drivers or pedestrians	2.46	0.90	Low Agreement
The arrival of more tourists will make residents uncomfortable	2.33	0.92	Low Agreement

Source: Field Study (2024)

3. Observational Insights: Maintenance and Spatial Integration

Qualitative observations supported the quantitative findings, particularly regarding concerns related to maintenance and community engagement. Many of the artworks, especially murals near Memory Lane were visually striking and frequently photographed by both locals and tourists, indicating their appeal and informal promotional value. As shown in Figure 2, the murals along Memory Lane illustrate several installations exhibited signs of physical neglect, such as fading paint, cracked surfaces, and insufficient signage. These issues reflect challenges identified by Evans (2005), who argues that inadequate maintenance can diminish the cultural value of public art and erode community pride. In addition, the spatial positioning of certain artworks appeared misaligned with historical pathways or pedestrian traffic, thereby limiting their visibility and interpretive impact. In contrast, installations placed along primary walkways or integrated with heritage buildings attracted greater public attention and interaction. These findings underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity and urban legibility in the planning and placement of public art, as emphasized by Miles (1997) and Whyte (1980).



Figure 2: Public Art & Mural at Memory Lane in Pekan Parit

Source: Study Field (2024)

Overall, the study reveals a broadly positive and supportive community attitude toward public art in Pekan Parit, particularly in relation to its role in cultural preservation, aesthetic enhancement, and tourism promotion. However, the findings also highlight critical areas for improvement, including the need for sustained maintenance efforts and stronger alignment between public art content, community values, and spatial context. These insights reinforce the view that successful public art interventions must be both locally grounded and strategically managed to ensure their long-term sustainability, cultural relevance, and effectiveness as tools for small-town revitalization.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted role of public art in shaping cultural identity, fostering community engagement, and enhancing the tourism potential of small towns such as Pekan Parit. The high level of community awareness and appreciation suggests that public art is not merely a passive aesthetic feature but is actively regarded as a meaningful vehicle for cultural expression and civic pride. These insights are consistent with prior scholarship emphasizing the symbolic and functional role of public art in reinforcing place identity and fostering a sense of belonging (Miles, 1997; McCarthy, 2006).

Positive community sentiment regarding the aesthetic and cultural contributions of public art aligns with the concept of placemaking, in which creative interventions reframe spatial narratives and elevate the experiential quality of public spaces (Cartiere & Willis, 2008). In this study, respondents valued public art not only for its visual appeal but also for its contribution to cultural sustainability, particularly through artworks that reflect the town's heritage and historical identity. This highlights the importance of content authenticity, a recurring theme in cultural tourism literature and the Experience Economy Theory, which posit that emotionally resonant and symbolically authentic experiences are central to visitor satisfaction (Richards, 2018).

Notably, respondents expressed minimal concern regarding common externalities associated with increased tourism, such as congestion, discomfort, or safety risks. This suggests that in smaller towns with lower population density and slower development pressure, cultural strategies such as public art may offer a socially acceptable and environmentally sustainable path to tourism development. These findings lend empirical support to the notion that public art can serve as a low-impact, high-reward strategy for revitalizing rural and semi-urban economies (Mathews, 2014; Zebracki, 2012).

However, qualitative field observations provided a more nuanced perspective, particularly concerning issues of maintenance and spatial integration. Several artworks were found to be deteriorating, with signs of neglect such as faded paint, cracked surfaces, and inadequate signage. In addition, some

installations were poorly positioned and spatially disconnected from high-traffic pedestrian areas or heritage landmarks, thereby limiting their visibility and interpretive value. These challenges echo concerns raised by Evans (2005) and Whyte (1980), who argue that without institutional support and formal maintenance frameworks, the long-term sustainability of public art is jeopardized. The gap between public appreciation and physical upkeep highlights the urgent need for municipalities to develop comprehensive public art policies that address not only commissioning but also long-term stewardship and care.

The findings also emphasize the critical role of community participation not merely as consumers of public art but as active contributors to its conception and design. Artworks that reflect local stories, cultural values, and collective memory received stronger support, while those perceived as generic or culturally disconnected generated limited engagement. This aligns with the views of Cartiere and Willis (2008), who argue that co-created, community-driven artworks are more likely to resonate with residents and endure over time. As such, public art initiatives should move beyond top-down commissioning models and embrace participatory approaches where local voices shape the artistic vision from the outset.

Nevertheless, participatory approaches are not without limitations. Public art in small towns like Pekan Parit often operates within larger strategic agendas such as tourism development and place-branding that influence decisions about representation and visibility. As Sharp et al. (2005) caution, these initiatives can risk privileging institutional or commercial narratives at the expense of grassroots, community-defined perspectives. This tension calls for critical reflection on how public art negotiates symbolic representation while meeting the expectations of funders, planners, and audiences.

Moreover, the participatory imperative is inherently spatial. Public art is not experienced in isolation but within lived environments shaped by movement, memory, and social interaction. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of socially produced space, the meaning of public art emerges through everyday encounters and spatial routines. Artworks strategically located along pedestrian pathways, near heritage landmarks, or in informal gathering spaces are more likely to be perceived as relevant, accessible, and memorable. Conversely, those lacking contextual or spatial resonance risk becoming overlooked or culturally inert.

In the context of Pekan Parit, the findings offer a compelling argument that heritage-rich small towns can leverage public art as a strategic instrument for cultural and economic revitalization provided that interventions are contextually grounded, meaningfully participatory, and supported by robust policy infrastructure. These insights hold practical implications for local authorities, cultural institutions, and urban planners seeking to harness public art as a tool for sustainable tourism, placemaking, and the reinforcement of civic identity.

Comparatively, similar public art initiatives in Southeast Asia, such as those in Yogyakarta (Indonesia) and Georgetown (Malaysia), reveal parallel challenges in balancing tourism development with heritage authenticity. These comparative insights underscore that, like Pekan Parit, many small towns in the Global South are navigating tensions between creative expression and cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the vital and multidimensional role of public art in the revitalization of small towns, particularly in contexts like Pekan Parit, where cultural heritage and community identity remain underutilized yet potent assets. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research revealed a high level of public awareness and favourable perceptions regarding the aesthetic, cultural, and economic value of public art. These installations are not merely decorative enhancements, but they are seen as vehicles for cultural storytelling, place branding, and expressions of collective pride. Significantly, public art was widely perceived as a catalyst for tourism development, with residents reporting minimal concerns about potential disruptions. This suggests that when thoughtfully implemented, culturally grounded public art can attract visitors and stimulate local economies without compromising the social or spatial integrity of small-town life.

Nonetheless, the study also identified key challenges that could hinder the long-term success of public art initiatives. Observational findings pointed to issues such as inadequate maintenance, poor site integration, and limited community participation, which are factors that may risk diminishing the intended cultural and social impact over time. For public art to realize its full potential, it must move beyond surface-level beautification and be firmly rooted in the lived experiences, values, and aspirations of the community it serves. Inclusive authorship, spatial relevance, and long-term stewardship are essential to ensuring that public artworks retain meaning and resonance over time.

Ultimately, for public art to fulfil its transformative potential, it must be treated as a strategic component of broader cultural planning, one that requires thoughtful curation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and strong policy support. Local authorities and cultural practitioners must work together to develop comprehensive public art masterplans that embed artworks within larger frameworks of heritage preservation, urban aesthetics, and community empowerment. As Ibrahim et al. (2023) argue, the implementation of such strategies must be studied carefully to ensure that the outcomes benefit all stakeholders, including government agencies tasked with cultural development.

In the case of Pekan Parit, a structured and participatory approach to public art could pave the way for a culturally vibrant, visually compelling, and

economically resilient future. The insights from this study may serve as a useful model for other heritage towns in Malaysia and across the Global South seeking to balance the pressures of modernization with the preservation of cultural identity through the transformative power of public art. The study's contribution lies in extending the discourse on public art beyond major cities to small-town Malaysia, demonstrating how contextually grounded artistic interventions can serve as catalysts for heritage preservation and community-led revitalization

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