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THE VALUE OF ARTS AND CULTURE: A CASE STUDY ON CREATIVE PLACEMAKING IN HIN BUS DEPOT, PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The arts and cultural sector are essential in sustaining George Town, Penang's UNESCO World Heritage Status. Creative placemaking incorporating the power of arts and culture can add value to the city's public space design. It involves revitalising abandoned public spaces to enhance neighbourhoods and strengthen local communities. This study aims to discover community participation and awareness in arts and culture. They are taking Hin Bus Depot, a creative hub in the heart of George Town, as the case study examines the impacts of creative placemaking projects on the community. In this context, creative placemaking is the approach that integrates arts and culture into a public space to enable transformation while also building character and quality of place. To test the hypothesis that arts and culture can positively impact the community, an online questionnaire survey was distributed to the locals and visitors of Penang. Respondents were asked about demographics, engagement, and awareness of arts and culture. The results showed the community's positive relationship with arts and culture and the success of Hin Bus Depot in bringing beneficial impact. The community's engagement in arts and culture has increased, contributing to the support of George Town's local arts scene. The concept of creative placemaking should be considered to promote better urban design in the future.

Keywords: Arts, Cultural, Engagement, Awareness, Creative Placemaking, Hin Bus Depot

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INTRODUCTION

Placemaking is a relatively new concept in Penang, but it is gaining momentum and has become an increasingly important part of the community. The COVID-19 pandemic made people realise the importance of public and green spaces across the cities. When people are restricted from travelling as freely as possible before, they will appreciate their local context. Although the pandemic has influenced our lives, it can also be an opportunity to enhance our locality (Placemaking for a Post-Pandemic World, 2021). People care more about the social and economic aspects when creating a place, but the arts and culture should not be neglected. The arts and culture can be a valuable tool to stimulate the relationship between people and space. Increased creative placemaking projects in George Town show a positive sign of progress, and locals are becoming more aware of the significance of their own culture and history. However, how much the community knows about arts and culture in creative placemaking needs to be clarified. The process of creating a great public space should involve the participation of different stakeholders. It is essential to engage artists or creative practitioners in the placemaking process to generate innovative ideas or approaches and enable the community to visualise the potential future of their space (ArtsWork Collaborative, 2018). To attain greater sustainability, a clearer picture of how arts and culture affect the community must be explored.

Especially in George Town, arts and culture play a significant role. Like many other Asian cities, George Town uses arts and culture to accelerate the economy's growth. The beauty of arts and culture was vital to recognise George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. This inscription is undeniably a revolutionary force that has changed George Town (Khoo, 2016). It is critical to understand and comprehend the significance of arts and culture to the local community today. The key to success mainly depends on the local community, which can utilise the rich and abundant resources readily accessible in the city. Still, these advantages are usually neglected by the community. To keep arts and culture alive, the community is encouraged to reflect on the significance of arts and culture and incorporate them into the design of a place. This research helps promote the arts and culture and understand the impacts of creative placemaking projects on the community. The stakeholders will know if the project is making a difference to the community and will learn about and enhance future project implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Arts and Culture

Arts and culture are widely defined to incorporate multiple forms of creative expression, including formal and informal arts and cultural practices: performances, architectural design, media production, traditional arts, visual arts and culinary arts. These artistic approaches are now reflected in the growing field

of creative placemaking. Place-based arts and cultural initiatives promoting various cultural experiences, irrespective of background, will bring people together for shared experiences (Arroyo et al., 2020). Culture is described as a "specific way of life, whether of an individual, an era, a community, or civilisation as a whole." It also applies to the social interactions in the community, which can impact how innovation and creativity occur in a society. Examples of tangible cultural assets are murals, artefacts, historic buildings, and structures. Intangible cultural assets include practices, knowledge, traditions, and languages. Each community has its own cultural identity, identified by its shared history, beliefs, and assets. It is intrinsically tied to a person's sense of belonging, recognition, and engagement towards their place. Cultural exchange allows a group of people to maintain and preserve their social status and structure, thus aiding in the sustainability of a community (Sung, 2015). The interaction of people with arts and culture comes in a variety of contexts and delivery methods. Cultural interaction at home with television, radio, and various digital and online activities is familiar and is proliferating today. However, its growth affects people's perception of cultural meaning (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). The rise in digital interaction profoundly impacts cultural engagement and meaning, allowing people to engage with cultural institutions and commercial culture in new ways. The emergence of co-creation and user-generated content altered the production and consumption of arts and culture.

Arts participation can be categorised into three intertwined forms: arts involvement, individual art production and performance, and digital media involvement (Stallings & Mauldin, 2016). People may have fun and participate in the arts through various forms, such as public art, murals, galleries and festivals. Individuals can benefit from arts and cultural experiences to strengthen their skills and abilities and boost their physical and mental health. It enables people to escape their hectic daily lives and satisfy their desires and goals through arts experiences. As a result, their overall quality of life will be enhanced. Many studies have claimed that the arts will help to improve one's health and well-being. People who engage in the arts will feel happier or healthier, which correlates strongly with satisfaction. They can also boost self-esteem, social skills and interactions. Participation of older adults in arts and culture helps to strengthen their sense of self-worth and widen their social circle. More importantly, it could help the local community cultivate a sense of pride in their culture and become more aware of their local identity. People can express themselves and connect through different art. Increasing people's trust in society also makes them feel more secure in the face of crime.

Installing public art will decrease crime and violence, whereas massive investment in the cultural sector can increase local appearance (Sung, 2015). The importance of arts and culture should be highlighted in terms of placemaking. Arts and culture are community assets, and we should integrate them through

creative placemaking (Redaelli, 2014). Markusen (2014) claims that artists should participate and play a role in urban transformation, and places should "enable interaction among art-makers, permit socialising, and encourage conversation about the cultural experience". It reveals that the arts can bind people in a community with creative ways, put diverse people together, and discover the hidden talents of the community.

Regarding urban planning, most people, especially in developing countries, exclude the arts and culture. Arts and culture can solve fundamental issues such as the economy, healthcare, and education, but they are always considered secondary or tertiary. Since people have different feelings and perceptions towards public art, so their appreciation of art is often crucial in shaping its function. A few studies have investigated the importance of art in public spaces and claim that there are numerous perspectives on how people view public art and the form of art in which people take part, resulting in overall impacts (Jagannath, 2015). Public art connects to a city in various profound ways, bringing sense, memory, and social development and pushing towards creativity in a community.

Creative Placemaking

The term "creative placemaking" was introduced in the 1960s by urban planners like Jane Jacobs, who called for a community-driven strategy for creating places for people. In Malaysia, the idea of 'placemaking' is familiar but is acquiring momentum. Malaysia has been generating interest in placemaking and public spaces projects since 2014, beginning with Think City's cooperation and partnership with a Project for Public Spaces. The Project for Public Places (PPS) is a New York-based non-profit group dedicated to designing and preserving public spaces and promoting community development via placemaking. They are to assist Think City in disseminating the Placemaking concept in Malaysia by establishing a platform for placemakers and advocating with various government agencies to create high-quality public spaces around the country (Project for Public Spaces, 2014). In 2021, Placemaking Malaysia was launched by the Malaysian Institute of Planners (MIP), a network of individuals and organisations concerned about public space and hoping to make it more diverse, creative, and thriving. In partnership with the Penang City Council, Think City has generated significant waves of placemaking in Penang since 2019. From Sia Boey to Hin Bus Depot, they have embarked on various creative placemaking projects that support arts and culture to revitalise public spaces and bind the locals. George Town's thriving arts and cultural scene provides the framework for development in many other sectors, especially festivals and celebrations. The success of the creative placemaking project benefits the arts community as well. Rather than funding artists to produce artworks in silence, creative placemaking promotes creative installations in public spaces. Creative placemaking contributes to three

main goals: liveability, diversity and economic development. These goals are made to fulfil the public safety issues of local communities and their expressive and aesthetic needs. They are fostering environmental change by enhancing public facilities and landscape architecture. Creative placemaking also encourages more local expenditure, which may contribute to local economies (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Retail businesses supporting locals and visitors produce more employment opportunities and income. Arts and cultural industries that flourish will transform George Town into a creative hub, which is crucial for the survival and growth of the creative economy and the creative city.

In the present study, creative placemaking uses creative and participatory approaches to create more appealing and vivid public spaces. These artistic practices are in the physical setting, including public art, sculptures and murals (Cohen et al., 2018). Creative placemaking can also include art-related industries, galleries, places, and event-based practices in which seasonal shows, festivals, and other activities occur in public spaces (Lew, 2017). The word "creative" in "placemaking" can be addressed as a feature of a place where people come in and create places, embrace the cultural heritage and establish common goals for the community (Redaelli, 2018). Communities can contribute their creativity and imagination to collaborative art-making projects, too. This will lead to greater social cohesion and creative improvements in new spaces representing the community's cultural values. Indirectly, it will diversify the area's functions and offer another added advantage to the public (Isa, 2020). Economic growth programmes focusing on creative industries and cultural capital- residents' creativity- are another form of creative placemaking. In other terms, creative placemaking encompasses community and cultural building priorities, such as growing community pride, bridging gaps among the groups and creating opportunities for them to put thoughts into words. It lifts the community's well-being by creating local job opportunities and improving the environment for local businesses. Unlike traditional approaches, the economic growth that results from creative placemaking is asset- and place-based. It emphasises individuals' creative abilities and physical and psychological relations among people and their surroundings. Participation in creative placemaking initiatives and the arts more frequently is often shown to have positive mental effects. Till, K. E., & McArdle, R. (2015) explain the consequences of interaction in creative spaces that bring meaningful memories and experiences, helping to ease, accentuate, and gain trust in navigating the built environment. Arts participation could also ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety and reduce loneliness by fostering social ties (Erickson, 2016). The outdoor recreational activities involve direct contact with recreational resources and serve as a site for face-to-face social interaction (Isa et al., 2022). Placemaking activities will help to build new social networks, too.

METHOD

This study employs a quantitative method to achieve the research objectives. It comprises well-structured questionnaires to gather primary data from the local community and visitors. This study uses a descriptive research design to understand community participation and awareness in arts and culture and the impacts of the creative placemaking project. This research design is inexpensive and can gather data from a wide range of respondents in a limited time. This study used online questionnaires in which one can send out a survey to a particular target population, and they can respond to the survey whenever possible. In contrast to other data collection methods, online surveys are much faster and less expensive in getting feedback from the respondents. The study's population was comprised of Penang residents and visitors, who were all part of various demographic groups. The online questionnaire aims to reach 200 sample size with a margin of error of 6.93% of individuals of different age groups and social positions through other platforms, such as email and social media. However, only 125 answer forms can be used after screening. Hin Bus Depot, a vibrant creative hub, was selected as the case study. It is an example of creative placemaking in which a vacant bus depot is transformed into a gathering spot for artists, artworks, events, and creative works. A variety of arts and cultural activities are happening in this place. The online questionnaire is divided into three sections and generated using Google Forms. Google Forms is used as it offers an easy way to construct a survey online, with data gathered on an online spreadsheet. People may also use their smartphones to respond to the questions. The three parts of the online questionnaire are:

Part A: Demographic

The demographic survey asks about gender, age, ethnic background, where the respondents live, education level, household income, employment and marital status. This is an ideal method for understanding the respondents' backgrounds better.

Part B: Engagement with Arts and Culture

The questionnaire examined the kinds of arts and cultural events the respondents have engaged in, their motivations for participating, and the locations of the events. The results are essential for stakeholders who want to expand community engagement in arts and culture. Identifying which groups of people are most likely to participate in arts and cultural events is beneficial.

Part C: Awareness in Arts and Culture

This section reflects on the respondents' access to and awareness of arts and cultural events. It helps evaluate the availability of arts and culture in Penang and

understands what the community thinks about the existing arts and cultural opportunities.

Study Area

Hin Bus Depot was chosen as the case study for a creative placemaking project in George Town. It was a well-known bus depot on Penang island in the years after World War II, owned by Hin Company Ltd. It was believed to be the trendiest bus depot because of its unique architectural design. The bus depot eventually ceased operations in 1999. Then, it was left vacant until Ernest Zacharevic's 2014 art exhibition began the first ground-breaking moves in becoming the thriving creative hub today. The existing structures of the place have been maintained, with only minor changes and improvements made. The Hin Bus Depot is an essential venue for promoting and showcasing community artworks and cultural performances. There are a variety of exhibitions, music festivals, cultural activities, live performances and literary events. This place comprises 60,000 sq ft, with eight shop-houses on Jalan Gurdwara and three shop-houses facing Jalan Kampung Jawa Lama. Local small businesses and artists mainly occupy the shophouses. The location of Hin Bus Depot, which is in the centre of George Town, near the Komtar Tower, is easily accessible to both visitors and locals. The arrangement and orientation of the spaces are shown in

Figure 1.

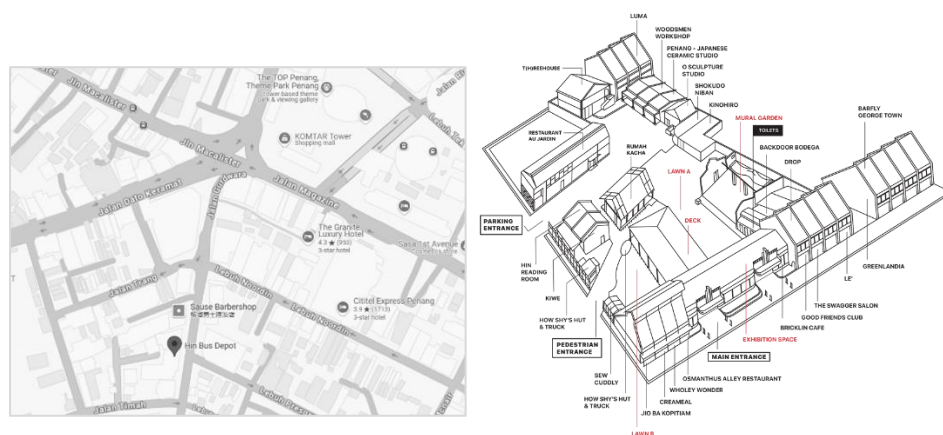


Figure 1: Hin Bus Depot Location and Layout Plan.

Source: Google Maps & <https://hinbusdepot.com/>

The exhibition space, deck, mural garden and lawn shown in **Figure 2** are public rental spaces. They come with standard event equipment such as power points, projectors, projector screens, and a basic PA system. When no private events are scheduled in the rental spaces, Hin Bus Depot will host a range of arts and cultural activities that are free and accessible to the public.



Figure 2: Rental Spaces.

Source: <https://hinbusdepot.com/space-rental>

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Part A: Demographics of the Respondents

This section describes the demographic information provided by the respondents. The frequency distribution of the questions in this survey was analysed using descriptive statistical analysis by SPSS. There was all the information. **Table 1** provides a summary of the demographic of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic of the respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency, N	Percentage
Gender	Male	40	32.0%
	Female	85	68.0%
	Total	125	100%
Age	18-24 years old	77	61.6%
	25-34 years old	31	24.8%
	35-44 years old	5	4.0%
	Above 45 years old	12	9.6%
	Total	125	100%

Variable	Category	Frequency, N	Percentage
Ethnic	Malay	14	11.2%
	Chinese	100	80.0%
	Indian	5	4.0%
	Other	6	4.8%
	Total	125	100%
Current place of living	Penang	89	71.2%
	Other	36	28.8%
	Total	125	100%
Education Level	Secondary school	7	5.6%
	Pre-University	16	12.8%
	University or College	102	81.6%
	Total	125	100%
Characteristics	Teens or Young adults	88	70.4%
	Middle-aged adults	15	12.0%
	Child-free couples	8	6.4%
	Parents	10	8.0%
	Senior citizens	4	3.2%
	Total	125	100%
Employment status	Student	60	48.0%
	Employed	56	44.8%
	Unemployed	4	3.2%
	Retired	5	4.0%
	Total	125	100%
Income group	Less than RM2,500	54	43.2%
	RM2,500-RM5,000	39	31.2%
	RM5,000-RM10,000	19	15.2%
	More than RM10,000	13	10.4%
	Total	125	100%

Source: Authors

Part B: Engagement with Arts and Culture

This section examines community participation in arts and cultural events. The respondents can select multiple answers for each of the questions. All responses should be collected as respondents may participate in or wish to participate in different arts and cultural events and have multiple reasons for attending or not going. Multiple response analysis is used to analyse multiple response questions in SPSS accurately. It can construct frequency tables for every multiple response set. **Table 2** represents the overall community participation in arts and cultural activities.

Table 2: Engagement with arts and culture.

Variable	Category	Frequency, N	Percentage
Arts and cultural activities participated	Performing arts	74	26.9%
	Visual arts	52	18.9%
	Literary arts	20	7.3%
	Community arts and cultural festivals	80	29.1%
	Online artwork, performances or literary events	32	11.6%
	None of the above	17	6.2%
Total		275	100%
Reason for attending arts and cultural activities	Learn about art form.	38	9.7%
	Join in a religious ceremony.	21	5.4%
	Celebrate heritage.	45	11.5%
	Learn about another culture.	44	11.3%
	Support organisations or events.	59	15.1%
	Support friends or family.	45	11.5%
	Socialise with friends or family.	54	13.8%
	Leisure and recreation.	70	17.9%
None of the above	14	3.6%	
Total		390	100%
Places of arts and cultural activities participated	Public building	67	19.4%
	Museum or gallery	45	13.0%
	Place of worship	30	8.7%
	Cinema or concert hall	51	14.7%
	School or college	63	18.2%
	Open-air	48	13.9%
	Online	30	8.7%
	None of the above	12	3.5%
Total		346	100%
Arts and cultural activities wish to join	Performing arts	48	21.0%
	Visual arts	46	20.1%
	Literary arts	36	15.7%
	Community arts and cultural festivals	48	21.0%
	Online artwork, performances or literary events	29	12.7%
	None of the above	22	9.6%
Total		229	100%
Reason for not attending arts and cultural activities	Too expensive	24	11.9%
	Not enough time	47	23.4%
	No one to go with	38	18.9%
	Too difficult to get to	18	9.0%
	Not in my area	55	27.4%
	Not interested	19	9.5%
Total		201	100%

Source: Authors

Part C: Awareness in Arts and Culture

The respondents were asked about their awareness of arts and culture. A Likert scale indicates if they focus on or have various opportunities in arts and cultural activities. The availability and importance of arts and culture in George Town are also evaluated based on respondents' perceptions. This type of question enables respondents to express their agreement level with a particular statement. The results are summarised in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Awareness of arts and culture.

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
I pay much attention to the arts and cultural activities.	1 (0.8%)	8 (6.4%)	41 (32.8%)	55 (44.0%)	20 (16.0%)	125 (100%)
I have various opportunities to be involved in the arts and cultural activities.	6 (4.8%)	26 (20.8%)	45 (36.0%)	33 (26.4%)	15 (12.0%)	125 (100%)
I would like to see more arts and cultural opportunities.	-	2 (1.6%)	12 (9.6%)	58 (46.4%)	53 (42.4%)	125 (100%)
	1	2	3	4	5	Total
	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Good	Very Good	
How would you rate the availability of arts and culture in George Town, Penang?	2 (1.6%)	7 (5.6%)	12 (9.6%)	66 (52.8%)	38 (30.4%)	125 (100%)
	1	2	3	4	5	Total
	Not at all Important	Poor	Neutral	Important	Very Important	
How important is having arts and cultural offerings in George Town, Penang?	-	-	5 (4.0%)	24 (19.2%)	96 (76.8%)	125 (100%)

Source: Authors

Community Participation

Community engagement fosters relationship development via various activities to build a dynamic environment in a place. People involved in the arts and culture are more likely to form community ties in their area. Some may actively participate in community groups that are meaningful to them or come to places they frequently visit. The findings of community engagement are valuable to stakeholders who wish to encourage participation in arts and culture. The study asked about the types of arts and cultural activities people participated in, the reason for their participation, and the events' locations. The respondents are primarily teens and young adults in the city. They involve people in arts and culture when they are young, which can lead to a long relationship with the arts. Their most popular activities are performing arts such as music, dance, movies, and community arts and culture festivals, fairs, and celebrations. George Town hosts various arts and cultural festivals and events throughout the year. The George Town Festivals are the most expected annual cultural event, creatively showcasing the local arts and culture scene, including visual and performing art. Both performing arts and community festivals are abundant in George Town, a major tourist attraction that draws various visitors to celebrate together. Enhancing the overall tourist experience directly impacts post-visit intentions and indirectly shapes them by fostering a strong sense of place attachment (Bai et al., 2024).

Teens and young adults participate in arts and cultural activities for leisure and recreation. Weekend art and cultural workshops, exhibitions or performances could help them forget their busyness. The public building is where most people participate in arts and culture. Hin Bus Depot is another place that has held several public and private events. Since most respondents are students, they are also active in arts and cultural projects at their school. Students actively engaging in arts and cultural events are more inclined to volunteer their time as adults. Some people are not involved in any of the arts and cultural activities. They are primarily child-free couples and those who are employed. Males are also more prone than females to be uninterested in arts and culture. Participation is sometimes affected by an individual's interest, surroundings, and people's influence. Many people wish to receive information through electronic devices, especially in today's digital environment. However, it is a two-sided coin; when arts and cultural venues gradually transform into "smart places," the traditions and beauty of arts might be forgotten. Most respondents have a positive relationship with the city's arts and culture. They are interested in the activities and would like more possibilities. It is a positive sign since arts and cultural activities may benefit the community in various ways. George Town is a well-known creative hub, with arts and culture supporting the economy and its UNESCO World Heritage Site inscription. The city needs numerous people

focusing on the arts and cultural sector to strengthen the local creative industries and maintain their cultural heritage's distinctiveness.

Local Impacts

Creative placemaking projects' social and economic impacts on the community are assessed. More than half of the respondents, most teenagers and young adults, had visited or heard of this place. Many young local business owners, artisans, and performers display their products and skills. It also attracted international visitors to this spot, immersing themselves in the relaxing atmosphere. Hin Bus Depot is where everything fits well, with various exhibitions, events, stores, markets, and cafes. This makes it family-friendly and suitable for weekend gatherings. It is essential to bring a group of passionate people about the arts and culture sector to support the local arts scene to preserve this community hub. It fosters community relationships and provides unique experiences for people from all backgrounds. To continuously attract people to revisit Hin Bus Depot, the community needs to have a sense of attachment, feelings, and memories. The relationship between arts and happiness is natural and may serve as a determinant of mental health.

The existence of Hin Bus Depot has further increased the number of visitors, although it is at a less touristed location. A huge crowd can be seen, especially on weekends, as various arts and cultural activities occur. It has successfully drawn many international visitors who have fallen in love with this cosy environment. Even the locals love this spot, giving them a different vibe from the open street art. Not only are the activities engaging, but the building itself is also appealing, as it is a rarer kind of architectural design that appears in George Town. Besides, most respondents think that the Hin Bus Depot has encouraged community participation in arts and cultural events. It allows people in the community who are passionate about the arts to express themselves while sustaining and supporting the city's creative industry. In a nutshell, Hin Bus Depot has made significant contributions to the community's economy and social circumstances. As it is a community-driven platform, the community must contribute to its upkeep. This should be maintained, which gives Hin Bus Depot its uniqueness and attractiveness, with loving people willing to sacrifice and grow together. Funding from the state government is also necessary for this place to be supported. It will be exciting to see how well the Hin Bus Depot can flourish and fill gaps in the George Town art scene.

CONCLUSION

The data from this research shows a variety of practical implementations deserving of future work. It would be beneficial to understand the participation and awareness of the community in arts and culture and to measure the impacts of creative placemaking projects on the locals. The arts and culture must serve as

a tool to enhance the placemaking process and should also have a seat at the table in public space projects. This survey was significant in understanding the local community's perspectives on the creative placemaking project so that stakeholders could determine whether this approach is appropriate for George Town, Penang. Public opinion matters because placemaking is all about community-based participation. Those who live, work and play here are the only people who know their needs and expectations for the community. Arts and culture also significantly contribute to a city's social and economic well-being. Creative placemaking promotes civic participation, enhances public and mental health, strengthens place attachment, and reduces crime. Arts and cultural activities allow memories, cultural heritage and social interactions to build a sense of belonging to a place. The presence of arts and culture production reduces people's fear of crime as they feel safer walking down alleys with mural paintings on the walls. When a city invests in creative placemaking, it also expands the local business and employment opportunities. The availability of jobs and skilled labour force is often concentrated in high-quality places. A new destination that attracts visitors, locals, and workers will lead to a rise in property values and further infrastructure investment. Penang has a pretty active art community, supporting the effort to implement creative placemaking in this culture-rich city.

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