

## **WALL ART IN GEORGE TOWN: THE EFFECTS OF AESTHETIC GENTRIFICATION IN A CULTURAL HERITAGE SITE**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the development of wall installations and their effect on aesthetic gentrification in the George Town heritage site, Penang, Malaysia. This study first investigates the three waves of aesthetic gentrification in George Town by adopting Chang's (2016) framework. Besides, the concept of place-making is adapted to examine the emotional connection between residents and wall installations. The findings show that aesthetic gentrification was initiated in George Town after the nomination of George Town as the World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2008. Today, 52 wall installations are existing in George Town, which are involved in three historical stages (planning phase, preparatory phase, installation phase) and categorised into three types of themes (multi-cultural trading mode, traditions of Asia and European colonial influence, George Town's unique culture and townscape), to identify George Town's heritage. The wall installations are designed under government sponsorship for the preservation of George Town's heritage and to boost the tourism industry. Policy-driven sponsorship for the art creation changed the artistic atmosphere in George Town from one that is characterised by traditional trade to one that is driven by art tourism. This has caused the emergence of conflicts between the residents and artistic creation, as well as competition for space.

*Keywords: wall installations, gentrification, heritage site, installation art, George Town*

## **Introduction**

Penang is located in the northwest of West Peninsula Malaysia. George Town, the second largest city in Malaysia, is located at the northeastern tip of Penang Island. The population of George Town in 2020 is 708,127 people based on over 1.8 million population of Penang, which includes three main ethnicities Malays, Chinese, Indians and a minority of Thais, Burmese, Eurasians, Japanese, Koreans and various expatriate groups (*The Star*, 2018). George Town is also a multi-cultural old city with various religions. The official religion is Islam by Malaysian laws, other religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Hinduism are freely practised.

The colonial history of George Town Penang began in 1786, established by Captain Francis Light of the British East India Company. It was one of the first settlements of the British in South-East Asia. George Town, together with Melaka, had been nominated as the world heritage site by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) in 2008 (Ho, 2009). The traditional townscape, multicultural trading and architecture are the most important factors of the UNESCO criteria (Mohamed, Omar, & Zulaiha, 2015). With the improvement of George Town's international fame, numerous visual artworks appeared on the streets, which include wall installations, murals, graffiti, etc. Culture, history, conventional social life of George Town are critical subject matters involved in the creation of those artworks (Poon, 2016). Nevertheless, this characteristic cultural heritage site has been challenged by the irreversible gentrification in George Town. Beng, Barker, and Kuan (2016) claim that George Town was suffering gentrification caused by the art transformation and art-driven tourism. The tourism-led urban development has already changed the types of residents and functions of historical buildings in the George Town heritage zone. The destruction of traditional houses, renewal of culture, changes in population structure had eroded George Town's cultural heritage.

Malaysia is taking lots of steps to fulfill the purpose to achieve as a developed country, such as branding the nation for cultural heritage and repositioning tourism setting, which involves many considerations especially from socio-cultural aspects (Hussin, 2018a). "In the new Malaysian tourism policy, heritage tourism has been considered as one of the niches and significant product to be developed extensively for the future" (Hussin, 2018b, p. 79). By utilising culture and identity as an effective branding approach, previous studies indicate that food heritage can be used as a method to promote Malaysia and boost its tourism industry (Hussin, 2018a). However, there is still a need to understand more diverse socio-cultural resources in Malaysia to achieve its sustainable development. This study attempts to introduce an exploratory investigation of a

relatively less-investigated artistic resource, wall installations or installation art, in the cultural heritage zone of George Town, the capital of Penang State, Malaysia. The present study primarily utilises Chang's (2016) conceptual framework of aesthetic gentrification and also uses a social semiotic approach to document the production and development of the wall installations in George Town, as well as to understand the significance of this kind of artwork through the comprehension of George Town's identity development.

### **Installation Art**

This study uses the term 'wall installations' to define a series of artistic works that are permanently affixed (installed on) to the walls in George Town. 'Installation art' refers to an arrangement of structures that are installed inside, outside or around exhibition space using found or constructed objects, often emphasising the immersive experience of the viewer within the artwork and sometimes include hi-tech and multi-sense instruments of sound, light and smell (Stogner, 2011, p. 3).

Installation art is regarded as a mode of production and display of visual artworks. It can comprise traditional and non-traditional media, such as sculpture, painting, ready-mades, found objects, drawing and text. Installation spaces can range from cluttered to minimal based on the number of objects and the nature of the presentation (Kelly, 2010, p. 5). The exhibition space may be institutional, commercial, domestic or public. Installation materials range across static, dynamic and interactive combinations of organic, graphic, typographic, plastic, sonic, kinetic, photographic, etc. and virtual representation of everything from material, physical, environmental and mechanical realities, to the evocation of conceptual, theoretical, spiritual, and metaphysical experience (Zurbrugg, 2001). For a long time, installation artists tended to attach value to the constructs such as the frame and the plinth, then they insisted on strategies of representation and transcendence characteristics of objects to draw the viewers' attention to the totality of the experience of the artwork – its materials, context and site (Kelly, 2010).

Installation art is mostly associated with the formative period during the 1960s and 1970s, which was a time of social, political and cultural upheaval. It came to prominence in the 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, installation artworks were increasingly characterised by networks of operations that involved the interaction among intricate architectural settings, environmental sites and extensive use of everyday objects in ordinary contexts. With the increase of new venues and large-scale as well as international exhibitions, installation art became a noticeable visual format. In this regard, site specificity was gradually displaced by project-based, participatory or discursive forms of installation, which

emphasise the activation of the viewers through active engagement with the artworks (Kelly, 2010).

Recently examinations of audience experience of artistic features or playful interactive applications have been growing as an area of interest (Gross et al., 2009). Nonetheless, the authors of this research have referenced earlier articles on the subject of installation art, especially the sub-category of wall installations, and found that previous focus has been predominantly paid to this artistic mode from the perspective of computer-related components or applied technology (Polacci, 2018). We found that almost none deals with installation art as a visual resource in heritage studies. The documentation of the artworks may be the evidence of their existence, and in some instances, it may be the sole means by which the viewers engage with the artworks. At the same time, the documentation may come to represent the artworks and, consequently, it may acquire a commercial value of the artworks (Kelly, 2010). In this regard, we tend to concern this research less with what we have seen in the previous technique-based articles, but to work in the direction by documenting the production and development of the wall installations in George Town as a type of specific installation artwork involving distinctive features, and by exploring how this wall art influences the aesthetic gentrification in George Town heritage area.

### **Roles of Art in Urban Gentrification**

Glass (1964) created the term 'gentrification' to define the phenomenon of urban changes taking place in the 1950s in London. He explained gentrification as a process where middle-class developers and house owners rehabilitated working-class communities in the core area of urban. As such, the rich community reinvested capital in the city and in due time gradually replaced the original residents. Glass's theory is used to examine the process of gentrification in many places with different styles, such as New York, Spain and Latin America. These studies illustrated that gentrification is initiated for many reasons, such as the growth of commerce, aging of the population in the community (Wyly & Hammel, 1999), art transformation of old neighbourhood, emergence of new trade mode or policy-supporting "brownfield" (refers to areas where new houses can be built after old houses in the city are cleared) transformation (Janoschka, Sequera, & Salinas, 2014).

Previous studies elaborated on the role of art in gentrification, which affects the renaissance of culture, changes in social formation, stimulation of urban economies, and the alteration of urban appearance (Palermo, 2014; Phillips, 2004). Plenty of studies are more specifically focused on examining the role of street art in urban gentrification. It is widely acknowledged that when the viewers play with

the artworks in a physical or real environment, they become involved in the daily life of individuals in the community, and at the same time, their sense of art becomes enhanced. Hence, the street artworks get social attributes that the artworks in the gallery cannot acquire. And the social attributes expand the interaction from limited gallery space to the whole city, from a certain spectator to everyone in the city (Márquez & Tosca, 2017). The viewers' experimental interaction with the street artworks always enhances the awareness of the natural experience that has disappeared in urban daily life (Graf & Kwanmuang, 2015). Consequently, it revives the memories of traditional culture and social values. Lloyd (2002), as well as Markusen and Gadwa (2010) examined the function of art in the revitalisation of declining urban spaces and economies. In their case studies of gentrification in Vieux Carre Heritage District New Orleans, Wicker Park Chicago and Hobart Tasmania, art and art-driven tourism are the main methods to promote economic growth, rejuvenate the use of old buildings and enhance middle-class mobility.

Related to this article, George Town in Penang, Malaysia, shares lots of similarities with Vieux Carre, Wicker Park Chicago and Hobart Tasmania in terms of the conserved heritage, historical characteristics, development of art and art-driven tourism. According to Chai (2011), tourism in Penang relies on the heritage identity of the British colony, cultural diversity and culture-based street murals. Wall installations recomposed the urban appearance and trade mode of George Town (Sadati, Rahman, & Aldrin, 2015).

### **Three Waves of Aesthetic Gentrification**

Aesthetic gentrification, as a global issue nowadays, is a concept that provides a suggestive frame to explore the form and outcome of urban change, as well as its contestations when new artistic modes and cultural activities occupy historical buildings (Chang, 2016; Palermo, 2014).

Chang (2016) analysed the process of gentrification in Little India Singapore through the aesthetic perspective. In his view, the gentrification initiated in Little India passed through three stages. The first wave of aesthetic gentrification started with policy sponsorship. National Art Council (NAC) and Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) in Singapore actively attracted artists by giving rental subsidies to promote the renaissance of art and culture in Little India. The artist's incursion is another critical factor influencing the first wave of aesthetic gentrification (Moskowitz, 2015). The artist's incursion commonly has two types of aesthetic gentrification as proposed by Cole (1987): the lower rents and cost of living encourage artists to move into the old urban, thereafter, the artists start to revive the artistic expressions in the neighbourhood; the existing art-driven commercial

district and stronger artistic atmosphere attract artists to recolonise the old urban area for seeking higher income livelihood. Those artists as a creative middle-class are new old-urban migrants and political protagonists in policy-led gentrification (Markusen & Schrock, 2009).

For the second wave of aesthetic gentrification, prior studies examined the relationship among the artistic presentations, residents and neighbourhood. The labourers and residents reveal distinctness towards the awareness of art and art-led commercial activities. The adaptability of transformation in culture and art in some ways determines the potential neighbourhood and its quality of lifestyle (Grodach, Foster, & Murdoch III, 2014). Lee (2014) illustrated the two opposite groups of residents involved in the gentrification: as wealthier residents flow back into once low-income neighbourhoods, long-time residents can be priced out. As a result, those poorer and less acculturated residents who show a lack of awareness of art and culture are threatened with displacement by gentrification (Giovanni, 2011).

The third wave of aesthetic gentrification is considered to be caused by spatial competition and social conflicts. The particular characteristic of this phase is the influx of private or organised capital (domestic and overseas) which is concerned with the investment of historical and cheap buildings. Thereafter, the artistic renovation rapidly starts (Hackworth & Smith, 2002). This leads the private and public to intend to refurbish and somehow sanitise specific zones of central neighbourhoods to make them suitable for middle-class tastes and the emerging creative activities (Diappi & Bolchi, 2006; Julier, 2005).

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

A variety of tools and methods in ethnographic fieldwork were utilised in this research such as site visits, interviews, film records and photography (Chan, 2019). The rationale of the application of such a multiple-method qualitative methodology is that the authors could collect insights related to the heritage observation, thoughts belonging to the artists, and residents' views. Gathering different information from multiple perspectives enables the researchers to provide a better range of suggestive views on the wall installations in George Town and document the aesthetic gentrification in this cultural heritage site.

First, fieldwork was conducted to collect the first-hand data resource — present status of the wall installations in George Town. This process of observation was done between the periods of 13 February 2016 to 20 September 2016. Fieldwork mainly included four parts: (1) interviews with residents and tourists;

(2) observation of the wall installations; (3) digital data recoding via photography and GPS software; (4) documenting information about the physical environment. A total of 52 wall installations existing in George Town were recorded by photography as the data for analysis. Specifically, observation and recording of the wall installations had been conducted twice separately. In the early morning, the intact pictures of the installations were recorded before the peak hour of visitors flow-rate, then the researchers took the pictures in the afternoon again to record the daily conditions with visitors owing to the tourism function of the wall installations in George Town. As a study involving a documentary process, the renowned artists of wall installations in George Town were interviewed to seek their perception of the wall installations' production and development. Furthermore, both the international and local tourists as well as local residents were interviewed to capture their opinions on the wall installations in George Town.

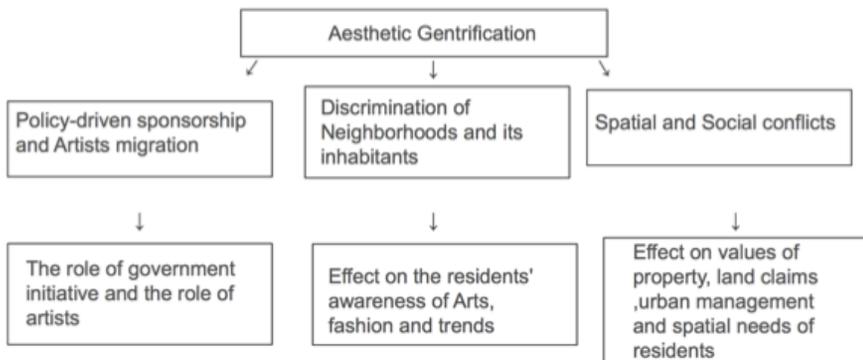
The information from publishing sources such as books, journals, newspapers and the Internet were collected as secondary data. This is an effective and reliable approach to acquire the historical background and development of the wall installations. The most frequently used online database and journals download web search engines were Science Direct, Research Gate, Taylor & Francis. Furthermore, some mainstream English newspapers in Malaysia with the widest circulation and highest readership in both print and online platforms, *Sin Chew Daily* and *The Star* were referenced as another feasible approach to facilitate the researchers to understand the development of wall installations in George Town.

For location and GPS point record, FotoPlace App was used as it accurately catches the GPS coordinates and street address of the wall installations and shows them on the digital map at the same time. Small errors of naked-eye observation can be corrected via the use of this tool, which ensures that the data collection is more precise. Because of the corrosion and man-made damage and tourism consumption, details of the wall installations may not be clear to a certain degree. Therefore, Canon 550D camera with high definition was used as the instrument to record the photographs of the existing wall installations in George Town.

### **Conceptual Framework of Aesthetic Gentrification**

To examine the role of the wall installations in the gentrification process in George Town, Chang's (2016) findings were employed as the main theoretical framework in this research. As aforementioned, Chang (2016, p. 53) has proposed three key points in investigating aesthetic gentrification, which are summarised as: first, artists' incursion and policy-driven sponsorship; second, discrimination of

neighbourhoods and its inhabitants; third, spatial and social conflicts (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework of aesthetic gentrification (Chang, 2016)**

The current investigation of the wall installations is also reliant on the concept of place-making. Place-making lies between the concepts of transforming space into a place and the roles of community in participatory processes for future urban planning. Moreover, place-making can be defined as the act or process of creating great places that possess an emotional connection with the users (Bertsche, 2013). Emotional connections of place-making give the residents a sense of belonging, and cultural and historical memories are considered as two critical ways to cultivate this sense of belonging (Fleming, 2007). In the public environment, installations can always resonate with the viewers based on their lifestyle, memory, emotion, or even personal preference. Thus, installations provide the viewers a sense of belonging or a cordial feeling (Markusen, 2006). This sense of belonging of residents in some ways is an important factor when it comes to choosing a place of settlement (Florida, 2005). Therefore, this study will examine whether the wall installations in George Town create a sense of belonging for the residents and understand the role of this artwork in the process of aesthetic gentrification in the George Town cultural heritage site.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study attempts to document the development of the wall installations in George Town and explore their roles in the gentrification process of this heritage city. As aforementioned, the present study adopts Chang's (2016) framework of aesthetic gentrification as the analytical model, therefore this section follows the three waves to firstly chronologically record the background, emergence of art style, the process of development of the wall installations in George Town. Furthermore, the changes of the wall installations and their influence on the

surrounding environment in George Town will be observed based on examining the interactive relations between the wall installations and the environment.

## **The First Wave of Aesthetic Gentrification in George Town**

### *Policy-driven sponsorship*

The first wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town did not take place suddenly, but was gradually triggered by many factors. Out of which, policy sponsorship was regarded as a pivotal one. Additionally, before the initiation of the first wave of aesthetic gentrification, George Town's international status and the cultural heritage nomination by UNESCO invisibly paved a way for the development of its aesthetic gentrification. UNESCO declared George Town as the world heritage site on 7 July 2008. One year later on 7 July 2009, Penang State Government hosted Annual Ceremony of Celebrating George Town as World Heritage Site. Lim Guan Eng, Chief Minister of Penang State Government, announced the date of 7 July as the George Town Heritage Day (Perisytiharan George Town sebagai Tapak Warisan Dunia). Meantime, the George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) was established to conserve this heritage city. Since then, an exceptional committee named George Town Festival (GTF) hosts a diversity of activities regarding art and culture to celebrate Heritage Day every year. For the first annual ceremony of George Town Heritage Day, an art challenge competition called *Marking George Town: An Idea Competition for UNESCO World Heritage Site* (hereafter refers to as *Marking George Town*) was organised, which aimed to enhance the fame of George Town heritage culture and tourism financial income as well as commit to heritage conservation.

*Marking George Town* was an official competition that was co-hosted by the Penang government, GTWHI and Royal Institution of Surveyors Malaysia. It started on 7 September 2009 and encompassed two phases. During the first phase that ended on 15 November 2009, the committee of the competition received a total of 138 design blueprints from 64 participants who came from Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Bangladesh, Singapore and Australia. The first phase of the competition aimed to identify innovative design concepts to build George Town as a brand image of a world heritage city, and preserve the heritage zone of the world's remarkable universal value. Eventually, the design work produced by a team called '*Sculpture at Work*' won the first stage from 100 artworks in the second phase on 29 December 2009 (<http://sculptureatwork.com/2010/10/sculptureatwork-wins-competition/>).

The mission of *Marking George Town* can be elaborated as to: (1) clearly show the characteristics of George Town at each entrance to the heritage zone; (2) provide the unique and specific identity of heritage; (3) give a clear sense of native;

(4) involve local communities and encourage visitors to explore heritage; (5) make an impact on the future design works and policies of the heritage zone. *Marking George Town* thus became a long-term project on policy scheme in Penang, with a purpose to increase the understanding and conservation of George Town heritage.

#### *Creation of wall installations*

Artwork designers also have an unshakable responsibility to be considered as a factor in the first wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town. In *Marking George Town*, an art institute in Malaysia called *Sculpture at Work* presented the proposal of wall installations and finally won the competition. This award-winning design work fully complies with the principles of heritage protection in terms of theme, technological features and materials. The theme of this installation work is 'voices from the people'. Every single steel diorama of this work was bent and shaped to bring stories and inspiration to the resident's daily life. Mr. Tang Mun Kian, the leader of the team, presented the inspiration of the work as follows:

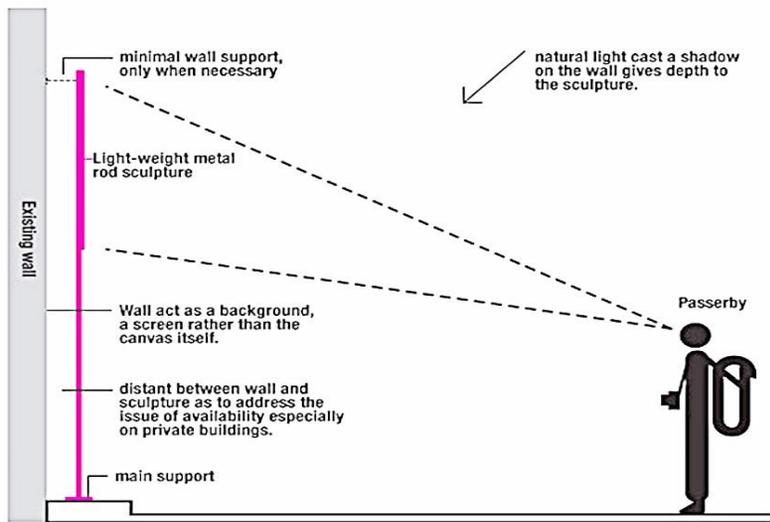
The streets of George Town were named after the trades, people and events, which means every street has its own unique story. With the rising rental, many of the original inhabitants moved out and with them, the stories as well. So, the idea is to put the stories back into the city.

Mr. Tang Mun Kian kindly shared the slides presented in the *Marking George Town* to the researchers via the E-mail interview. Thus, a more comprehensive interpretation of the artist's preparatory phase for producing wall installations of the *Marking George Town* program was fulfilled. *Sculpture at Work* understood the function and the inspiration of the wall installation as follows:

Utilisation of empty wall space as a background for voices to be heard. Simple fun and humorous drawing in metal rod with descriptions that portray the history of the street, the people or the building itself. Engage artists, cartoonists, and designers to participate and contribute their ideas to make George Town a creative city. A simple guide is produced for visitors to discover the history of the street as well as to enjoy the fun and humorous wall sculptures.

Walls of heritage buildings, as the place background provided to install the artworks, are not only a part or an element of the installations, but also inspire this process of artistic creation. The wall installations are not merely fastened on the walls, in contrast, their effective roles are dependent on the viewer's points. The book entitled *Penang transitions – Marking George Town and Rifle Range Renewal*

*Competition*, published by the Malaysian Institute of Architects, records the viewpoints of the passersby, approaches and the expected results of the wall installations. As shown in Figure 2, the main body of the wall installation is placed at a certain distance from the wall mainly with the bottom of the screw to be fixed. If the wall installation is too large or in other necessary conditions, it will be set up with fixtures behind to keep itself stable. Due to the natural sunlight and the gap between the wall, the installation on the wall forms a certain depth of shadow, so that the environment, the installation and the choice of viewer's viewpoint jointly decide the final effect of this visual artwork. Besides, the role of the gap is important to protect the ancient and private buildings.



**Figure 2: Viewpoint of visitors for wall installations**  
(Source: Mr. Tang Mun Kian (2016).)

In order to express the accurate sense of 'heritage' in the wall installations, the *Sculpture at Work* team did many autoptical investigations including site rece and taking photos. With a purpose to keep the intactness of historical buildings' external appearance and minimise the damage of walls, the artists utilised special materials and approaches to produce the installations. George Town wall installations are not made of molten iron cast but wrought iron. The physical environment determines the proportion of artworks in design manuscripts, the size of artworks and the size of different parts in actual production. Then the high-strength steel bending machines are frequently employed for cast iron wire bending. Small parts are hand-made with iron pliers. In the final step, various parts of the molding are welded together (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Production of wall installations by electro welding**  
(Source: Mr. Tang Mun Kian (2016).)

The welding of the iron plate and the steel bar at the bottom enables the installations to be vertically fixed on the walls. After completing the initial styling, to eliminate the protuberances caused by welding and enhance the aesthetic effect of the installations, the artists need to grind the welded interface with grinders and sandpaper so that the connection looks smoother and more natural. Following, the artists strip the rust from the surface of the artworks for ease of painting. The main body of the wall installations tends to use black paint, nevertheless, several wall installations also use colour paint to achieve vividness in visual presentation. The last step of the installation production is to install it on the wall of the target site with screws and welding (see Figure 4). In addition, the artists will take into overall consideration that the environmental characteristics of the sites and inherent problems associated with the materials, with a purpose to achieve a harmonious aesthetic effect.

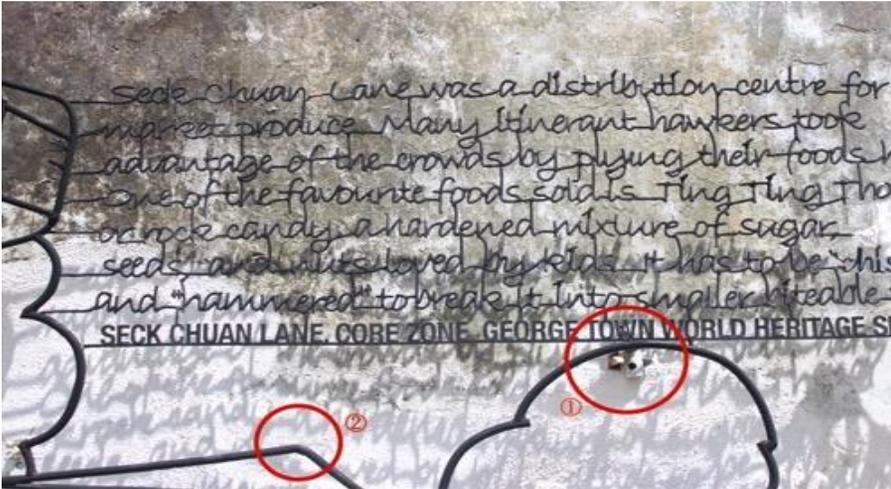


Figure 4: The screws and welding (①) and ground weld (②) in the wall installation  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

### *Roles of artists*

In addition to the support of the government policy, the artist's incursion was considered as another factor to boost the first wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town. The artist, Mr. Tang Mun Kian, stated that the wall installations indeed affected the heritage zone in George Town as this form of visual presentation gradually changed the artistic atmosphere in George Town, and it marked the beginning of multi-artistic integration in George Town heritage site. The artists in the fields of graffiti, handicrafts and painting had rented old houses and set up art workshops in George Town.

Based on the interviews with artists living in George Town, two categories of artists' incursion are observed in the George Town heritage area: artists who emigrated from other places, the local artists who returned to George Town and revamped the old houses. Although the government has imposed restrictions on the design and production of artworks to protect the cultural heritage, it could not intervene in the artist's residence. Hence, the artist's incursion still ineluctably happened and has been witnessed in the first wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town.

### **The Second Wave of Aesthetic Gentrification in George Town**

The second wave of aesthetic gentrification that was initiated by wall installations in the George Town heritage site revealed conflicts between residents' cultural and artistic perceptions. This wave gradually took place during the period when the

number of wall installations increased on the streets, and the artistic atmosphere in George Town was intensified, thus the residents' awareness of art and culture was strengthened. In this process, conflicts of thoughts would inevitably arise in that some residents agreed with this art transformation while others disagreed.

*Installation: Signifying the initiation of art tourism*

The assemblage of wall installations in George Town encompassed four stages. The first stage of installation refers to the three wall installations that were completed in July 2010, namely *Cheating Husband* at Love Line, *Mr. Five Foot Away* at Jalan Transfer and *Wrong Tree* at Lorong Pasar. Afterwards, the number of tourists in Penang showed swift growth by comparing the data of total tourist arrivals since the first quarter of 2005 to the fourth quarter of 2010 based on the statistics of the Penang Institute. Before the third quarter of 2008, the average number of tourist arrivals remained at 0.72 million. However, in the third quarter of the year, the number of visitors exceeded 0.8 million for the first time, and the average figure maintained around 0.85 million until the second quarter of 2010. Unexpectedly, in the third quarter of 2010, the number of tourists broke the highest record in history as reaching 0.952 million (see Figure 5). Furthermore, it also indicates that the percentage of international visitors has doubled than domestic Malaysian tourists in the third quarter of the year. Thus, art-driven tourism started to speedily increase and George Town's international attractiveness was enhanced.

	2010	2010	2010	2010
Estimated Total Visitor Arrivals for the State	0.840 mil	0.882 mil	0.952 mil	N/A
Estimated Domestic Share	46.7%	55.0%	37.4%	45.3%
Estimated International Share	53.3%	45.0%	62.6%	54.7%

**Figure 5: Penang: Estimated total visitor arrivals, 2010 (Q1-Q4)  
(Source: Penang Statistics (2010).)**

*Installation: promoting art diversity of George Town*

The rapid development of art-driven tourism and its huge commercial potential have fostered George Town's art diversity which resulted in a greater economic benefit. The second phase of the installation of visual artworks heightened the artistic atmosphere in George Town and led to a change in the aesthetic awareness and preference of the inhabitants.

The second phase of installation ended in June 2011 in which 8 visual artworks were first produced, which are respectively *Labourer to Trader* at Jalan Kuala Kangsar, *Escape* at Lebuah Acheh, *One Leg Kick All* at Lebuah Muntri, *Too Hot* at Pengkalan Weld, *Cow & Fish* at Lebuah Melayu, *Bullock Cart Wheel* at Pitt street,

*Waterway* at Gat Lebu Prangin, and *Limousine* at Lebu Carnarvon. Moreover, to further expand its tourism economy, based on the *Marking George Town* wall installation plan, the Penang government invited a foreign youth painter, Mr. Ernest Zacharevic, to create a mural plan named *Mirror George Town*. This series of murals were painted on the walls of old houses which were used as the canvas to reflect the daily life of residents in George Town (the example is shown in Figure 6). The street art in George Town began to get out of control and many local artists frantically painted on the walls of old buildings. Among them, Mr. Louis Gan, a painter in Penang, got the most attention because of his similar style to Ernest Zacharevic. Nonetheless, Mr. Gan's painting violated the principle of protecting the heritage buildings. He used corrosive oily pigments and improper painting techniques which led to an emergency stoppage by the Penang government. However, there is still much illegal graffiti on the walls, on the other hand, a diversity of visual arts and semiotic resources were noticed in George Town.



**Figure 6: *Sister and Brother on the Bicycle* by Ernest Zacharevic  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)**

*Discriminating neighbourhoods: Visual content of wall installations*

The *Marking George Town* wall installations reveal a strong contemporary style of installation art in terms of materials, techniques, themes, and context. Most new middle-class immigrants love these wall installations since they make the streets more fashionable and modern in the atmosphere (based on the interview with a Chinese owner of a local hostel, Nick, on 19 May 2016). The combination of contemporary installations and traditional shophouses is a cultural collision in

George Town, which shows a contradictory sense of beauty. The style of wall installations appears in a form of a comic strip illustration, showing history in a relaxed and humorous mode. On the one hand, this form can increase the attractiveness of visual presentation; on the other hand, it also has a good decorative effect on the urban environment (*Sin Chew Daily*, 2016).

The artists followed UNESCO's cultural heritage criterion of George Town to accurately select the content of the wall installations: (1) George Town is a multi-cultural trading town; (2) it has living multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia and European colonial influences; (3) it has unique architecture, culture, and townscape (an exceptional range of architecture of shophouses and townhouses) (Mohamed et al., 2015). Therefore, the content of the wall installations can be classified into three categories.

The first category of representative meaning is concerned with 'multi-cultural trading modes' in food, transportation, cloth, handicraft, service jobs and finance of the last century (see Figure 7). Specifically, the installations display three main traditional trading modes among Chinese, Malays, and Indians. Thirteen installations show the Chinese trading in the content of traditional food retail, transportation and handicraft, and eight installations depicting Indian trading in the content of agriculture and labour market. Only one installation is related to Malay trading. Next, nine installations are identified as 'traditions of Asia and influences of the European colony'. Among these, seven installations mainly illustrate the practices related to Chinese religion (e.g. Chinese Taoism) and tradition as well as Chinese immigration during World War II (see Figure 8). While the other two display the influence of the European colony in Penang (see Figure 9). Thus, the second category of content shows that George Town is a modern city that is more influenced by Chinese immigration during World War II and early European colony starting from the late 18th century. Fourteen installations reveal George Town's unique architecture, culture and townscape, which represent the narrow streets, shophouses, street view of bull carts and sparrows, and celebrity stories of the building (see Figure 10). Six installations display the cultural phenomenon and townscape that now still exist in George Town, however the content regarding culture and townscape in the other eight installations had disappeared due to the modernisation of George Town.



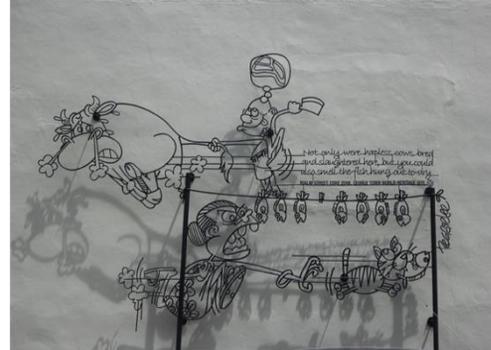
**Figure 7: Jimmy Choo**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)



**Figure 8: Chingay Procession**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)



**Figure 9: No More Red Tape**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)



**Figure 10: Cow and Fish**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

The aforesaid three categories of content reflect that the design of wall installations mainly relies on the cultural background of powerful foreign immigration in George Town, such as Chinese and Indian communities. The artists did not opt to express the history of George Town along the timeline of its development but rather to display multiple aspects of the residents' life to portray George Town as a trading city. The theme of wall installations also tends to denote that George Town is a foreign cultural fusion city. More specifically, the wall installations reflect the historical changes from all walks of residents' life. This is consistent with the government's original intention to protect the heritage of George Town and spread the theme 'voices from the people' of the *Marking George Town* competition.

#### *The role of wall installations*

The wall installations integrate with the environment as an approach to realise place-making. They do not only decorate the environment, but also reveal the characteristics of the site, historical culture, residents' memories, and the city

image where they are located. The old buildings, landscape, street image and lifestyle can enhance residents' sense of belonging, on the contrary, the changes of trading mode, living environment and appearance of buildings result in losing this sense. The wall installations and architecture interact and coexist with each other in Penang. In other words, parts of the buildings, such as the windows or the doors become incorporated into the wall installations. Thus, the buildings are also a part of the interpretation of the installations' display effect and meaning potential.

Figure 11, named *Cheating Husband*, was produced by Mr. Tang Mun Kian. It is installed at the entrance of Love Lane through Lebuhr Chuila. The shape of the black 'rope' extends from the window to the ground, and it signifies the subject matter: the escaping man is hiding out of the window. The tourists may not easily notice this installation due to its relatively high placement, however, this achieves the desired effect to intensify the theme of 'hiding'. Additionally, the artist took full consideration of the historical background of Love Lane, so that Mr. Tang tried to hint at the living conditions of the residents. Love Lane was a place where wealthy businessmen hid their mistresses in the past. These mistresses lived on the second floor of these shophouses, this is the reason why the 'cheating husband' in the installation was placed at the second-floor window.



Figure 11: *Escape at Lebuhr Aceh*  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

There is another installation named *Budget Hotel* in the place that is two-meter away from the *Cheating Husband* installation, which describes a different story. At the turn of the last century, many shophouses at Love Lane were turned into cheap hotels for backpackers, businessmen and low-income workers. The scene presented by this installation is concerned with a conversation between a backpacker and a hotel owner. Moreover, this kind of content is not frequently

identified in all the 52 installations because the budget hostels began to shift to the edge of Love Lane just over a decade later, and the original buildings have become bars, cafes and souvenir shops.

The buildings realising these two functions have experienced different periods and still exist in George Town, meanwhile they have become a unique architectural feature of George Town. The installations such as *Cheating Husband* and *Budget Hotel* exemplify the process of historical development and original residents' memories. Parts of the wall installations show the urban outlook and traditional events of ancient George Town. These wall installations play a vital role in conserving the memories of the George Town urban image that almost disappeared. For instance, *Chingay Procession* in Figure 8 shows the narrow streets of the old George Town and the traditional activity of acrobatics. With the development of tourism and the influx of tourists, these traditional activities and urban features are difficult to see. However, the local Chinese community still adheres to traditions. In each Lunar Year of the Tiger, the Penang Chinese will hold a float parade and a ceremony to celebrate the important festival of Taoism. Therefore, the installation *Chingay Procession* showcases the Chinese culture that is still prevalent in George Town and reminds the tourists and residents that this is an important cultural heritage that should not be abandoned.

George Town was the birthplace of many world-famous celebrities, consequently, the wall installations are also used to describe and record the stories of them to the tourists, such as Jimmy Choo (see Figure 7). Nevertheless, due to the emergence of new tourism industries, old handicraft workshops and businessmen have gradually lost market and competitiveness in the George Town heritage area. With the rising of goods prices and housing costs, these traditional handicrafts were difficult to survive. In addition, a large number of family workshops, which used traditional production methods and caused a messy environment, could not meet the demand of tourists on clean and tidy streets in this world cultural heritage area and gradually moved to the edge of the city. The wall installation *Then and Now* at Lebuh Armenian reveals this process of change. As seen in Figure 12, the street was originally a place of well-known bronze shops, but later it became a place with recycling shops collecting used newspapers, cans and plastic bottles. Lebuh Armenian has now become a popular tourist destination where a variety of museums, restaurants, cafes and galleries have replaced the traditional trade in recycling waste (see Figure 13). At present, Lebuh Armenian has become an upscale area that meets the aesthetics of the middle class as the houses were repainted and the street has become quite neat.



Figure 12: *Then and Now*  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)



Figure 13: Café, museums, galleries and shops at Lebuh Armenian  
(Source: Based on the FotoPlace added by Yue Cao, 2016.)

### *Residents' different aesthetic preferences*

The wall installations changed the look of George Town city, and reflected the growing demand for tourism and the aesthetic changes of residents. In this process, there is a certain aesthetic contradiction indicating that not all the residents accept and recognise this change. There is a change from a pragmatic use of space to a use that favors aesthetic considerations. Different social groups, among the low-income workers, the middle class and the rich class, show a different aesthetic preference.

Based on the interviews with the inhabitants, it is disclosed that low-income

people generally show a disinterested attitude to the artistic place-making and wall installations. But a Chinese owner of a hostel, next to the installation *Iron Smith* at Lorong Toh Aka, gave a different answer that he showed his interests in visual arts and the wall installations, and he also decorated his old shophouse into a stylish budget hostel. Residents have such a remarkable disagreement about the changes in the visual arts and culture in George Town, and the composition of the population began to change. Residents who identified with the artistic changes stayed in George Town. At the same time, there was also a steady influx of people from outside of George Town who hold the same view. But those who disagreed or were unable to adapt to such changes have started to migrate outside of George Town.

Obviously, in the second wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town, the divisions of inhabitants in artistic conception led to a flux in the structure of residency. The old urban space is constantly being re-occupied by fashionable and artisanal residents. Through the visual analysis of the wall installations, it is observed that the artistic atmosphere created by the installations, the aesthetic experience, and the revival of the cultural atmosphere of George Town are not exactly attractive to the low-income class, and that they have become a barrier for some low-income people to make a living. But for the middle-upper class, the cultural renaissance and artistic changes in George Town meet their aesthetic preference. This divergence brings about a potential danger for spatial and social conflicts in the third wave of aesthetic gentrification.

### **The Third Wave of Aesthetic Gentrification in George Town**

The third wave of aesthetic gentrification of George Town began to emerge in the ever-intensifying aesthetic contradictions of the residents. The contradictions that were slowly accumulated during the first and second phases of the installation broke out during the third phase, and consequently become a social issue of competition for land and space, as well as cultural and aesthetic conflicts.

#### *Installation: Intensifying social conflicts*

Until 22 July 2012, 24 wall installations were being set up in George Town. During the third phase, 13 artworks were installed, including *Jimmy Choo* at Lebuh Leith, *Chingay Procession* at Lebuh Armenian, etc. With the further establishment of the wall installations, the street condition has been changed and triggered a competition for space between residents and visual artworks. Remarkably, cars, advertising posts and sidewalk food stores block the visual artworks such as the wall installations. Different from those street elements involved in the recreation of artworks, those cars, posts and food stores balefully hide the artworks and

obstruct viewers' sight (see Figure 14). The blocking of views by cars is the most frequently noticed condition observed by the tourists. The authors had walked around the George Town heritage area and found the parking management in Penang to be in a serious state of confusion. To protect the old buildings and keep the original environment of George Town, car parking in the heritage area is scarcely possible to satisfy the demand of people. Consequently, cars occupy the narrow streets without appropriate regulations (see Figure 15).



**Figure 14: Elements blocking the wall installations**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)



**Figure 15: Cars blocking the wall installations**  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

On 2 August 2016, the Pokémon Go game came into Malaysia and deepened the embarrassing situation of the wall installations in George Town. The crowded streets became worse due to the influx of a large number of Pokémon players. To attract players, the game designer set the Pokémon base in a high-volume popular place. George Town heritage zone has become the hardest-hit area. Not

only that, the places where the high popularity of the murals and the wall installations are located become Pokémon capture stronghold and bear the brunt of high-volume people. According to the official Pokémon capture map in George Town provided by Pokémon Company (see Figure 16), Pokémon positions completely cover all the setpoints of the wall installations. The crowded players completely blocked visitors' sight, and the majority of players drove motorcycles to the capture stronghold and caused serious traffic jams. As a consequence, both the artistic effect of the wall installations and the travel experience of tourists were reduced. For example, *Cannon Hole* that is located at Lebu Cannon is the most affected wall installation by Pokémon Go (see Figure 17).



Figure 16: Pokémon map in George Town  
(Source: Based on the Pokémon Go app of Yue Cao, 2016.)



Figure 17: Pokémon players and cars as obstructers in George Town  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

The last phase of installation ended on 4 June 2013. All the 52 wall installations were assembled in George Town (see Figure 18). By that time, except for the wall installations, *Mirror George Town* murals and Louis Gan's murals, plenty of illegal

murals and other artworks rapidly appeared and occupied numerous corners of George Town. This out-of-control situation initiated social conflicts among residents, government, local and foreign artists. To control the number of street visual artworks and preserve George Town's heritage, the government ordered to remove all the illegal and undeclared street art pieces. However, the residents and local artists opposed it. The residents thought that the artworks were painted or installed on their own houses so that the government has no right to interfere with them. Besides, local artists fought with the government to express the notion that George Town belongs to the Penang residents who made it as the heritage, thus the government should admit the visual artworks created by the local artists rather than the foreign artists who focused on western visual style. An example is shown in Figure 19 in which a local artist painted the head of an ancient woman wearing a crown. In this work, one half of the face of the woman was painted with the gorgeous makeup of a Beijing Opera actress, and the other half was painted as a shaggy skull with a bold and vivid colour. The artist's autograph on the side of the artwork is conspicuous: "Our Art is Dying (我们的艺术文化正在消亡)". The metaphorical message of this work is clear that facing the challenges brought about by foreign artists, local art can only quietly die.



**Figure 18: Locations of all wall installations in George Town  
(Source: Based on the FotoPlace added by Yue Cao, 2016.)**



Figure 19: The mural *Our Art is Dying*  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

The increase of tourists also led to residents being unable to live normally, then the residents also carried out their resistance. They deliberately undermined the visual artworks on the houses among which the murals were most frequently destroyed rather than the wall installations. For example, the painter Chen Shou Quan (陈首铨), a resident who lived in Chew Jetty, had painted a mural *Grandmother and Child* (see Figure 20) which had been sprayed with brown paint three days after it was completed. In the end, he had to sweep away his artwork.



Figure 20: A mural vandalised with spray paint  
(Source: Yue Cao, fieldwork, 2016.)

*Intensification of spatial conflicts by incoming of foreign capital and renovation of heritage buildings*

As said earlier, the conflict between the residents and the visual artworks that competed with their living space initiated the third wave of aesthetic gentrification. However, the renovation of heritage buildings and the afflux of foreign capital intensified this spatial conflict. In February 2013, the wall installation *Labourer To Trader* was removed due to the *Chowrasta Market Renovation Program*. This progress of renovation had been continuing for 4 years. During the time, there were only 51 artistic wall installations in George Town that were planned to be revealed to tourists. With the completion of reconstruction in January 2017, this wall installation had been reinstalled on the front wall of the new Chowrasta Market Complex. For this issue, the team leader of this wall installation stated that the wall installations should be compliant with the development and change of George Town city (based on an interview with Tang Mun Kain on 12 May 2016). In response, some residents and heritage protectors pointed out that this action of renovation has also destroyed George Town's cultural heritage. In their opinion, even if the Chowrasta Market collapsed, it was still a part of the cultural heritage of George Town and that the renovation constituted vandalism.

Furthermore, foreign capital noticed the huge commercial value of art-driven tourism in George Town and was involved in the battle for spatial scramble, thus accelerating the process of aesthetic gentrification in George Town. Referring to the *Kwong Wah Daily* (2015), a listed company Aspial from Singapore spent 200 million Malaysia Ringgit to buy 100 old buildings in George Town. All the old houses purchased would be transformed or rebuilt into commercial apartments. All of these old buildings are located in the George Town heritage buffer zone. Not surprisingly, those old buildings are surrounded by a large number of wall installations. These artworks that are full of semiotic resources and aesthetic features have raised the commercial value in the neighbourhood and have led foreign consortia to buy the nearby houses. For instance, around the shop *Rope Walk Piazza*, there are four wall installations, *Three Generations*, *Same Taste, Same Look*, *Rope Style* and *Retail Paradise*.

As a result, the residents strive for the living space from the visual artworks, e.g. wall installations, as the beginning of the third wave of aesthetic gentrification in George Town. With the economic growth led by art-driven tourism, foreign capital, new immigrants and the middle class involved in the scramble for space resources in the heritage zone. The indigenous inhabitants gradually lost their original land and houses and were driven out of the George Town heritage area.

## **Conclusion**

This study sought to offer a heuristic understanding of how the wall installations were established as a special visual artwork to create an effective influence on the gentrification process of the George Town heritage site. It shows that the establishment of the wall installations was the starting point for the gentrification process in George Town, which led to the subsequent waves of artistic activities and immigration into the city. The process of the development of the wall installations was fast and went through three stages, namely, the planning phase for competition preparation, the competition as the preparatory phase for creating the wall installations, and the installation phase of artworks, as demonstrated in Figure 21.

The visual analysis of the wall installations shows that they mainly express three categories of themes, in which the predominant content is concerned with the multi-cultural trading mode in George Town, followed by the traditions of Asia and European colonial influence as well as George Town's unique architecture, culture and townscape. Thereinto, Chinese trading, religion and lifestyle are the most influential subject matter on the creation of the wall installations in George Town. These wall installations can be understood as a depiction of the transformation of the city during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a reflection of residents' life in food, cloth, transportation and religious activities.

The result of this study shows that the Penang government was the main initiator of the gentrification process. The first phase of the installation rapidly increased the wall installation-based tourism commercial value. Artists were attracted to migrate into George Town with their workshops and galleries, marking the beginning of the replacement of the low-income class by the middle class. In the second wave of aesthetic gentrification initiated by the wall installations, this wall art changed the residents' aesthetics, which started to discriminate the neighbourhood as trendy or traditional, thereby accelerating the replacement of residents by the middle class who could adapt to the new artistic environment and the enhancement of living cost. Place-making thus influenced residents' aesthetics as the historical memories presented by the wall installations make a part of residents' sense of belonging which was gradually lost with the development of tourism and the changes in the living environment. Through the visual analysis of the wall installations, the distinction of aesthetic preference is based on the understanding of traditional cultural revival through the place-making by the wall installations. The memories of the trade mode, urban image and lifestyle that had disappeared were awakened by the wall installations. The awareness of heritage conservation has been enhanced in a part of residents. However, place-making is

an important aspect for the middle class whereas it is less meaningful for those who are living in George Town since the beginning. George Town has become a historical and cultural city from an ancient trading port city, which is favored by the middle class. Third, the wall installations enhanced the value of properties. The reconstruction of old buildings took away the means of livelihood of small traders. The foreign capital realised the commercial value of the heritage zone and began to purchase large quantities of cheap old buildings. As a consequence, the living space of residents was compressed. In addition, a large number of street artworks produced by overseas artists appeared and provoked protests by local artists and residents. Hence, social conflicts, spatial conflicts as well as cultural competition have gradually escalated in George Town.

Concerning the mediation of conflict brought about by gentrification in George Town, we assert that some necessary preservation-based initiatives should be launched to seek long-term sustainability of this heritage site and especially the wall installations. First, there should be the creation of a strong socio-spatial demarcation in the use of space where the wall installations are placed. This frequently involves excluding some parts of the local population whose daily activities, for example, parking spots and food stalls, may influence the preservation and tourism value of the wall installations. By means of establishing relatively well-defined boundaries between different users (i.e. inhabitants and tourists), this intervention enables effective uses of the local street art (i.e. wall installations) and creates differentiated niches to attract consumers (i.e. tourists). Second, the wall installations in George Town, as a particular form of artistic presentation, can boost a unique sense of belonging and social cohesion for the entire population in George Town cultural heritage site. Some neighbourhood museums or local groups should be created, which significantly promotes people's understanding and preservation of these wall installations. Local groups can work in many aspects of conservation and education in terms of street arts in George Town. We also foresee that local groups can reinforce the interaction between the residents and the artists who made street arts in Penang. The cultural properties of the wall installations should be taught and involved in the local community to motivate the residents and artists to help safeguard the heritage site.

The wall installations form an important series of installation artworks that capture the socio-cultural and economic transformation of George Town city. This unique artwork will continue to play an important role in the place-making of George Town, as a constant reminder of a particular period in history which has shaped the characteristic identity of George Town, Penang. Finally, the qualitative approach of this study attempts to shed knowledge on artists or those involved in wall installations, installation art and street art, as well as provide considerable

value for heritage conservation in George Town, Penang, Malaysia, and the art tourism industry.

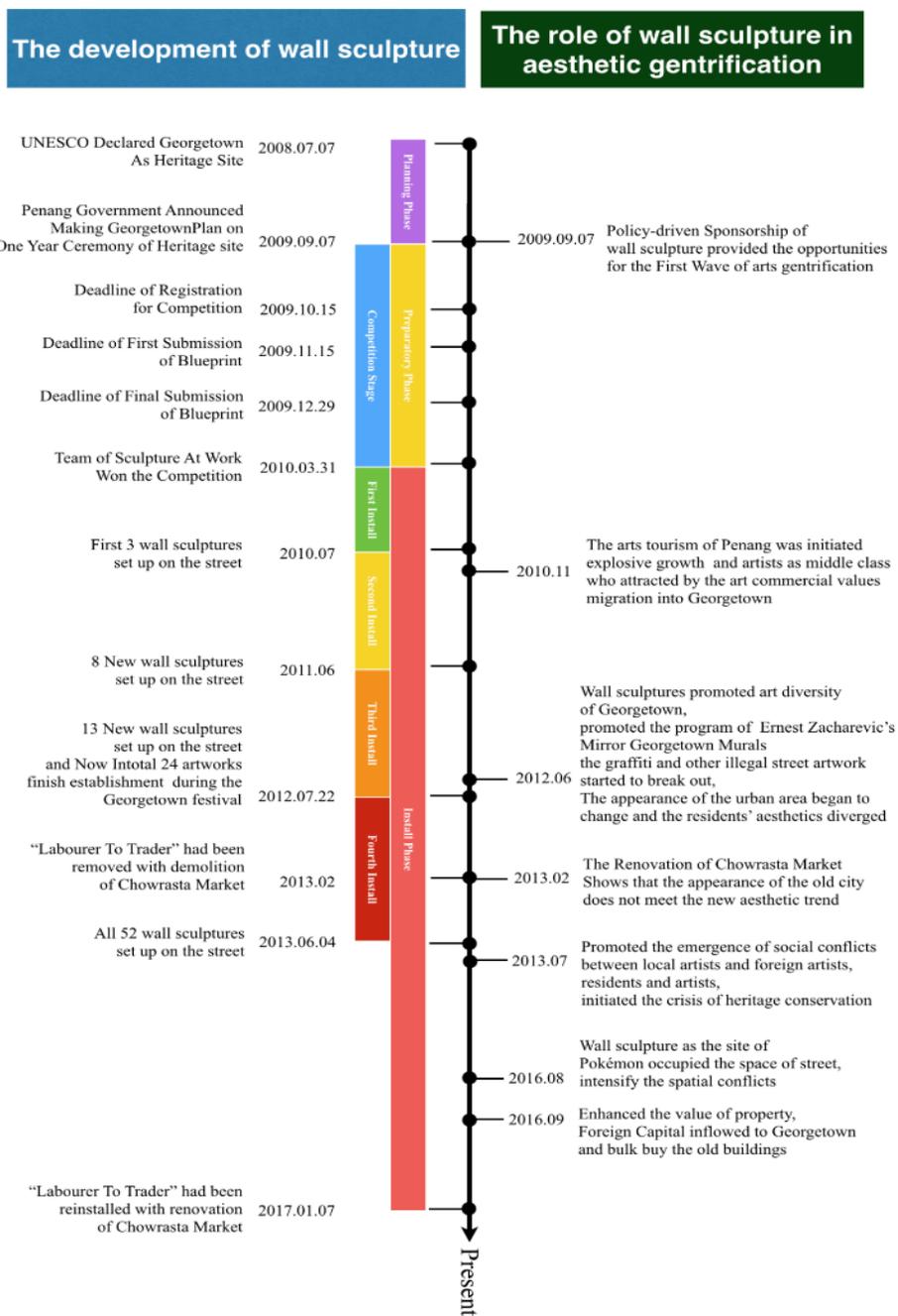


Figure 21: Timeline of the development of wall installations in George Town

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