



THE IMPACT OF TANGIBLE HERITAGE TOWARDS HISTORIC BUILDING USAGES IN THE GEORGE TOWN UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN PENANG, MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This study endeavors to explore the economic significance of tangible heritage treasures, examining their positive and negative ramifications, as well as their conservation and preservation for sustainable development. A framework analysis was employed to gather data from both local and international traders. Findings derived from qualitative methods revealed that the economic value of tangible heritage treasures, as manifestations of living cultural heritage, is particularly evident within the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, which functions as a specialized market treated as a monetary asset. This dynamic engenders both advantageous and detrimental financial effects on the utilization of historical buildings in George Town, highlighting the unique architectural heritage as a valuable asset for residential and commercial purposes. The potential for adaptive reuse for business ventures necessitates ongoing maintenance as a critical aspect, while challenges such as gentrification, which displaces long-standing residents in favor of wealthier individuals, underscore the importance of preserving built heritage. Moreover, the imperative to conserve and protect these assets for sustainability is evident, with the enhancement and upkeep of built heritage being essential for both survival and the viability of sustainable enterprises. The results illuminate the perspectives of the local community and foreign visitors, offering constructive suggestions for improvement and insights into the future of heritage sites, particularly in light of the impacts of Covid-19 and the strategies for overcoming these challenges in the George Town World Heritage Site.

Keywords: Economic Value, Tangible Heritage treasures, Historical Building Usages, Sustain, Cultural Heritage, George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site Penang, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

The UNESCO World Heritage Site designation has significantly propelled the tourism industry in Malacca and George Town, particularly emphasizing cultural tourism. The unique amalgamation of historical townscapes, living heritage, and multiculturalism that distinguishes Malacca and George Town is noteworthy. In 2008, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee conferred upon George Town the prestigious title of World Heritage Site in the Cultural Heritage category following multiple nominations. According to George Town World Heritage Incorporated (2016), the "historic cities of the Strait of Malacca" were collectively acknowledged as multicultural heritage communities and architectural masterpieces.

The UNESCO nomination as a World Heritage Site has engendered abundant opportunities for the enrichment of George Town's cultural heritage. The harmonious fusion of multiculturalism, living heritage, and historical townscapes is what uniquely characterizes Malacca and George Town. These three salient elements epitomize the peaceful coexistence of diverse religions and places of worship, a synthesis of Asian and colonial multicultural heritage, and architectural forms that reflect the lives, daily rituals, trades, and culinary traditions of the inner city community (Farahani et al., 2012).

The historic city of George Town encompasses a diverse array of architecturally significant structures, showcasing various styles. These include churches, mosques, and Chinese and Indian temples, as well as Indo-Malay Palladian structures, Early Shop Houses, Anglo-Indian Bungalows, Early Eclecticism Shop Houses, Early Traditional Style, Sino-Anglo Bungalows, Art Deco Style, Neo-Classical Style, Early Modern Style, Late Modern Style, and an assortment of religious architectural heritage. The deterioration of George Town's streetscapes stands as a testament to the evolution of this once rustic port city.

George Town, a city center in Penang, faces threats to its cultural, location-specific, local knowledge, and traditional trades. To preserve the culture, the public should consider George Town as a Cultural Capital and harness its economic resources to provide employment opportunities and generate revenue for the local community. Since 2008, George Town has been designated a World Heritage Site, leading to increased land and property values, job opportunities, and rental costs within the heritage zone.

Generation has led to the displacement of traditional business owners and increased rents, which have compelled the displacement of traditional business owners. Urban regeneration, or gentrification, involves reinvesting in inner cities that are deteriorating due to neglect and abandonment, resulting in long-lasting economic and physical improvements.

The prices of heritage properties in the buffer and core zones have risen by an additional 300 percent since 2008, driven by limited availability of falls

within the heritage zone for sale and strong demand from foreign and domestic shareholders or investors. Rental rates for heritage properties that have not been renovated or are still in their original condition are still low, with yields typically below 2 percent.

UNESCO World Heritage Sites aims to conserve and preserve the culture in George Town by promoting the recognition, preservation, and protection of the heritage site as a site of exceptional value to humanity. However, researchers need to elaborate on the limitations of cultural tourism's economic impact and conduct a comprehensive study to identify the values of tangible heritage treasures in the city.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Penang, established in 1786 by the British East India Company, emerged as a pivotal shipping and trading nexus along the Straits of Malacca. The principal town, George Town, was aptly named in honor of King George III. In response to a labor shortage during the 19th century, Penang experienced a significant influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants. The majority of Malay inhabitants, however, remained ensconced in rural locales and largely abstained from the urban development of the town. By the early 19th century, the urban landscape was characterized by the dominance of shophouses and terrace houses adorned with tiled roofs and robust brick constructions. The allure and distinctive character of the city center stem from the plethora of historically significant monuments and the rich tapestry of cultural and architectural elements, particularly evident along King Street. Penang's traditional edifices, shaped by local customs and the tropical climate, continue to serve commercial purposes, as a substantial portion of trade is still conducted within these vibrant Southeast Asian structures (Hailane et al., 2013). The most iconic formation within the inner city comprises shophouses, featuring two or three stories that provide covered walkways and open arcades extending five feet both in front and behind. An abundance of food vendors, bustling markets, quaint shops, and artisanal workshops contribute to a lively street scene where stores and cafés overflow with patrons.

Nur Alia Mohamad Omar and Sharifah Fairuz Syed Fadzil (2011) observe that the original identity of the shop houses has evolved into that of boutique hotels and retail establishments. This transformation is the result of a serene and harmonious amalgamation of cultures that have coexisted in George Town, occupying various types or categories of buildings to facilitate their livelihoods. According to Zwain and Bahauddin (2019), one such structure, the shop house, boasts a history spanning at least 200 years and exemplifies a unique architectural style distinctive to George Town. Traditionally, it has fulfilled dual purposes, with the ground floor dedicated to commercial activities and the first

floor serving as a residence. On the other hand, the George Town World Heritage Site in Penang has seen the emergence of creative tourism as a result of these business and cultural activities, as well as the need for development, which has transformed numerous historic buildings with heritage status into boutique hotels and commercial spaces (Mohd Abdullah et al., 2020). These edifices represent a living, tangible heritage of the past—showcasing the built environment, traditional artisans, and trades that continue to thrive and operate as they have for generations in Georgetown.

The 2008 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site significantly influenced the affordability of housing and accommodations within the inner city of George Town, recognized as a world heritage site. Consequently, George Town's dynamic voluntary and discretionary sectors have cultivated a discourse surrounding heritage, wherein the inhabitants, the spaces they occupy, and the edifices they have constructed are perceived as focal points for conservation (Cheng et al., 2014). This phenomenon has emerged as a consequence of a secondary wave of outward migration, supplanted by practitioners and investors. Amidst the pressures of economic expansion, social transformation, and the commodification of cultural heritage attractions, George Town has been acknowledged as possessing Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), with its cultural resources facing significant threats. Consequently, the development process may result in heritage buildings acquiring designations and classifications that are ill-suited for restoration.

(Mohamed et al., 2015) posits that, in accordance with other historical or heritage sites, escalating real estate prices can lead to exorbitant rental costs for proprietors, the emergence of boutique hotels, upscale dining establishments, and a burgeoning hospitality sector. As noted by (Y. Lee et al., 2017), rental fees for commercial spaces within public heritage zones have surged dramatically by 500 percent. This troubling trend places George Town at risk, eroding the intrinsic allure of its living cultural heritage. It is imperative that greater public engagement and consideration for community welfare be integrated into the strategies for gentrification and redevelopment in George Town. Concurrently, more comprehensive research dedicated to the preservation of culture and history should prioritize conservation efforts over capitalist ambitions. The collapse of local cultural identities has been directly impacted by the transition of conventional enterprises, as citizens and long-standing firms are being forced to relocate and foreigners are acquiring more city assets (Connolly, 2021).

Penang's shophouse culture transcends mere architecture and construction; its preservation necessitates a commitment that surpasses conventional practices associated with building conservation (Wagner, 2017). The Act on Tourist Boards states that the common goal is the consciousness's development about the importance and economic, social and other effects and

influence of tourism; about the importance and need to improve and preserve all the elements of the tourist product of a certain area, and especially the protection of the environment and the safeguarding of cultural heritage and natural according to the development sustainability (Petti et al., 2020). The government must engage with a diverse array of stakeholders, as pursuing these processes in isolation is neither viable nor advisable. Being recognized globally as a UNESCO World Heritage Site entails a profound sense of accountability on an international scale. Consequently, for a site to be included in the esteemed roster of World Heritage Sites, it must uphold its remarkable universal value, alongside the criteria of authenticity and integrity at the moment of its nomination and declaration. Failing to meet these standards jeopardizes its status on the list, resulting in the forfeiture of its significance (Mohd-Isa et al., 2011).

These initiatives can generate revenue for the residents while safeguarding traditional enterprises. Engaging stakeholders in tourism management, coupled with training and fostering innovation, can substantially enrich visitor experiences. Dedicating human capital and resources towards conservation efforts can yield financial advantages for the local community. By recognizing cultural diversity and actively participating in conservation programs, it is feasible to achieve economic viability and stave off deterioration. Conversely, George Town encountered severe repercussions from the COVID-19 pandemic, which precipitated a surge in cultural tourism yet simultaneously imposed travel restrictions and controls that complicated mobility. Although the pandemic's impact on the travel industry was devastating and overwhelming, the city also witnessed the resilience exhibited by certain enduring business vendors and operators, who adeptly navigated the transition back to regular business operations through the implementation of Movement Control Orders (MCO), Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), the availability of vaccinations, and the maintenance of local product capabilities, supplemented by financial assistance from the local government. Incentives designed to invigorate and stimulate the tourism sector must adhere to rigorous assessment and evaluation rather than merely conforming to regional norms and best practices (Dewan, 2020). Penang aspires to revitalize the tourism industry and rebound from these challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was meticulously designed as a qualitative research endeavor, employing a case study as the overarching research strategy and semi-structured interviews as the primary research method. A cohort of 21 respondents was judiciously selected from both local and international traders, as well as associated traditional businesses engaged in economic activities within the cultural heritage context of George Town, specifically in the buffer and core zones. Open-ended questions can provide qualitative information that can be

analyzed with qualitative methodology (Robyn Longhurst, 2010). This approach facilitated the collection of comprehensive and precise data. An interview schedule was meticulously crafted to ensure that data collection occurred in a structured manner, aligning with the study's objectives. Judgment sampling was employed to elicit more profound insights and intricate details within this inquiry.

The research focuses on the economic impacts of cultural tourism development in George Town, Penang. It involves exploring research problems, determining research objectives, conducting a literature review, and constructing a research design using "intensive and extensive" approaches. The research uses intensive interviews, focusing on qualitative techniques like interactive interviews, to explore public views and understand the economic impacts of cultural tourism development in the area.

Data was garnered through in-depth interviews conducted from October to December 2021, with each open-ended interview allotted between 45 and 55 minutes. These sessions were recorded using audio tapes and supplemented with detailed notes. Arrangements were established prior to the actual meetings, with interviews taking place in the interviewees' offices, although some participants were interviewed at their shophouses.

Prior to initiating the interview process, the researcher prepared a comprehensive list of questions tailored for the targeted participants. Longhurst (2013) emphasizes the importance of participant selection in semi-structured interviews. The resultant strategies and theories generated from this research are both intelligible and experientially credible to the subjects being studied, as well as to others, thereby establishing the inductive approach in practice (S. Bolster Arthur, 1983). By employing this strategy, the researcher aims to fulfill the research objectives through the acquisition of in-depth information regarding the subject matter. The researcher will subsequently proceed to the final stages, which entail analyzing the data through framework analysis, thus facilitating the answering of the research questions. The findings will be thoroughly discussed and analyzed in the final report.

The framework methods will be utilized to systematically analyze the recorded semi-structured interviews. Developed by Ritchie J. and Spencer, the framework represents a methodical procedure for managing qualitative data within an applied research context, thereby yielding analyses with the "potential for actionable outcomes." The framework technique encompasses five distinct stages of data analysis, executed in a systematic manner.

1. Familiarisation

Initially, the familiarization process will initiate the data analysis procedure. Once the recorded interviews are transcribed and securely stored in electronic files, the researcher will delineate key concepts and recurring themes. According to Anne

Lacey (2001), prior to commencing the formal analysis, the researcher should attentively listen to the recordings, thoroughly examine the data, and compile comprehensive summaries.

2. Identifying a thematic framework

During the familiarization phase, the thematic framework was meticulously crafted from the transcription and textual analysis. Ritchie & Spencer (2002) refer to this as the preliminary iteration of the indexing process, wherein all themes emerge from both preconceived notions and novel issues articulated by respondents. This methodology encompasses 'both intuitive and logical reasoning, alongside discerning the significance, relevance, and implications of various issues, as well as the latent connections between concepts' (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). This stage is imperative to ensure that the research inquiries are comprehensively addressed (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

3. Indexing

At the indexing stage, the application of the thematic framework to the data process entails identifying specific data segments that align with various themes through the utilization of numerical or textual codes, a practice commonly referred to as coding in other qualitative analysis methodologies (Anne Lacey, 2001). Although this method can be employed to index any textual material, it has predominantly been utilized for transcriptions of individual interviews (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

4. Charting

The analyst is tasked with constructing a comprehensive understanding of the data by employing the thematic framework to individual transcripts and meticulously examining the spectrum of attitudes and experiences associated with each issue or thematic perspective (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). Each theme, as represented across all respondents, is rendered thematic through charts, or conversely, each respondent is analyzed across all themes by case (Anne Lacey, 2001). In this study, the thematic approach will be embraced. Upon the adoption of a thematic approach, for each pivotal subject area, charts are meticulously created, with entries recorded for multiple respondents (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002).

5. Mapping and Interpretation

The analyst commences the process of synthesizing key characteristics of the data, subsequently mapping and interpreting the dataset in its entirety once all the data have been organized according to fundamental themes (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002). During this phase, Ritchie & Spencer (2002) posited that the qualitative

analyst should endeavor to (1) delineate concepts, (2) chart the spectrum and nature of phenomena, (3) construct typologies, (4) uncover associations within the data, and (5) offer explanations or formulate strategies.

Research ethics involve ensuring participants are aware of the research background and objectives before conducting interviews. Dilmi Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) emphasizes the importance of informed consent and confidentiality. Interviewees are not named and presented with a corresponding number, such as R1, R2, or R3. Confidentiality is a crucial ethical issue, and each interview data is transcribed and sent back for confirmation to ensure it does not differ from its meaning. Confidentiality is a crucial ethical issue in research.

The researcher ensured the validity and reliability of the research findings through careful recording and listening to interviews. Reliability measures the scope without bias and ensures compatible measurement across time. In qualitative research, reliability is defined as consistency, precision, stability, homogeneity, equivalence, and accuracy. Validity involves rigor, trustworthiness, and quality generated by the researchers themselves. Triangulation is a valuable strategy for testing reliability and validity, used in gathering data about unitary matter and examining policy documents and interview results. There are five types of triangulation: investigator, methodological, theoretical, data, and analysis. However, triangulation raises methodological issues in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to control bias and establish valid propositions. Therefore, triangulation is the best instrument for achieving analysis findings' validity and reliability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Akram Zwain (2019b) observes that Georgetown, Penang, stands as the sole complete and final surviving center of the historic city along the Straits of Malacca. The architectural edifices and cultural heritage of Penang have emerged as some of the most esteemed products and assets within Malaysia. Furthermore, it boasts a rich tapestry of multi-cultural and ethnic heritage stemming from the trade routes and pathways connecting the Indian subcontinent, the Malay Archipelago, China, Europe, and Great Britain. For instance, as articulated by respondent 13: *"I embarked on my early-stage songkok enterprise within a traditional shophouse of early Penang style, reflective of structures built between the 1790s and 1850s, featuring five-foot walkways, single-story design, intricate details, lime plaster on structural brick pillars and walls, and square columns supporting slanting beams with overhanging eaves, established by Indian and Malay artisans."*

George Town Heritage City, home to approximately 7,000 traditional shophouses, serves as a testament to Penang's illustrious architectural legacy. Two centuries ago, this city was conceived in a markedly different era (Y. W.

Tan & Studio, 2015). Owing to its distinctive architectural style and cultural milieu, this city in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list in 2008. The integrated economic and social development of urban and regional planning endeavors ought to take into account the historic urban landscape of George Town. Respondent 9 further remarked, *“As a five-star boutique hotel, complete with a café, fine-dining restaurant, cigar den, and wine lounge, we celebrate Penang’s vibrant present and its opulent colonial past. This establishment, known as Gatsby’s Mansion, is the first Malaysian member of Design Hotels and is named in honor of the British Governor of Penang, Colonel Norman Macalister, who served from 1808 to 1810.”*

The findings elucidate that adaptive reuse constitutes a "successful marriage" of contemporary architectural design and cultural heritage facilities. This concept pertains to the modification and transformation of sites or edifices that are amenable to adaptation or conversion in alignment with modern inclinations and the principles of sustainable and viable development. Such initiatives are capable of stimulating the economy and generating revenue for local stakeholders (Mohd. Shukuri & Awang, 2014). *One of the traditional traders (Respondent 4) remarked, “We have occupied 11 heritage shop houses in Georgetown and require ample time and space for roasting coffee. During the conversion process, we intend to utilize the upper floor as an office while the ground floor will serve both business and production purposes.” Another traditional trader (Respondent 7) stated, “The store has also been transformed into a joss stick workshop. We continue to use the ground floor for this workshop, while the upper floor remains designated for housing and shelter during visits.”*

The findings elucidate that maintenance encompasses the introduction of novel uses and services while preserving the contextual attributes of the location. This approach facilitates business expansion without compromising the original function and utilization of the buildings, all while safeguarding their architectural integrity and design. Consequently, this enhances their value and economic stature (Wahab et al., 2016). As articulated by respondent 16, *“Our café business endures as it has been meticulously preserved and restored in accordance with UNESCO guidelines, facilitated by Intersocietal and Scientific, and inaugurated by the Penang Governor. It embodies a southern Chinese traditional shophouse, adorned with an interior reflective of Penang Peranakan Muslim eclecticism. The establishment is owned by an Indian Muslim coppersmith and brass craftsman, and, as previously, was brought to life by the Al Iman society.”*

Yee Sing & Yoh (2016) elucidated that maintenance encompassed the introduction and promotion of novel uses and services while preserving the locale conducive to fulfilling the requirements of the desired and sought-after functionality. The construction upheld the contextual integrity of the

environment, yet adapted to incorporate an entirely new performance and function internally, thereby enabling the continuation and expansion of business operations. Respondent 3 remarked, *“Our traditional building houses have been meticulously preserved and now feature a coffee museum, suites, and an art gallery, creating an eclectic ensemble of a restaurant, all fully equipped for both short and long-term stays, adorned with modern amenities.”* Respondent 6 observed, *“It infuses the street with vibrancy and liveliness, establishing an optimal pathway to explore the intimate side lanes replete with secluded hidden alleys and hawker stalls.”*

According to the findings, globalization has profoundly influenced George Town's heritage site, particularly through gentrification propelled by economic interests. Establishments such as cafes, restaurants, hotels, and hostels have experienced a surge in prices due to heightened demand for accommodations, culinary experiences, and entertainment options. The inception of these enterprises in the 1970s was integral to the region's early tourism initiatives. The scarcity of affordable housing coupled with escalating living costs has precipitated the displacement of local communities, an influx of businesses, deteriorating premises, unoccupied constructions, and an increase in low-wage employment (Ley, 2014). Professional roles are now predominantly filled by foreign nationals and investors rather than local or domestic workers, and apprehensions regarding security have intensified in recent times. The restoration of heritage structures is prohibitively expensive for many locals, as they are compelled to adhere to authentic and traditional construction methods and materials.

According to Respondent 1, *“The only hotel in Penang that currently exists has been bestowed a new lease on life within a 130-year-old edifice, dating back to the British colonial era, originally established as a merchant hotel and now functioning as a boutique hotel. However, by 2007, it had fallen into decline due to diminishing demand and the onset of inflation, which rendered it increasingly challenging to preserve the building. Consequently, it remained uninhabited for several years. Only a few years ago, this architectural heritage was granted a second chance at life. After a period of leasing, Mr. Seah, the proprietor of various real estate assets in this city, invested approximately RM 11 million to restore and maintain the original structure, culminating in its current state and operation as a potential new entry into the hospitality industry.”*

Referring to the interview with Respondent 3, they stated, *“These shophouses were originally constructed in 1927. At that time, traders resided on the upper floors while conducting their businesses on the ground level. The shophouses are almost entirely adorned with antique oriental-themed furnishings, showcasing exquisite carvings and fine woodwork. The first owner faced business failures and was unable to preserve the integrity of the traditional*

shophouses due to the burgeoning development of cultural tourism following the declaration of George Town, prompting them to vacate and sell their property from this prime location. The premises were left abandoned until they were claimed by a Swiss gentleman, who relocated to Penang as the proprietor of a coffee house and an aficionado of the beverage, establishing a boutique hotel along Stewart Lane. Today, the building houses six suites, the 55 Cafe & Restaurant, and the Kopi Museum, which serves Mediterranean-inspired cuisine, alongside the Gehrig Art Gallery, currently under the stewardship of Gehrig.”

In the George Town World Heritage Site, gentrification is conspicuous and has jeopardized the sustainability and livelihoods of its multicultural, ethnic, and historically rich inhabitants (Ferm, 2016). As articulated by respondent 12, *“There are numerous similar competitors, which have rendered our businesses economically unviable due to the exorbitant rental fees on Penang Road. Concurrently, the development of George Town, Penang has precipitated inflation, as the original proprietors could not maintain the structural integrity and deteriorating condition of the shop houses, leading them to divest their properties. These have been acquired by new investors who have subsequently escalated the rental fees to offset the high costs of repairs. Moreover, the price of materials for rattan goods has surged, while the demand for rattan has diminished, as consumers increasingly favor plastic alternatives. Consequently, we experienced a significant loss in business and were compelled to relocate, with the new owners transforming the premises into a café. In response, we have devised plans to innovate new rattan products, such as baskets and handicrafts. Today, there is a growing awareness among people regarding their heritage and culture, fostering an interest in this endangered craft. Ultimately, our shop has gained visibility online. Gradually, fueled by our passion and dedication to crafting with rattan and bamboo, our business has flourished, culminating in the establishment of a shop house on Beach Street.”* According to Respondent 13, *“The demand for ready-made songkok has surged, compelling me to cancel orders for tailor-made variants this year. Most consumers opt for factory-made songkok available in malls or supermarkets, despite the superior quality of handmade products. This shift has resulted in a considerable decline in business, necessitating our relocation from the shop house on King Street in George Town due to the untenable rental fees. The landlord’s insistence on preserving the traditional architectural features of the shop house, which are vital for economic growth, has compounded our difficulties. The premises have suffered damage from inclement weather, and the preservation of its historical elements has become increasingly costly and time-consuming. Ultimately, the property was relinquished and acquired by a new owner from Singapore, who repurposed it into a restaurant for higher profits. During each George Town festival, I endeavored to set up a stall to promote and sell songkok, which gradually*

enhanced my reputation and business prospects. I received an order for approximately 100 pieces from a company in Singapore, enabling me to purchase a shop house in Little India and revitalize my business, which continues to thrive to this day."

Kamal et al. (2016) posited that the inflation rate serves as a significant factor and indicator that may precipitate an increase in housing prices. One traditional trader (Respondent 14) lamented, *"We face the same competition as artisans. The inflation of goods has rendered it impossible to procure materials necessary for production, leading to business failures and a diminished capacity to purchase supplies. Ultimately, we are compelled to sell handicraft products at significantly reduced prices, sometimes even at half their original value, resulting in diminished profits and, consequently, the collapse of our enterprises."*

In an interview with Respondent 1, it was noted, *"In light of inflation, a majority of suppliers have escalated the prices of raw materials essential for food preparation, thereby undermining our financial viability. This compels us to raise operating costs, room rates, and the prices of menu items, which we must pass on to our guests in order to secure essential resources and materials. Consequently, many guests engage in comparative analysis to ascertain the best value, gathering information to inform their decisions, which ultimately leads to a loss of business opportunities. If we continue to suffer losses and are unable to sustain ourselves, we risk losing our properties."*

Urban development poses a threat to the architectural integrity of shop houses in Georgetown, Penang, adversely impacting their facades and stylistic elements. The visual aesthetics and delicate features render them susceptible to degradation. Architectural principles must be re-evaluated, with particular features necessitating heightened attention. As articulated by Respondent 8, *"To preserve the authenticity and originality of our hotel building, we require greater financial resources. Additionally, we must restore the facilities of buildings that embody a heritage concept. Failing to retain the original architectural characteristics will not only erode the artistic and cultural significance but also contravene the regulations instituted by the government aimed at preserving pre-war structures."*

Moreover, another traditional trader (Respondent 5) remarked, *"It is imperative that we restore and maintain our shop houses to ensure the survival of all food stall businesses, as numerous family members are reliant on these enterprises for their livelihood. Food stall proprietors are compelled to allocate their income in two directions: towards the renovation of the shop lots and the sustenance of their families. Beyond food quality and service, we must uphold the ambiance, authenticity, and facade of the coffee shop to allure both local and international tourists."*

The evolving values and characteristics of individuals have

fundamentally transformed the consumption of products, particularly heritage items, which necessitate specialized knowledge and skills, thereby influencing the viability of the heritage production model (Ashworth & Larkham, 2013). Grasping the market demand in this contemporary era is imperative, as it significantly influences purchasing behaviors, learning experiences, and engagement with heritage products. Respondent 6 noted, *"The enduring popularity of our restaurant has persisted alongside the burgeoning interest in Indian cuisine over the years, both prior to and following the nomination and the ascent of economic and cultural tourism in George Town, Penang, despite the occurrence of inflation."* Furthermore, Respondent 10 remarked, *"It is fortunate that my establishment is located along Armenian Street, a prominent destination frequented by tourists for sightseeing. Often, they discover my shop upon their return home and share their experiences with relatives and friends. One of the primary reasons for my continued success is the affordability of my offerings, allowing customers to select from an extensive catalogue or print designs that resonate with their events."*

Gentrification is intricately linked to historical patterns of residential segregation, with indigenous communities grappling with threats stemming from white flight and neglect throughout the 1950s to the 1970s (Powell & Spencer, 2002). Strategies devised to counteract gentrification are predominantly centered around residential areas, with the aim of ensuring stability, job equity, and sustainable economic growth. To foster long-term stability and equilibrium, these strategies should garner support from a diverse array of sectors, including municipal, regional, non-profit, private, and philanthropic entities. As articulated by Respondent 3, *"What has transpired is that, as businesses negotiate fair market rents, there has been a leapfrogging effect along the street, resulting in numerous new openings and the closure of several establishments. The well-regarded local specialty shops and coffee houses, still buoyed by the patronage of local customers from both the city and suburbs, continue to thrive in their endeavors."* Respondent 19 commented, *"Gentrification will inevitably manifest, yielding fortune; however, only 3% to 4% of the shop houses and other properties in the 109.38 zone are owned by foreign entities, thereby controlling and restricting the ownership of heritage properties by outsiders, as stated by the chief minister."*

Said et al. (2013) posited that the proliferation of cultural and heritage tourism, along with its attendant benefits, can facilitate the preservation of heritage and elevate awareness, ultimately yielding financial dividends. The city's affluence and its rich tapestry of historic shophouses and grand edifices encapsulate Penang's cultural essence and depth. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken by individuals and organizations to foster tourism development and enhance heritage appreciation in Penang (Chan et al., 2020). Respondent 9

articulated, *"It is imperative for the local authority to contribute to the upkeep of historical sites and buildings, as well as to acquire land pertinent to the preservation of these historical structures."* Furthermore, another traditional trader (respondent 2) remarked: *"As a local resident, it is crucial to engage in the planning of sustainable tourism development, educating both tourists and residents, conserving natural resources, respecting local culture, and actively participating in all practices and initiatives pertaining to sustainable tourism."*

The issue of sustainability assumes particular significance in the context of cultural phenomena that shape and define the fundamental dimensions of cultural tourism development and industry (Abdullah et al., 2019). The assessment of the energetic dynamics of tourist activities and their impact on cultural sites necessitates a more concerted effort for cultural tourism to achieve greater sustainability. As articulated by a traditional trader (respondent 12), *"We cultivate a diverse array of cultural activities within our shop house, enabling us to derive direct benefits from foreign visitors who contribute economically. This, in turn, allows us to sustain our shop house while generating economic advantages for the community and preserving the values inherent in our cultural heritage."*

This finding underscored that the residents recognized the paramount importance of heritage preservation for the benefit of future generations. Generally, the uninformed yet keen community of enterprising and entrepreneurial individuals could derive greater advantage from gaining insight into the diverse interpretations that have emerged in the discourse surrounding heritage, as well as understanding the business models specifically designed to promote the sustainability of cultural tourism (Cw et al., 2021). Furthermore, the enhancement of systemic support and fundamental infrastructure can facilitate collaboration across different generations within the communities of George Town, fostering a collective appreciation and acknowledgment of the area's historical significance and its modest future as a heritage site and cultural nexus (Samat & Mahamud, 2019). In September 2016, the Special Area Plan (SAP) was published for George Town's heritage buildings, providing a more detailed and professional management plan. The plan includes a history, SWOT analysis, conservation strategy, guidance plan development, and guidelines for heritage buildings and conservation areas. According to a traditional trader (respondent 9), *"Conservation areas and Heritage Building Guidelines are intended to manage and regulate land development and consumption, safeguarding not only the heritage structures but also contributing to the integrity of the entire area within the George Town World Heritage Site."* As articulated by respondent 11, *"It is imperative to provide appropriate services and amenities to ensure the comfort and convenience of visitors while exploring the destination, thereby stimulating increased engagement in cultural tourism and attracting a greater*

influx of visitors to the heritage site.”

The findings suggest that fortifying the bond between local communities and the city's heritage, while augmenting awareness of its cultural values—encompassing both local significance and Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)—is essential for establishing productive, inclusive, and accountable foundations at every level of residency. This approach aims to facilitate equitable access for all and foster harmonious societies conducive to sustainable development (Khoo Salma Nasution, 2001). Respondent 15 articulated, *“The principal strength will undeniably reside in the inner-city area of George Town, Penang, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, characterized by its multi-ethnic societies, distinctive architecture, and historic landscapes, which directly engage tourists through vibrant marketplaces and street life, thereby epitomizing the uniqueness of our culture.”* Respondent 11 remarked, *“Preserving the pre-war buildings is vital for enhancing the stability and longevity of these structures. Our hotel room business, housed within these shophouses, attracts tourists and travelers seeking a heritage-centric experience. This not only generates benefits through tourist taxes but also underscores local distinctiveness, thereby ensuring the preservation of heritage resources in George Town.”*

Timothy Choy Xia Wei and Yeong Pey Jung (2020) emphasize the imperative for the council and government to furnish augmented support, resources, and expertise for tourism development in the wake of the COVID-19 announcement. Local communities must diligently adhere to standard operating procedures (SOP) to mitigate the profound impacts of the pandemic, alongside the phased implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) which pertains to regional recognition and identity (Lee Siu Ming, 2020). The efficacy of the recovery across all sectors and the capacity to navigate the public and community health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic will hinge on population immunity and the widespread acceptance of vaccinations (Vaghefi et al., 2021). This initiative is poised to catalyze economic revitalization, instigating transformations within the heritage and industrial sectors. Such progress is untenable without regular discourse among all stakeholders regarding their perspectives and contributions to the management and operation of enhanced adaptable tourism development.

Respondent 4 articulated, *“The pandemic has precipitated business closures, resulting in widespread job losses across various industries, diminished financial prospects, and an inability to procure our products. The loss of business has reached a critical point; if we cannot sustain operations, we will inevitably be compelled to cease our business activities.”* Respondent 5 remarked, *“The culinary staff uphold stringent hygiene practices, and patrons diligently adhere to SOP and MCO regulations.”* Furthermore, Respondent 14 asserted, *“It is incumbent upon government officials and healthcare professionals to ensure*

comprehensive awareness of the immunization process for all residents and to facilitate vaccination efforts to restore normalcy in business operations.” Respondent 7 conveyed, “The adoption of innovative applications aimed at enhancing the skills of master craftsmen represents the most effective strategy to preserve our techniques and craftsmanship, thereby ensuring the continuity of our enterprises.” Additionally, Respondent 11 proposed, “Our government should devise strategies to alleviate electricity costs and tax burdens for the hotel sector in George Town City, thereby reducing the financial strain during the pandemic's cessation.”

CONCLUSION

Georgetown, Penang, stands as the sole, quintessential remnant of the historic city along the Straits of Malacca. The architectural edifices and cultural heritage of Penang have emerged as some of the most esteemed assets in Malaysia. The unparalleled uniqueness, extraordinary architectural designs, historical significance, and distinctive layout of these heritage buildings are pivotal factors in their commodification, as boutique hotels, restaurants, galleries, and various establishments contribute to the local economy. However, with such development and growth, the specter of gentrification looms, wherein the character of historically underserved urban areas is transformed by the influx of wealthier residents, leading to enhancements in housing and the attraction of new businesses, often resulting in the displacement of existing inhabitants during Georgetown's developmental trajectory.

While the preservation of built heritage presents formidable challenges, it is imperative that these treasures be conserved and safeguarded for sustainable advancement. Thus, there exists an urgent need for collaborative input and perspectives from local stakeholders and international partners to effectively manage this heritage site and cultural nexus for a prosperous future. In light of the pandemic, which has posed significant challenges to the site, it is essential to adopt exemplary regional practices to invigorate cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism is expected to become a key part of the travel industry, presenting challenges in managing flows to cultural destinations and sites. It can help revive customs and restore historical landmarks, but unrestrained travel can negatively impact this sector. Sustainable development in cultural heritage tourism should focus on preserving cultural assets, understanding their value, providing genuine guest experiences, and generating revenue from cultural assets. It should also consider the impact of the travel industry on networks and districts, financial and social benefits, insurance, and promotion. Addressing challenges in managing and advancing the social legacy of the travel industry can lead to the growth of the local travel industry.

The study found that tangible heritage treasures can significantly impact the economic development of cultural tourism in George Town UNESCO Heritage Site, Penang, Malaysia. Future research should compare this with other locations in Malaysia to improve cultural tourism management. Intangible elements should be linked with tangible elements to nurture the state as a tourist attraction and destination. The website promotes various types of tangible heritage, including dwellings, places of worship, human creations, art, architecture, and traditional crafts and arts. As the travel industry rapidly develops, maintaining cultural tourism is crucial. A coordinated, manageable travel industry can attract additional financial support and support the local economy.

The review reveals that George Town lacks complete data on all heritage values, with the lack of a comprehensive list of heritage items being the main reason. Intangible heritage, which is more sustainable, has less protection and conservation policies. The researchers believe that uploading and providing data about intangible information requires agreement from trades owners and key holders, which is time-consuming and requires significant effort. Comparing tangible and intangible heritage is crucial for understanding their conservation and protection.

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