

The role of higher education in society activation through digital mural in ASEAN cities

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Abstract. Previous research has shown that mural graphics have a significant impact on the environment and society. As technology advances, digital graphics can also be applied to the space through a monitor or projector, providing choices in more varied graphics. Although previously popular in major cities in the world, especially with the theme surrounding the marginalization of certain communities, mural and environmental graphics made its debut back to several cities in ASEAN with new advancements. Analysis of documentation and observational techniques in the form of qualitative methods are used in this study. The analysis is divided into titles with examples from ASEAN countries. Therefore, this research is not only descriptive but also uses observation methods to collect information, explore environmental graphics and to be able to analyse other related works. The findings indicate that the mural affects society in three ways: (1) ideas cultivation through interactions in mural making processes, (2) involvement of university students enhance their artistic and socializing skills, and (3) acts as a media which foster traditions and cultures to the society. The murals are the background of life. Mural affects residents and passers, both consciously and unconsciously. In this way new ideas and actions will be created.

1. Introduction

The use of mural now has spread throughout the world, especially as a “filler” in public spaces. Murals which are present in many strategic places, effectively serve as message intermediaries, including many products that are using mural as a promotion tool [1]. Mural is not only serves as aesthetic elements but also as a tool to spread information, marketing and political views [2]. Moreover, the use of mural can also bring many effects, including the reduction of vandalism, for example in the form of graffiti attacks [2]. Apart of positive effects resulted, the results cannot instantly appear, efforts and processes are to be taken for such results to appear.

Focusing on architectural and environmental subjects, public spaces, plazas, open neglected spaces are a good place to start to do mural. While, some places will be more suitable for digital spatial interventions [3]. Nowadays, digital forms of mural, as digital pop-ups, projections, and monitors, are used to create live art installations on many surfaces, in the interior and also exterior of a building [3]. Study in mural and spatial imagery could be done by approaches of many disciplines, not only from architecture, but also from visual art. From visual art perspective, the images should be clear, simple and universal, in addition there could be also typography, photographs, illustrations, and pictograms that could give direction, inform, translate and define spaces [4].



Modern people are more and more individual, instead of asking for directions, they would prefer to take their own analysis than asking another person. In this manner, they need the ability to communicate graphically. Therefore, graphics, illustrations, typography used in mural that are easy to understand by the audience is of a paramount importance. As famous graphic designer Milton Glaser once said “The goal of graphic design is to motivate people or inform them, and if the goal is to create a friendly social environment, it is much better” [5].

The walls that are used as medium for mural painting, are usually in medium to big size. Mural characteristics is short lived. It will not withstand the weather well and will fade quickly due to the effects of rain, sun, and pollutions. Moreover, mural will need restoration and treatments if it need to serve its functions in much longer time than it should. A muralist, David Siqueiros said that painting mural need a different technique compared that is used in making traditional painting, for the mural to serve its communication role if approached from various angles or from high speed [6].

Mural studies have not been seriously done in the past, except for only a few numbers of studies. Although, there are a lot of works in the form of mural, both in the form of works itself and in the prints publication. Today, we see also a large amount of publication about mural in the online form. The studies done in the past are usually only gets around the prints reproductions with minimal descriptions. Sometimes, mural also serves as an illustrative material regarding other subject of studies [6]. This paper approach mural from three aspects, built environment, aesthetics, and technology. The mural discussed will be from ASEAN countries, mainly Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

2. Methods

Mural making approach which involves members of a community apart of only be done by artists, is called participatory approach [2]. This kind of approach in mural making is very popular especially in higher education institutions in Indonesia. This method of mural making was intended to form the sense of belonging for the mural being made, and to strengthen the connections between the participants through interactions. For example, this kind of mural once done in 2003 in Lebak Siliwangi, Bandung, Indonesia and was granted the longest mural in Indonesia by MURI (Indonesian Records Museum). This mural was initiated by Fine Art Department of Institut Teknologi Bandung (ITB), an art higher education institution in Bandung. Participatory mural could also be used as an action research laboratory, a research in which the researcher describes, analyses, and explains any kinds of social situations involved in the process, while also tries to make interventions to achieve particular objectives. The authors were involved in many mural projects involving communities and students from higher education institutions to achieve social changes through mural. Some of the projects will be discussed in this paper.

According to Gillian Rose, in Visual Methodologies, visual research could be approached from three different perspectives, action research is only deal with the mural production process [7]. Social psychologist deal with the effects of mural images to the audiences, anthropologist deal with the meaning which were constructed by mural images in social movements context. Next, there is sociologist or political scientist that deal with the ways of mural images connecting and influencing with the dynamics of social movements. These could be sum up into three areas: production, image, and audience.

As mural artists, the authors were forced to criticize the taken for granted visual research approaches given above, that an artist usually has their own views about their fieldworks, inspiration, meaning, style, aesthetic and creative choice [8]. So instead of making pure ethnographies about mural works, we approach the mural works from the point of view of art critics intertwined with the norms of anthropological views, so it would give a new way of thinking of mural as a cultural knowledge.

There is no substitute of the primary data collections, such primary data collections help to prevent this work to be just theoretical. Analysis of documentation and observational techniques in the form of qualitative methods are used in this study. The analysis is divided into titles with examples from ASEAN countries. Therefore, this research is not only descriptive but also uses observation methods to collect information, explore environmental graphics and to be able to analyse other related works.

3. Discussions

Mural is a work of art, and like another art form it reflects culture of a particular era or could be called as *zeitgeist* [9]. This art form was in one time neglected because of the rise of modern art, in which the approved art is that owned by an artist, mural on the opposite side is owned by the public [2]. Mural differs from graffiti, where murals are formally designed and planned rather than just a marks or verbal messages [10]. Murals are static, with only limited consumption level, different from graphics art or poster that could be replicated. An artist views mural more important than a painting, for the mural cannot be used to gain personal advantages [6]. As for those which make art as their hobby or passion many choose to keep their work far from professional or academic inquiry as to make it a way to relax or privacy [8], mural could be seen as this kind of art. Moreover, the artist and audience of such work of art experiencing what is called “aesthetic experience”, in which art is approached in an informal context, bringing contemplation to the viewer, working not only in intellectual level but also emotions. Murals tend to make differences in behaviour, local peoples protect murals from vandalism, and take care of its cleanliness, sometimes accompanied it with potted plants [10].

Since Palaeolithic age, muralists have used metaphor, ambiguity, colour, and other elements backed by creativity to communicate different or opposing messages to their various audiences [10]. This kind of ambiguity helps the artist send different message to general and specific audiences at the same time. Mural help people from different ethnicities understand and communicate to each other. For communication purposes mural activity is an effective way to bring changes with its messages [1]. This is why some companies using mural as a ubiquitous marketing tool, and youth were their targets with an assumption that it has visual appeal for them [11]. Mural can transform complex ideas into one that is simple, memorable, effective, and sometimes humorous [6].

Especially for marginalized groups murals help them creating, confirming, and supporting a collective “pride” identity. The youth also use mural to support their culture and language [6]. For them, mural activities could be dangerous, because of the exposure in public space that is needed to finish a mural. To lessen this risks mural sometimes designed in a simplistic manner for it to be finished rapidly or to involve as many muralists to finish the project. A stencil could be sprayed rapidly, producing sharp, hard-hitting image [12]. Ironically, mural is far from being permanent, it is normal for it being replaced should there be a new context.

Speaking of content and composition, some of theme that usually used by muralist are: Cultural Archetypes, Landscapes, Heroes or Heroines, In Memoriam, which came from the local culture of different ethnicities. For the composition, muralist now tend to choose dynamic composition, which is unsettling, attention-getting, but also disturbing [10].

As the technology evolves, digital projection now is getting more and more popular because of its advantages compared to traditional mural. They do not need any official permission, and less risk than in the traditional mural because of its characteristic that do not permanently change the surface of the walls like in the traditional mural. Projection bombing, because of that is being chosen by today’s social activists and artists [3].

Color affects mood, emotional respond, and space atmosphere. Space and colour have an important role in changing the audiences characters and behaviours [13]. The use of lighting could emphasize role and visual identity of a space, along with colour effects, it will make the space more meaningful and defined [5]. Culture and knowledge are created in a space where people meet and socialize, in the past it would be a bazaar, now probably a plaza or an art gallery. The space should have visual identities and bring experiences to the people’s minds [5]. This is what called placemaking. Mural could be used as powerful communication tool to foster people expression and collective action in such space [3]. The space can also affect the mural compositions. Uneven ground, seam in a wall’s surface, are influencing the artist decisions on compositions [12]. Muralists also place images in certain ways because of it is understood more readily by viewers because of its placement [10].

About the role of higher education institutions in promoting mural, graduates of fine art study programs could be the solvers of social problems in ASEAN, especially Indonesia [14]. Higher education institutions that have a fine art department usually fostering mural activities [1]. Within

campus, mural could affect the learning objectives, and relate to the psychological of the students and lecturers [13]. Outside the campus, higher education institutions use mural as a part of its education and social responsibility roles [1]. As a comparison, there is a centre in California which was founded by UCLA professor named Digital/Mural Lab (DML) that promotes innovation of collaborative art in form of combinations between mural and digital arts [3]. This could become an example to create one in ASEAN. Unfortunately, there are some resistance from communities and academic members to fostering mural because there is a possibility that mural is still seen as a sort of vandalism by some people, which cannot differentiate between a mural and a graffiti [2].

The role of higher education institutions in society activation could be seen from some mural projects initiated by higher education institutions. The examples are mural project in Babakan Siliwangi area of Bandung which was initiated by FSRD Institut Teknologi Bandung, Urban Kampung mural initiated by Architecture Department of Universitas Indonesia, and mural in Girimekar area in Bandung which was initiated by Telkom University. All the mural projects mentioned, involving the society such as mural clubs, residents, and also university students. Some of mural project mentioned also using technologies to plan and produce the murals. Even though, the technological applications limited only to the sketch projection, and visual application such as graphic software.

The society were affected by the interactions in mural making processes, which involving ideas cultivation. Another element of societies are the students which is involved in mural making process, with the residents they enhance their artistic and socializing skills. The mural also acts as a media which foster traditions and cultures to the society in their respective regions.

3.1. Mural and higher education institutions in Indonesia

Telkom university in Indonesia has a fine art program that foster the mural activities, the mural activities usually held every semester. Mural at Telkom University could be seen as a representation of Indonesian mural. Theme surrounding the mural projects in Indonesia could be taken from the culture of Indonesia. Indonesia has various culture, one of which is decorative art that could be further developed and showed to the world stage [14]. These decorative arts could be seen from Indonesian traditional crafts, like *songket*, *batik*, *keris*, *ulos*, jewellery, and many more [14]. Today's, decorative arts still have high value as one of Indonesian culture [14].

In Bandung, a city in West Java Province many young artists often use subculture theme in their works and synthesizing between subcultures become a norm. Apart from that, religion and spiritual theme also significantly influence their works [9]. Intra and interethnic use of traditional symbols of visual culture and religions, bringing the past to present situations.

Indonesian culture identity is open to another culture [9]. For Indonesian case, maybe we could refer to Margaret Mead's idea. A different and various culture in Indonesia, instead of conflicting each other, could be seen as a public ceremony [10], instead of making division it could in fact force cohesion. An image of Indonesian national views of *bhinneka tunggal ika* or unity in diversity.



Figure 1. Mural activities by Telkom University's students utilizing computer projection.

3.2. *Mural and higher education institutions in Thailand*

Thailand is a Buddhist country. Traditionally Thai artists paint mural on the walls of temple buildings. Temples murals usually depicting the scenes from the life of Buddha, and his incarnations. Although Buddhism originating from India, local visual culture has significant role in the traditional Thai murals. Thai government also promoting this national culture through art productions to the furthest borders of the kingdom [8].

Thai traditional artist did not sign their art works, they don't take personal identity as high as sacredness or the beauty of the mural itself. The idea is if the mural become too much about the artist, it loses its meaning. Individualism is seen as a character of western society, not of the Thai's [8]. Thai muralist often paid to do mural projects, and the fee is calculated based on the square meter of the wall's space.

Thai muralist sometimes does commission work, as stated above. Not only for traditional mural done on temple's walls, but also in public and hotels walls. This is due to the state policy on culture and also the culture of local Thai people.

One of the Thailand's university that often make mural projects is Silpakorn University. Silpakorn University is the oldest Thai higher education institution that at the beginning only focusing on fine art. There is a Faculty at Silpakorn that focusing on fine art today, which is The Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphics Art (PSG). Before renovation, the campus is located at Wang Tha Phra area, next to Bangkok's Grand Palace. As memoriam for the late King, murals displayed at Silpakorn's Wang Tha Phra Campus Walls in 2017.



Figure 2. Mural in memoriam of the late king Bhumibol at Silpakorn University.



Figure 3. Mural in memoriam of the late king Bhumibol at Silpakorn University's wall.

3.3. Mural and higher education institutions in Singapore and Malaysia

In Penang, Malaysian government turn their heritage area to be canvases for mural and city creativity [2]. There, the Lithuanian muralist Ernest Zecharevic made some mural, and the mural is still could be seen as tourist attractions. But Ernest Zecharevic right now is banned for entering Malaysia for unknown reason. In Singapore, one of the well-known muralist is Yip Yew Chong. As a self-taught artist, his mural based on the memories of living in the city state in 1970s and 1980s.

Sometimes artists are triggered to do a self-censorship, the case is often seen when making mural in public space, especially in different and wider community members. Thai artist in Singapore says that sometimes self-expression and individual style are often subsumed under the larger rubric of the art forms didactic theme [8].

In Malaysia and Singapore, universities also fostering mural, like Asia Pacific University in Malaysia, and also Nanyang and NUS in Singapore.



Figure 4. Little children on a bicycle, mural by Ernest Zecharevic.



Figure 5. Mural in Singapore.

3.4. Mural in the rest of the world (for comparison purpose)

Mural of the world, could not be separated from political views, as in the Basque (1970s-1980s) [6], Palestinian-Israeli Conflicts [6], and also environmental issues in China [15]. In social point of view, often muralist speak on shift between social culture space, this is especially in an immigrant society [10].

Mural in the world stage is represented by Banksy. The internationally acclaimed, he once numbered by Time magazine among the world's 100 most influential people [12]. His murals often speak about borders, like what he did in Palestine and Clacton. In Clacton the mural message is about immigrant and borders, creating racial dispute, the mural then whitewashed by the officials.



Figure 6. Banksy's mural in Clacton on Sea.

4. Conclusions

In conclusions, attempts to design and produce murals that serve as educational tools, reflecting the complex past and the socially conscious future, reflecting local experience and transcultural and diasporic norms, not only aesthetic issues, but ethical and epistemological issues.

The higher education initiated mural affects society in three ways: (1) ideas cultivation through interactions in mural making processes, (2) involvement of university students enhance their artistic and socializing skills, and (3) acts as a media which foster traditions and cultures to the society. The murals are the background of life. Mural affects residents and passers, both consciously and unconsciously. In this way new ideas and actions will be created.

Digital mural applications, or computer projections application although popular in art world, is still rarely used by universities in ASEAN, except for only a few. Digital mural has many advantages, they do not need any official permission, and less risk than in the traditional mural because of its characteristic that do not permanently change the surface of the walls like in the traditional mural.

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