

Arca Keris in Alor Gajah Town, Melaka: A SWOT Analysis of Design and Appeal Factor [†]

Azahar Harun ^{1,*}, Khairunnisa Mohd Abdul Ghani ¹, Sharmiza Abu Hassan ¹, Mohd Hanif Mohd Omar ¹, Nurhikma Mat Yusof ¹ and Ohm Pattanachoti ²

¹ College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Melaka 78000, Malaysia

² School of Social Sciences, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University of Thailand, Muang Chiang Rai 57100, Thailand

* Correspondence: azahar581@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract: In 2020, the Alor Gajah Municipal Council (AGMC) embarked on a project to upgrade the town's public courtyard. One of its tasks was restoring and relocating a giant traditional Malay dagger replica known as the *Arca Keris* from the courtyard to an adjacent roundabout. Despite this initiative, most people are unaware of how such a change could improve the town's image and one's quality of life. In this sense, two questions arise: (1) what are the design specifications of the *Arca Keris*? and (2) how does the presence of the *Arca Keris* improve the town's image? In order to address this issue, the design and appeal factors of the *Arca Keris* were examined. A triangulation strategy was used, consisting of interviews and observation; this was followed by a SWOT analysis. The outcome demonstrates that the *Arca Keris* has both strengths and opportunities in terms of visibility and symbolization. However, it may have flaws, such as accessibility and anonymity. As a result, the general public was unable to appreciate the significance of the *Arca Keris* or comprehend the rationale for its relocation. This research should help us better understand how public art affects a town's image across the country.

Keywords: public art; municipal council; design and appeal



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1. Introduction

Sculpture, environmental art, signs, murals, and ephemeral works are all examples of public art. In Malaysia, public art is frequently recognized, especially by local government authorities, as an amenity rather than expressive art [1]. This is in contrast to the avant-garde philosophy of “Art for art's sake”, which maintains that the only thing that matters is the artist's self-expression [2]. In theory, public art, according to some scholars, has a lot to offer; this includes promoting society's core values, maintaining the ability of attractions to achieve desired goals, and adding value to urban environments and their inhabitants in terms of history, beauty, and purpose [3–6]. Therefore, careful planning and consideration should be taken to ensure that public art is not just made for utility purposes if it is to be placed in an urban area [7]. To put it another way, public art is the art that was created with the intention of igniting and honoring its viewers [8,9].

2. Problem Statements

Situated in the northern part of Melaka, Alor Gajah town is governed by the Alor Gajah Municipal Council (AGMC). As stated in the *Rancangan Tempatan Daerah Alor Gajah*, 2020 or local plan, AGMC is committed to implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of ensuring the quality of life by providing good public service, boosting the town's image, and preserving the environment [10]. This pledge is believed to be fulfilled through altering and modernizing public facilities in and around Alor Gajah. For instance, a 2017 news report stated how AGMC and the faculty of Art and Design at the Universiti

Teknologi MARA Cawangan Melaka collaborated to create a mural art project to enhance the town's image [11]. Several old shop houses' walls are decorated with drawings that feature cultural themes to create a new image and unique experience, for the local and foreign visitors. AGMC began work on a development plan to upgrade a public courtyard in the heart of Alor Gajah town in 2020. In order to maximize the use of the public courtyard, AGMC decided to relocate a huge traditional Malay dagger replica known as *Arca Keris* to an adjacent roundabout (see Figure 1). Additional accessories, such as a new concrete base design, lighting, and landscaping were added to the final upgrade work in August 2020. Despite AGMC's efforts, no empirical study has yet been conducted on the *Arca Keris* in Alor Gajah, especially in terms of design and appeal. Scholars argue that very few public artworks are examined after they are displayed, which raises concerns about whether their design and appeal can reach the highest standards [2]. As a matter of fact, most public artworks in various Malaysian states are typically misinformed; hence, they fail to improve the quality of life as intended [6]. Taking into account all of the reasons for and against public art installations, this study intends to examine *Arca Keris* in Alor Gajah and answer the following questions: (1) what are the design specifications of the *Arca Keris*? and (2) how does the presence of the *Arca Keris* improve the town's image?



Figure 1. The Keris replica in Alor Gajah town.

3. Literature Review

Keris is a traditional Malay dagger known for its beauty and legend. In some circles, the *Keris* is even regarded as a sacred object endowed with magical powers. For example, it is known as '*Azimat*' in the Malay community and '*Tosan aji*' in the Javanese community [12]. One scholar noted that *Keris* is a form of traditional weapon that has unique features, such as being long or short, having two sharp eyes, having straight or winding blades, pointed at the end section and widening on the side base [13,14]. Technically, it was created with the intention of murdering an enemy in a stealthy, swift, and unexpected manner [15]. Despite this, the *Keris* is now considered one of the local cultural items and is no longer used for killing or self-defence [16]. As a result, it can be seen in Malay ceremonial occasions, particularly traditional weddings and the Malay martial art of *Silat* [1].

Keris can also be found in the design of the Jata Negara, or the Malaysian national coats of arms; which represent non-federated nations and serve as symbols of Malay rulers' sovereignty. It has consistently served as inspiration for local artists and is widely acknowledged as a significant work of art in public art initiatives [16,17]. The National Archive property, for example, houses *Pekaka*, a 1979 *Keris* sculpture by Arifin Ismail. *Pekaka* is made of copper with a decorative motif that is thought to have originated in Thailand [18]. Another example is Latif Mohiddin's *Keris*, which he built in 1998. This artwork can be found in front of Menara Maybank's main entrance in Kuala Lumpur. According to a public art scholar, the artist has successfully depicted *Keris*' concealed philosophy and method through the use of shape, lines, and style; thus, this provides the public with a distinct and novel experience [18]. Rosli Zakaria, a local sculptor and public art researcher, attempted to promote Malay culture by creating and installing a *Keris* sculpture at Changchun Sculpture

Park in China in 2006 [17]. Several local governments and town councils have also taken the lead in incorporating and promoting *Keris* sculpture as part of their urban beautification initiatives. *Tugu Taming Sari* in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, *Tugu Keris* in Klang, Selangor, and *Arca Keris* in Alor Gajah, Melaka are some of them.

Nonetheless, the *Keris* sculpture in front of Kuala Lumpur's Bukit Jalil National Stadium is undoubtedly the most popular. Ironically, this public art installation was not created by local artisans. In 1996, the Malaysian government commissioned Neil Lawson Baker, a well-known British sculptor, to create a giant *Keris* replica for the 16th Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur [19]. Unlike the previous sculptures mentioned earlier, the *Keris* replica at the Kuala Lumpur National Stadium, which stands around seven metres tall and weighs more than ten tonnes, is an exact reproduction. Baker struggled to cast the *Keris*, at first; particularly the *Luk* or wavy-shaped blade, and the *Hulu* or the hilt. This is most likely due to a lack of knowledge and experience with *Keris*' ideology and approach. As a result, Ramlan Abdullah, a well-known local sculptor, was enlisted to assist in the alteration of the *Keris* [19].

Keris' significance as a symbol of Malay identity and Islam has always been acknowledged and appreciated, even by non-Malays. Thus, any attempt to minimize its significance, whether by a group or an individual, may be seen as disrespectful of Malay society. Take a look at the following scenarios. According to the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) university news, the new president, Datuk Dr. Mohd Abu Bakar had suggested replacing an existing *Keris* replica at the university entrance with a Qalam (book) replica during his speech at IIUM Takrim Day 2019 held at the IIUM Cultural Center (ICC) [20]. The present artwork, according to the president, is unfit to symbolize the university as a center of intellectual debate and enlightenment. He went on to say that the Qalam is more appropriate because it reflects the university's logo as well as the concept of Hidayah, or Allah's bounty. Former Minister of Culture, Arts, and Heritage Datuk Rais Yatim, on the other hand, expressed his dissatisfaction with the situation [21]. He was actually hinting that the current IIUM president's action could be misinterpreted as an insult to the Malay population. In the second scenario, during the 2006 UMNO general assembly, Datuk Hishamuddin Hussein, the party's youth leader, was photographed kissing a *Keris* while severely telling the Inter-faith Commission (IFC) not to play with Malay religious sentiment [22]. Hishamuddin Hussein's gesture was reportedly in response to two problematic events. The first was in response to an allegation made by the Islamic Consumer Association that a food product's packaging had a cross emblem. The second was a rumor that national yachtsman Azhar Mansor had left Islam, and was converting Malay Muslim children to Christianity at an Ipoh, Perak church [22]. Despite the changes in setting, these two scenarios clearly demonstrate *Keris*' close connection to Malay interests and faith.

4. Methodology

This study used a triangulation technique, which involves drawing conclusions by using data from multiple sources [23]. In this case, the study's initial phase included interviews and observation. Authorization from the UiTM Research Ethic Committee REC/06/2022 (ST/MR/108) was obtained before conducting the task. To execute this, aerial photographs were captured using a drone and a Digital Single Lens Reflex, or DSLR camera. For the interviews, we were able to speak with Tuan Haji Zainal Abidin Bin Abu Bakar, an AGMC technical assistant to the architect; who is involved in the early stage of the design and development of *Arca Keris*. Data from the observation and interview were coded, tabulated, and analyzed using a SWOT analysis; this stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This research tool can be effectively used for assessing the capabilities and shortcomings of the subject under study [24].

4.1. Analysis

The *Arca Keris* of Alor Gajah is located in a 40-foot wide \times 60-foot long roundabout adjacent to a public courtyard, old shophouses, and a parking lot (see Figure 2). The roundabout acts as a transition that allows traffic from three main roads—Jalan Datuk Naning, Jalan Datuk Md Zain, and Jalan Datuk Dol Said—to move smoothly. Motorists and pedestrians can see the artwork from all sides. A row of old shophouses adjacent to it has been decorated with mural design. However, because it is close to traffic, access to this public art is limited due to safety concerns.



Figure 2. Alor Gajah town roundabout.

The *Arca Keris* is about 18-feet tall and 30-feet long (see Figure 3); in addition, it is made of composite material, namely ferro-cement and wire mesh, and coated in bright yellow and black paint. It is set on a new concrete foundation designed by Hyundai Engineering Malaysia Sdn Bhd as a gift to the AGMC. There is a large amount of clearance of 15 feet between the concrete base and the edge of the curb. Landscaping and lighting fixtures were added to the roundabout.

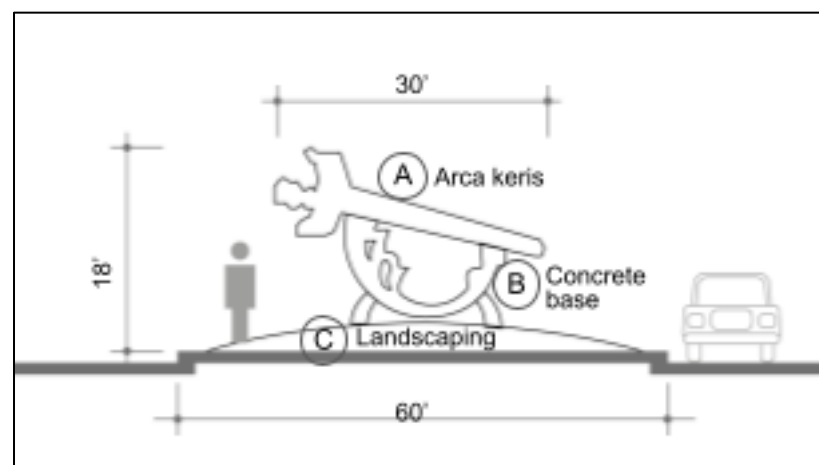


Figure 3. Detailed illustration of Arca Keris.

SWOT Analysis

- **Strength:** The *Arca Keris* of Alor Gajah town is a 15-feet tall structure that stands out in the crowd. Its design and construction began in 2002, according to AGMC's director of the Town Planning Department, Puan Nurul Adawaty; and was overseen by Haji Zainal Abidin Bin Abu Bakar, a technical assistant architect. The design motif was chosen as a symbol of the Alor Gajah region and the Melaka state. The state's symbol, which features five dagger blades representing the five renowned Malay warriors *Hang Tuah*, *Hang Jebat*, *Hang Kasturi*, *Hang Lekir*, and *Hang Lekiu*, is also representative of Melaka's valor and historical image. Furthermore, the placement of the *Arca Keris* in the Alor Gajah roundabout can also serve to raise awareness of the local history associated with the 15th-century *Naning War* against colonialists; this enables a stronger sense of place and identity for the municipality of Alor Gajah.
- **Weaknesses:** The *Arca Keris* is located on a 40-feet wide and 60-feet long roundabout where three streets meet: Jalan Datuk Naning, Jalan Datuk Dol Said, and Jalan Datuk Md Zain. The public is not permitted to enter the roundabout area due to heavy traffic and safety concerns; however, the public can observe the artwork from a safe distance. Because of these constraints, effective involvement and appreciation were unable to be achieved in a meaningful way. Public art in public outdoor places, according to public art experts Ramlan Abdullah and Rosli Zakaria (personal communication, 2022), makes the space appear more engaging and vibrant; this has a beneficial impact on urban identity. In this sense, public art must be made available to the general public in order to fulfil its duty and function. In terms of craftsmanship, its design has no apparent significance that is worth noticing. According to the crafter Haji Zainal Abidin Bin Abu Bakar (personal communication, 2022), its design was literally copied from a typical dagger; this is despite the fact that the original intention was to resemble the legendary Taming Sari. This is due to the fact that there was no visual reference of the legendary Taming Sari available at the time. As a result, the *Arca Keris* is regarded as anonymous because the general public is unable to determine its identity. In an interview, a sculpture expert remarked that when creating a public sculpture and placing it in a public space, it is necessary to have a larger perspective; particularly when creating public art based on a race's identity. This clearly demonstrates the significance of the sculptor's instructions. The aesthetic value of public art will be ignored and forgotten if it is not applied.
- **Opportunities:** The *Arca Keris* can aid in the construction of cultural identity by differentiating a society and attracting visitors to its uniqueness, as well as promoting local culture. This opportunity will definitely raise awareness, foster goodwill among stakeholders and artists, and eventually lead to the development of new public art projects.
- **Threats:** Regarding *Arca Keris's* location, there are two potential threats. First, the *Arca Keris* is situated near a roundabout with heavy traffic, particularly during rush hour. In order to prevent incidents, visitor safety must be addressed. Second, because it is situated in an open space, there are concerns that the weather will affect the 20-year-old work of public art's substance and color.

5. Conclusions

Without a doubt, the *Arca Keris* in Alor Gajah town is a popular three-dimensional landmark that reflects Malay identity and local history; therefore, it should be preserved as such. In this study, we observed that it has the ability not only to beautify the town, but also to improve its image; thus, creating a welcoming sense for both local and foreign visitors. Furthermore, the study discovered that the only flaws that detract from its appeal are aesthetic proportion, craftsmanship, and accessibility. In this regard, it is suggested that local governments, especially AGMC, pay greater attention to the design and appeal factor in order to ensure that the *Arca Keris* is better appreciated by the general public.

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