

## An Encounter of Diversity of Building Signage in Traditional Street Character at Melaka Historical Centre

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### Abstract

Today, street functioning as social arena is less sensitive towards designing a continuity of building appearance in terms of building signage design, thus creating an unattractive setting. The design of building signage nowadays that does not consider the whole context of the street and human scale aspects has created a chaotic ambience. Thus, this paper will discuss the continuousness of building signage design that contributes to street character by referring to traditional street model. A mixed method employing questionnaire survey (n=330), in-depth interview with street users (n=21), content analysis of archival data, and a visual survey was adopted. This study has chosen the streets at Melaka Historical City Centre because they represent the local character. Those streets are Jalan Tukang Besi, Jalan Tukang Emas, and Jalan Tokong. The study shows the continuousness of building design created by the diversity of building signage, thus creating an attractive environment to consider in the new street design. This study concludes that the result acts as a benchmark for designing the future or existing street as a public space. The new street milieu portrays the spirit of a place and has a potential in the future tourism sector by attracting them to places with local character.

**Keywords:** Traditional Street; Street; Character; Building Signage.



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### 1. Introduction

Street is one of the important elements that form the city or town. Scholars added that approximately, 80% of the city is formed by the street. Besides that, streets also function as important public spaces that act as social arena where people will mingle around, meet somebody, have leisure time, to pass through, and for business. This is different from the road where the function is more towards vehicle movement such as the highway (Jones *et al.*, 2008; Moughtin and Merterns, 2006). Therefore, it is important to design a street with local character that makes people enjoy walking around or relaxing (Ja'afar *et al.*, 2017). Thus, street appearance with local character could be more appreciated by the users and fulfill the local needs.

Unfortunately, the fast development has affected street appearance. This includes the debuts of building signage. The increase in businesses and economics has created a diversity of trade along the street. Hence, to market their business and service, large building signage is located at the front of the building façade to inform people about the type of business inside the building. Therefore, we could see building signage appearance in a big scale along the street. Every company wants to enhance their business through large signage. This appearance has covered the architectural style, especially a historical building with unique façade. As a result, this creates a street with chaotic and unpleasant walk-able environment (Ja'afar, 2014; Ja'afar *et al.*, 2014).

**Figure-1.** The appearance of today's bigger building signage, thus covering the uniqueness of building façade.

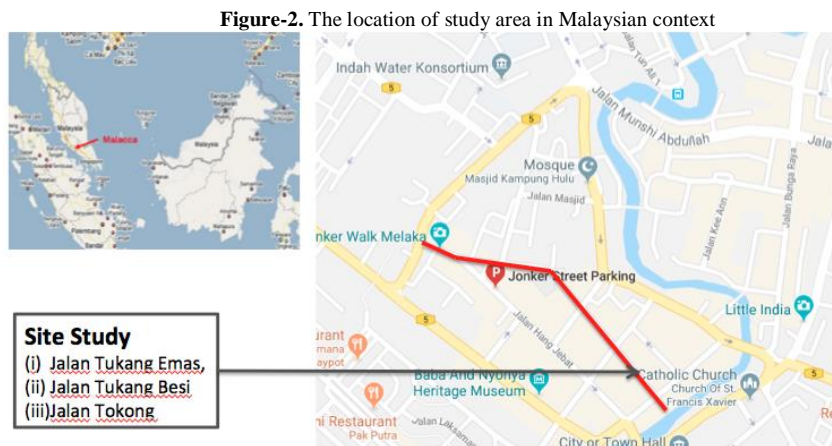


### 2. Methodology

In order to identify the diversity of appearance of building signage in creating a traditional street character, this study applies mixed mode with fieldwork and survey approaches. The techniques utilized in this study are questionnaire, observation, in-depth interviews, and document review on archival data. For quantitative approach, the questionnaire was distributed to 330 respondents of street users. The study has classified them into two types of

user, namely (i) mobile users – who do not depend on the study area, for example, tourists and buyers, and (ii) static users – who fit the study area, for example, residents and people who are working there (Alamouh and Ja’afar, 2017). The data of this technique will be analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences software via simple statistics such as frequency and percentage.

The next approach is qualitative through observation, in-depth interviews, and document review on archival data. This study applies visual analysis for observation technique, while the other three techniques will apply thematic analysis via framework and variable determined through literature review. These techniques use NVivo computer software to analyze the data. For the interview, this study uses a group of respondents for questionnaire; mobile and static users with 21 samples. The number of samples is selected because according to the previous study, a number of 20-30 samples are enough if the study applies qualitative approach (Alamouh and Ja’afar, 2017; Ja’afar, 2018).



The study area chosen is Jalan Tukang Besi, Jalan Tukang Emas, and Jalan Tokong at Melaka Historical City Centre, Malaysia. The combination of these three streets creates a long street, which is approximately 600 meters. The reason this site is chosen is that it is among traditional streets in Malaysia that portrays local character. Thus, the ambience of the local environment that is rich with culture could befall until today (Ja’afar, 2018; MPMBB Rancangan Khas, 2010).

### 3. Result and Discussion

Building signage that contributes to traditional street character has been mentioned through the techniques of questionnaire, interview, observation, and archival data as shown in Table 1. In this study, building signage will be measured through appropriateness of location, size, and visual

**Table-1.** Building signage that has been mentioned through the techniques

Element	Questionnaire (n=330)	Interview (user) (n=21)		Observation	Archival Data
		Yes	No		
Building signage	62% (n=204)	21	-	✓	✓

**Figure-2.** Red dotted line indicate an example of type and location of traditional building signage



Historical review from archival data has found that traditional building signage could be found at several locations of the building. These include the (i) wall surface of building or (ii) surface of timber that is crafted directly. The form of building signage includes an alphabet or logo. The location of building signage is different for each building façade. This is because there is diversity of architecture style via diversity of era. As mentioned in Figure 2, there are seven locations of building signage, namely (i) main entrance, (ii) frieze, (iii) in between of shop frontage and frieze, (iv) column at ground floor, (v) tang long, (vi) door, and (vii) window. The appearance of the signage could be in the Roman or Chinese alphabets.

According to a survey, 62% respondents mentioned that building signage is associated with one of the elements in describing the uniqueness of buildings in the study area (Table1). The observation has supported the data of history where we still see inheritance of building signage at different locations for each unit of the building. As a result, the assemblage of building that creates blocks along the street generates a unique ambience that enhances the original architectural façade. However, an observation has also found that the modern building signage could be divided into two types of appearance. As mentioned in Figures 3 and 4, those are (i) building signage with a large scale where it covers or shields the building style of architecture, and (ii) building signage with small size that does not shield the architectural style.

**Figure-3.** Modern building with big building signage that covers the architectural and theme park styles.



**Figure-4.** Modern building signage that does not annoy the architectural style



The appearance of heritage and today's signage has been elaborated in detail by respondents through an interview. Below are the responses as quoted:

*"From my point of view, big building signage is not needed. It looks ugly because it covers the beauty of building façade. A small signage is already enough to recognize building function while walking. This is because I could recognize the building function according to the types of item they display outside the building."* (Respondent-1)

*"The uniqueness of this place is that you can find a traditional building signage that looks nice with Chinese words. Usually, the builder carves at the column, which mentions the types of business. No need the today's signage, bigger than the building. ... As you can see here (showing the door), they also carve at timber door. Today, this type of door is expensive because there is a value of heritage."* (Respondent-15)

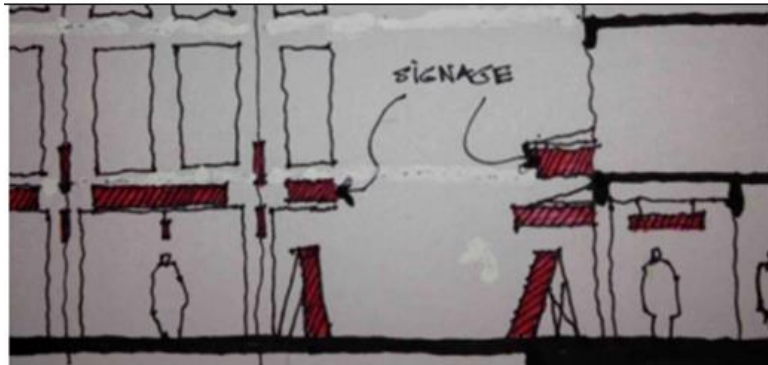
The responses above have discovered that the modern building signage through big appearance is not applicable because it does not enhance the uniqueness of historical façade. Besides, respondents could recognize building function not because of large building signage. The second statement describes the type and location of traditional building's signage with Chinese characters that enhance the uniqueness of the street compared to large modern signage. The design of this traditional building signage also portrays visibility of building's function.

The observation has supported the statement of both respondents above. According to Figure 3, an observation has found that the location and big building signage's appearance have hindered the building's architectural style and the continuity between building façade and blocks along the street. In addition, it has been found that there is a mural building signage using bright colors. According to scholars, the theme park's building signage approach should be avoided because it ravages the harmonies of the street environment visually (Syed Zainol Abidin Idid, 2008).



The above interpretation portrays that it is essential to design a building signage with appropriate location, size, and visual quality. This is parallel with another scholar's point of view that the design of building signage in a street that functions as public space should refer to the need for pedestrians' visibility. This is because the main users of the street are the pedestrians; thus, a size that appropriates with the scale of human is necessary. Therefore, a big building signage is not needed. Further, the signage that responds to human scale will enhance the style of building architecture. Thus, the types and location of building signage should consider the orientation of pedestrians along the block of the building. Some of the scholars have suggested several places of building signage as shown in Figure 5 (Gehl *et al.*, 2006; Syed Zainol Abidin Idid, 2008). Other scholars added that building signage with human scale design could reduce the competition between public and traffic signage (Bogert, 2011; City of Meridian, 2009).

**Figure-5.** The location and type of building signage with human scale character as advised by previous scholars (City of Meridian, 2009)



The characteristics of building signage such as type, location, size, and visual as suggested by previous scholars above could be seen in our traditional building signage (Gehl, 2010; Ja'afar, 2014; Jacobs, 2010; Syed Zainol Abidin Idid, 2008). As explained above, it shows that our traditional building signage generates uniqueness by enhancing the architectural style, not just individually but also by including the whole block on the street. As a result, the ambience will contribute to the visibility of building function, continuity, and unity of the streets. Thus, the appearance of traditional building signage design could become a model or reference in designing today's building signage in the context of street.

To sum up, the design of traditional building signage that uplifts a continuity of architecture and place attraction is crucial in the contribution towards traditional street character. This study has found that this aspect should consider designing a new or existing street via two concepts:

- Building signage design that is appropriate with the building that appears as individual and the whole blocks that form the street character. The building signage should consider appropriate aspects of location, size, scale, and visual. Thus, the characteristics should cover several parts, namely displaying the visibility of building use, reducing a visual negative impact, reducing the confusion, and reducing the competition with public and traffic signage that could create a continuity of building façade and harmonies of streetscape environment.
- Building signage for pedestrians that supports the human scale environment where the types' and location's appropriateness should be considered.

## 4. Conclusion

The study has identified the diversity of building signage that contributes to traditional character at several streets in the Melaka Historical City Centre. To characterize the attributes is not only depending on archival data and observation on the current situation, but also the users' experience and perception. This is because the users are the 'customers' of the street who use the place. Thus, their point of view could be a point for designing a place with local character because the place is designed for them.

To summarize, there is something that we can learn from our diversity of types, size, location, and visual of the heritage of building signage that we could apply to our new and existing streets today. Besides, we could avoid a 'giant' or standardized building signage that creates a dull environment.

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