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Colonial Architecture on Local History Through Glass Sculpture

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study the aspect of colonial building that relates to local history. The history of tin mining is to be acknowledged and understand as important to the local. Local history has been part of important aspect in a developing community. It signifies engagement of the link between the present and the past. It helps the community to learn about the events that has happened and in the Malaysian context, the history of the British colonial is the most relevant for it is visibility due to the architectural ruin that is on location. The method applied is Critical Self reflections and studio experimentation. Samples and images of location on site retrieved to study the visual aspect of the buildings and applied as part of the artwork. Artwork explorations are conducted to relate the material and techniques to the context of the study. The British occupation existed in Malaysia for more than two hundred years from 1795 until 1957. In Malaysia generally there are four typical colonial styles of architecture which are Moorish, Tudor, Neo Classic and Neo Gothic (A Ghafar Ahmad, 1997). The tin mining industry has brought merchant and workers to Central Perak such as Gopeng and Batu Gajah. According to (Syed Zainol Abidin Ibid,1995), during 1900 till 1940s, there are three architectural style that influenced the construction of commercial building and shop houses which are adaptation style, eclectic and Art Deco. However, after time the Colonial buildings have decayed and turn into ruins. The beauty and style of the Colonial architecture has inspired the researcher to study the building since it is visible in the surrounding central Perak and keeps an interesting story of the past. Working with glass, the researcher will fabricate the idea of colonial building and glass as a work of art.

Keywords: Colonial building, Local History, Tin Mining area, Glass, sculpture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Living in Perak Tengah, most of its old town area has the background as tin mine location in the past. During the era of the British colonial, the area was booming with trades of tin and has brought the Chinese to the Perak region. The area consists of Tronoh, Lahat, Papan, Pusing and Batu Gajah. In the past there was a railway track that connects this area to Ipoh until it was destroyed by the Japanese. My everyday experience driving passing through the historical colonial buildings inspired the question on local history of the area that were once glorified with industry of tin ore. The discovery of tin has changed the Perak Tengah into a gold mine. However, that was in the past for the towns are now mostly abandoned and turn into ghost town. This has interested researcher to create an artwork that was based on the designated area.

The objective of this study is to learn about presenting the colonial building as an object of art for glass sculpture. The study needed to manipulate images retrieved from colonial building and fabricate with glass objects. From the visit to the designated area data collection of images on colonial shop houses are then manipulated and re composed to suggest the blending of images on the past and the present. The study also explores glass as a material of art work. Glass blocks are then fired in the kiln to react with heat and produced a new form. The images of manipulated colonial buildings are then fabricates on to the glass.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 Local History: Colonial Building

The British occupation existed in Malaysia for more than two hundred years from 1795 until 1957. In Malaysia generally there are four typical colonial style of architecture which are Moorish, Tudor, Neo Classic and Neo Gothic (A Ghafar Ahmad, 1997). Moorish designs are inspired by the Moghul architecture in Northern India. This is portrayed on the building of Sultan Abdul Samad (1894) in Kuala Lumpur. Tudor style of colonial architecture could be seen in the design of Selangor Club Building in Selangor. Neo classic style could be seen in the design of Penang State of Council building (1897) and the Neo Gothic style are portrayed in the design of Holy Rosary Church (1903) in Kuala Lumpur.

The tin mining industry has brought merchants and workers to Central Perak such as Gopeng and Batu Gajah. According to (Syed Zainol Abidin Ibid, 1995), during 1900 till 1940s, there are three architectural style that influenced the erection of commercial building and shop houses which are adaptation style, eclectic and Art Deco. The British abduction has brought changes to the local townscape. The towns are more structured and well plan to benefit the local. The designs are unique and western oriented however there is also influence by the eastern design that contribute towards combining both designs to represent the value of the locals. With the arrival of the British, Moghul Islamic design and Handasah knowledge on method to erecting dome, also clay bricks and roofing tiles as construction material were brought through British architects (Wan Ramli wan Daud, 2000).

2.2. Artist Reference

The artwork was influenced and referred to Jeremy Lepisto, a contemporary glass and sculpture artist. In this *Water tower Series*, he created unique artwork featuring photographs carefully merged with hand-blown glass.

The amazing collection is produced through an elaborate process, where Lepisto took average, everyday urban scenes of factories, deserted streets, and construction sites, and applies the images to the glass. Through this inventive technique, the artist invites his viewers to look at the world with a fresh perspective.

Set on top of a steel frame, each hand-blown piece of glass looks like a small water tower. The project visually transforms a complicated water tank, often overlooked in daily life, into a fragile and creative piece of art. The artist says that he intends to highlight the ordinary components and simple workings of everyday life and situations to capture the complex in the common. He strived to create from these themes his own objects that have an intricacy of construction yet have simplicity of form. He wants the viewer to look into the surrounding with new understanding.



Figure 1: Jeremy Lepisto. ‘Water tower series, 2015.

This work is being referred to for its possessed aspect of presentation that relates the townscapes and local history. It also portrayed usage of architecture applied based on three aspects;

1. Reflecting the surrounding that is informatively for public interest.
2. Sharing awareness on historical site and knowledge which is non profitable.
3. Changes of townscape that were documented as reference to artwork.

3. STUDIO INVESTIGATION AND ANALYSIS

3.1. Methodology

This paper consists of research as studio practice discussed and analyzed based on three main aspects which are 1. Critical Self-Reflection; 2. Studio Experimentations; and 3. Critic sessions.

Self -Critical reflection according to Mezirow (1990) is a method of reflection that includes critic from assumption that was created in referring to the application of trust in making definition, analysis, execution, discussion and decision. The method of art making is based on the application of Feldman approach in Method of Art Criticism (Feldman, 1994).

Feldman (1994) has introduced a guideline applied in evaluating an art work based on four principles, which are:

1. Description,
2. Analysis,
3. Interpretation,
4. Judgement.

The second method focused on the context of research that includes series of studio experimentations that has been executed. Studio experimentation is a process of development to justify the research objective by doing exploration through the process of manipulations on the art work subject matter and material (Paul, 2018, Sjolholm, 2013). According to McNiff (2008), researches which are done directly or 'on hands' which include physical contact is the best way to understand certain aspect in creative practices.

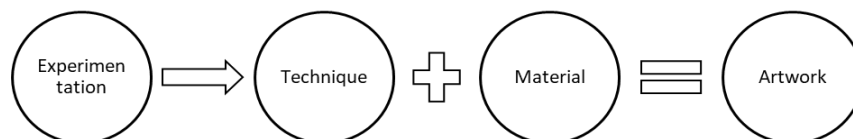


Figure 2: Studio Experimentation process

The third method consists of contextual review that includes critic session among peer practitioners and fellow artists or academicians in order to gain general opinion on new ideas that could benefit in the process of art making (Ward & Shortt, 2020). This session will contribute beneficial data and ideations to develop the artwork from time to time. The conceptual structure framework for the process of art work production is as shown below.

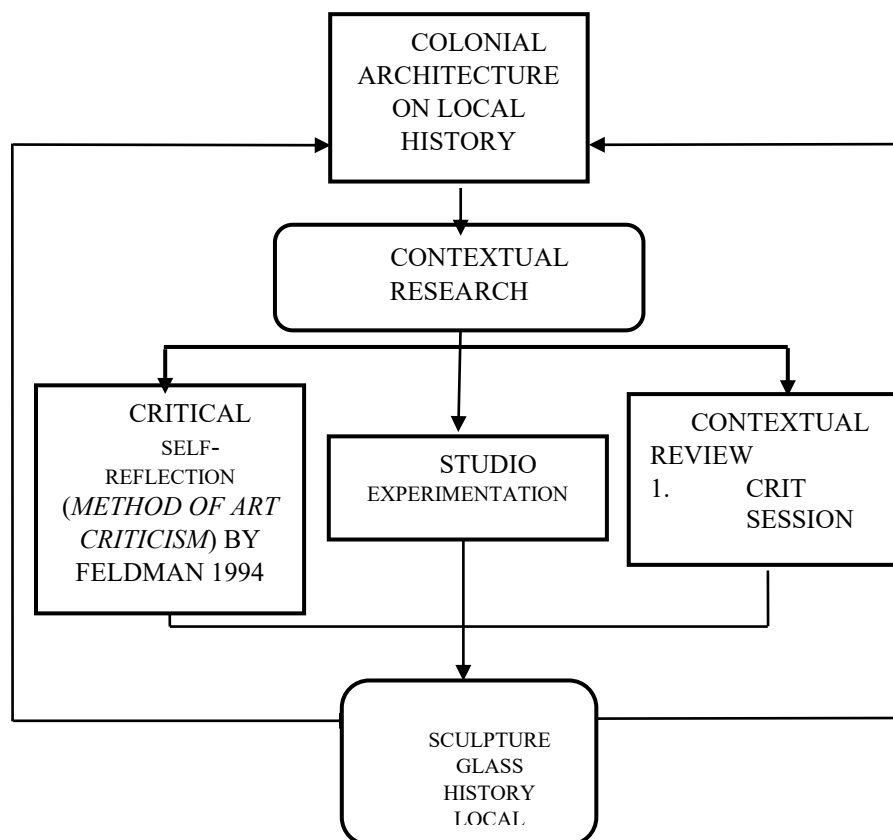


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework Structure

3.2 Field research – Site visit

According to Malayan history, Perak Tengah has been recognized as main location of tin ore in States of Malaya. The discovery of tin ore was once recorded as the story of Long Jaafar who discovered the mineral during the journey with his patron along the Larut Matang area. The elephants that they were riding were covered with layer of mud and shiny mineral that was soon discovered as tin. Other areas were also discovered as tin area since. Among the main areas that were tin mining zone include Papan, Lahat, Gopeng, Batu Gajah, Kampar and Tronoh. The main focus of this research is to retrieve visual data of designated location on colonial building that were link to the discovery of tin or tin mining town.

The images of colonial building of designated tin mining area will be used as images to be portrayed on glass sculptures. These images are manipulated to restore the originality of the buildings and also to suggest the changes that it has been through after ages of negligence.

During my visit to this area the building were neglected and display effects of decay on the structure and surface of the building. Only a few buildings are renovated and refurbished however some buildings are abandon and left to decay. Photographs are taken and selected collectively as subject matter for wall sculpture production.



Figure 5: Samples of images on colonial shop houses in Tronoh and Papan.

3.3. Visual Research - Data Collection of Colonial architecture in Perak Tengah

The main focus is to retrieve visual data of designated location on colonial building. Living in the central of Perak I have to travel twenty kilometers daily, to my workplace in UiTM Seri Iskandar, passing through old towns such as Batu Gajah, Lahat, papan and Tronoh. These old town were once an important location of tin mining in the past. In fact, there were traces of rail track that were built which connecting this town to Ipoh that was the capital of Tin Mining in Perak, before it was demolished by the Japanese during its occupation in Malaya. The researcher has documented images of old colonial building and shop houses to portray local history and manipulated the images. These images are significant to portray the occupation of the British in Malaya since early 1900.

For data collection, researcher has traveled towards this location on my folding bike pursuing the historical townscape of central Perak. Among the site that interest me including the Batu Gajah Town Council building, the shop houses in Lahat, the Istana papan, resident of Malay tin tycoon in Papan, Shophouses in Tronoh.

Visual research includes observation and social interaction during visit. From the findings we learn that colonial buildings are abandoned for the owner had passed away and inheritors have moved to new town. The building are rented to local and are still in use as premises of business and commercial but lack of customer or only nearby customer for the attraction of nearby area such as Seri Iskandar and Station 18 have over shadow the shop houses that were once were the main attraction during the tin mining era.



Figure 6: images of shop houses that are located in Pusing and Papan.

3.4. Art work Exploration

The researcher has worked with different material and glass always excites him due to its transparency and purity. It is also a material that is challenging to work with since it reacts to heat and gravity. For this work, researcher has used factory produced glass block that will portray the industry or modern-day technology that were rigid and geometrical. These glasses were created using mixture of ingots that were fired and then blown into molded shape form, produced in mass figuration. These glasses are used as a part of architectural structure for natural lighting purposes such as indoor area or as a divider.

The idea is to coordinate the images of colonial building in manipulated images with blocks of glass surfaces. The images of arch or an entrance or a door seems appropriate to portray the transition that it has become from a flamboyant architecture during its colonial era to become decayed and abandon structure of the past. The entrance also signifies the door to the past or knowledge of the past that is by looking beyond this entrance we will learn the important of local history towards the future generation. The door is the pathway to learn about the glorious past that this old town was related to during the past. We learn how the important of tin ore for the world industry was taken by the invention of metal and stainless steel.

The images of manipulated buildings are then place on the glass by using decal technique. Glass blocks are then arranged in structure to form suggested as an erected monument that suggest the awareness of appreciating local history and knowledge of the past. These images are then manipulated and compose to align with the glass block that was used as the body of the artwork.

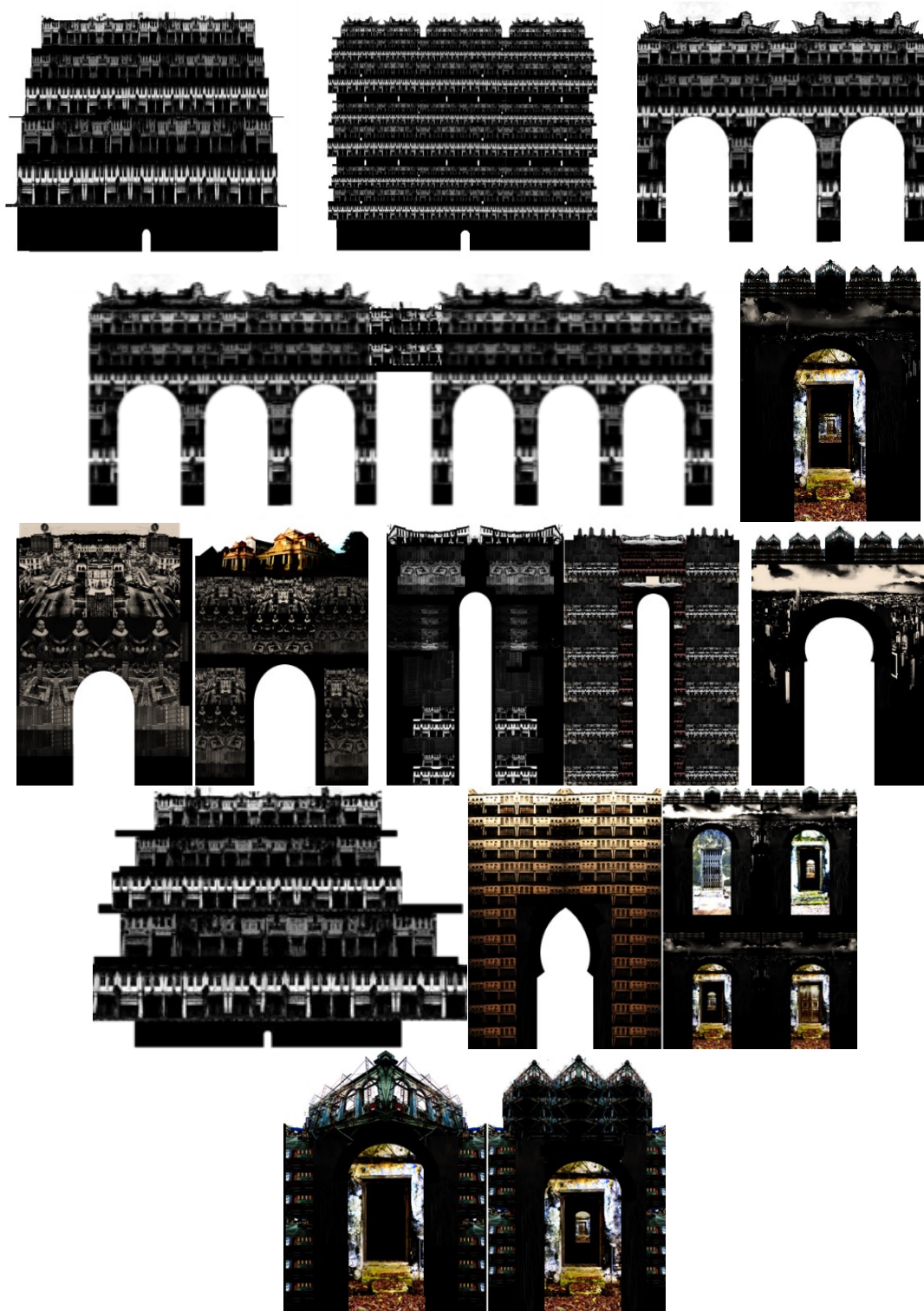


Figure 9: Diagram of the process on manipulating and composition images for glass sculpture production.

Processes are further developed by duplicating images of colonial shop houses retrieved from central Perak and combining them into mirrored images. This is to suggest the idea of looking back into the past and remembering history. The images are multiplied and composed together in a symmetrical order. This is to portray as suggested that during the colonial period township are well plan and structured to benefit the locals. The images of rectangle oval shape suggest an entrance or a doorway or perhaps a mouse door at the very bottom part of the images to suggest the doorway to knowledge of

the past or exploration of happenings in history during the tin mining era. The tonal and value of black and white are applied to portray the nostalgic and memorable aspect of the colonial era.



Figure 10: Mahizan Hijaz Mohammad. 'Tunjuk langit', 2020. Kiln formed glass block, 120cm x 120cm X 80cm.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the colonial building signifies the glorious past of central Perak. From the findings we learn that central Perak that was once an important landmark in tin mining area are now abandoned and washing away through history. The images of abandoned shop houses signify the glorious past decayed persist towards the test of time. Local history as reflection of the glorious venue of past, is presented as glass sculpture. This process consists of visual compositions of images retrieved from the historical site and manipulated and fabricated on to glass blocks. The glass block are arranged to compliment the idea of colonial building and composed in symmetrical balance to portray structured and well planned local town in the olden days.

Even tough, the area was and still rich with ore and mineral however, the changes of world industry into metal and stainless steel have condemned the area into abandoned old town.

Glass as a material to convey meaning of fragility as a material also contributed towards similar aspect in life. Align with the findings retrieved from the making process we learn that the tin town are short lived and vanished through the test of time. The application on shapes of entrance or a doorway suggested the pathway to the truth of the past. Like everything in life none is everlasting.

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