CHINESE OPERA CULTURAL CENTER AS A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSING
THE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN CHINATOWN, KUALA LUMPUR

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To my dearest family
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ABSTRACT

The encroachment of foreign workers and less youth involvement in cultural activities has eventually led to the diminishing of the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown, KL. Chinese opera which used to be a brimming cultural activity is currently facing the extinction due to its declining of community participation. Chinese opera is the oldest dramatic art forms with a heady mix of acrobatics, martial arts, dance, music, literature and poetic arias. It is an integrated art, the art of time and space that reflects the characteristics and culture of Chinese community. Hence, the effort should be made to preserve and promote this cultural activity by expressing its uniqueness and integrated spaces and principle to the next generation. On the other hand, as the site is situated at the urban area, it is important to consider the urban respond when deriving the design principle. According to Yeang (2000), to achieve a sustainable city, there are a few key aspects to be integrated in designing a town and one of it is Activities used-Mix uses and forms. Different forms and functions in activities are needed to slow down movement of people to allow interaction to take place. This research is to investigate the uniqueness of Chinese opera in terms of spaces, architecture and culture and search for potential mechanism through architectural solution to express its identity in urban context of Chinatown, KL. After extensive literature review and case studies, it could be concluded that three design strategies: Balance & Harmonize, Attuned to nature and Building up emotions could be used to translate the significant essence of Chinese opera incorporates with Chinese architecture into the cultural center design so that the Chinese cultural activities could be preserved and at the same time enhance the urban community interaction.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chinatown, Kuala Lumpur is best known for its tangible culture ‘the built environment’ and the intangible culture ‘the people and culture’. Besides the beautiful shop-houses, the uniqueness of Chinatown includes the people and its culture which are worth preserving. Unfortunately, the sense of place in Chinatown has been severely threatened by the foreign workers encroachments and the improper planned development. According to Kuala Lumpur Lumpur City Hall, (eTN, 2008) Chinatown is undergoing an "identity crisis" which means the architectural sense, cultural identity and history are disappearing in Chinatown that in due course disappointing the tourists. Furthermore, the improper development has caused the back lanes and alleys to be neglected, unfavourable street and five foot walkway design and the weakening of the legibility of the town and public realm.

Rapoport (1990) suggested that the types and intensity of activities are the factors that influence the character of an area or place. The suggestion is indirectly supports the government intention in making the Chinatown as a tourist attraction spot by improving the design of the public realm and refining the existing Chinese
culture identity. Hence, the key aspects in Urban Design Compendium 1 (D.Y Llewelyn, 2000) could be used and applied for Chinatown design in order to rejuvenate its sense of place (Refer to appendix A).

One of the key aspects that are important to Chinatown KL in an urban design is the Activities used-Mixed uses and Forms in public realm guiding principle. In order to allow interaction to take place, people human could be slowed down by introducing various kind and function of activities. Besides, certain spaces such as community or cultural centres are needed for community to express art, music and history to regenerate the cultural identity and historic quarter of a place for example the Chinatown, KL. According to Rappaport (1997), activities can be analysed into four components which are the activity proper, the specific way of doing it, additional, adjacent or associated activities which become part of an activity system and the symbolic aspect of the activity.

In this concern, Chinese Opera is selected as a medium to regenerate the Chinese cultural activities in Chinatown, KL rather than other cultural arts due to its rich identities which revolve about Chinese culture, tradition story, history and philosophies as well as the music and lively dance. In addition, Chinese Opera cultural activities is used to be a prevailing activity in Chinatown KL due to its brimming identity which make it pioneers the role in promoting Chinese culture and improving the public realm in Chinatown. With this approach, people or visitors are exposed to experience the rich cultural activities in Chinatown apart from shopping and eateries, hence the thesis background.
1.2 Problem Statement

The encroachment of the foreign workers and less youth involvement in cultural activities has eventually led to the diminishing of the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown KL. Chinese opera which used to be a brimming cultural activity is currently facing the extinction due to its declining of community participation. At the same time, as a result of rapid urbanisation and globalisation, the Chinese architectural and cultural identity is experiencing a discontinuity in Chinatown. The current buildings do not portray a strong Chinese identity either in architectural or cultural way, which is a gap that should be improved upon.

Therefore, it is essential to regenerate the Chinese opera cultural activity in Chinatown to create a vibrant atmosphere and promotes Chinese culture, events and activities. The methodology in interpreting and expressing the essence of Chinese Opera culture, the principle of Chinese architecture, space and culture are seen as a method in regenerating an appropriate Chinese identity to the Chinese Opera Cultural Centre. The research looks into getting the information and understanding the essence of Chinese opera and Chinese elements with the application of appropriate architecture in order to reflect the Chinese culture and identity in Chinatown, KL.

1.3 Research Aim

The aim of the research is to investigate the uniqueness of Chinese opera in terms of spaces, architecture and culture and search for potential mechanism through architectural solution to regenerate its identity in Chinatown, KL. The information gathered will be beneficial in the design of Chinese opera cultural centre in design thesis studio. Design methodology and interpretation are used to express the quintessence and uniqueness of Chinese Opera within the urban context, in an
attempt of regenerate the historic quarter of cultural identity in Chinatown for social interaction and urban variety.

1.4 Research Questions

Looking at the needs of enhancing the historic quarter of Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown KL, the questions are as follow:

1. What are the uniqueness and characteristics of Chinese opera that helps in forming the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown, KL?
2. What are the integrated spaces and principles associated with Chinese opera and its architectural identity?
3. How to express the cultural identity of Chinese opera through architectural articulation and design interpretation in urban context?

1.5 Research Objectives

The three main objectives that are targeted to be accomplished are as follow:-

1. To analyse the uniqueness and characteristics of Chinese opera that can help in forming the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown, KL.
2. To identify the integrated spaces and principles associated with Chinese opera and Chinese architectural identity.
3. To discover a possible architectural articulation and design interpretation in expressing the cultural identity of Chinese Opera responding to the urban context of Chinatown, KL.
1.6 **Scope of Thesis**

There are various types of Chinese cultural activities that were brought into Chinatown from China thousand years ago. First of all, the research will study generally on the Chinese cultural activities and then narrowed down into Chinese Opera. Chinese opera can be the vehicle for such cultural revival and preservation in the historic quarter of Chinatown, KL. This paper will basically elaborate on the Chinese opera origin, history, identities, characteristics, activities, architectural spaces for performing, audiences, stage, lighting & acoustic and etc. Besides, elements of Chinese opera and Chinese architectural identity are expressed as the main guideline in designing the building. The experiment and study of this research was focused on Chinatown, Kuala Lumpur.

1.7 **Significance of Study**

The significance of study was to identify the quintessence and spirit of Chinese Opera cultural identity through the methodology of architectural articulation. A methodology of translating the essence and elements of the Chinese Opera culture will be produced from the research. The outcome of the research will be implemented in the Design thesis as collaboration with Design Dissertation.

1.8 **Research Methodology**

Primarily, the methodology uses a qualitative theoretical framework and methods based in the field of grounded theory research. The overall basic research
framework is divided into five different stages: Defining the research issues, literature review, data collection, data analysis and discussion and lastly the conclusion. Discussion of the adopted methodology and the breakdown of the research will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Mixed mode method is used in data collection which is qualitative and quantitative approach. Primary data will be collected through quantitative approach mainly includes unstructured interview, site analysis and qualitative approach, the observation. Meanwhile, in order to understand more about Chinese opera and its architectural requirement as well as Chinese architecture, literature review is used as one of its primary method. Data collected through qualitative method for example literature review, journal articles, reading materials or books, internet-based articles and thesis done by alumni will be used as a secondary data to support the primary data. The design related case studies were used as well. Besides, the data collected from the field visit is further synthesised and analysed. Hence, through the analysing and synthesising of the data, the design principles and development of Chinese opera cultural centre are defined.

1.9 Expected Findings

The design strategies, building programs and architectural spaces based on the understanding of the essence and elements of Chinese opera will be defined by the author towards the end of the research. The Chinese cultural identity could be formed architecturally by using a methodology or formula generated that can be implemented on current design thesis project. Certain Chinese architecture spirit and elements can also be applied in the design to form Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown KL together with the elements derived from Chinese opera.
The conducted research studies are useful to derive design strategies and an architectural language which is contemporary yet responsive to tradition so as to express the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown, KL. Chinese opera was chosen as the key element for this research to examine the concluded design strategies. The author will be capable of outline the possible design strategies in designing the Chinese opera centre that can become the Chinese cultural identity to the urban stage. From this research, the author is capable of further applying the design approaches and principles extracted into the design thesis project.

1.10 Structure of Dissertation

Generally, the dissertation is divided into five main chapters. Chapter 1 is basically deliberate on the overview studies including the background issues, research aim and questions, research objectives, research methodology and lastly the expected findings.

Chapter 2 is basically a compilation of literature reviews on related studies and research. Overall, it is a background study on the basic understanding for the research background related subject matters. The history of Chinese opera, characteristics and essence of Chinese opera, traditional Chinese theatres and contemporary theatre design and lastly Chinese architecture and identity will be underlined in this chapter. In addition, the elements and essence of Chinese opera and Chinese architecture will be summarised and applicable in Design Thesis.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used to conduct this study. Research paradigm and procedure and the summary of overall research framework are being discussed in this chapter.
Chapter 4 is finding and discussion summarising the collected case studies. The case studies are done through visiting to Chinese opera centres in Singapore so as to appreciate the architectural spaces and identity expressed. The chapter will also talk about the discussion on the building design transformation in term of form, façade, space planning, details and etc.

Last but not least, chapter 5 is basically discussing the conclusion based on the outcome of the finding and discussion in chapter 4. It is the summarization of the research and significant of this study. Besides, the chapter will also talk about the limitation and the possible further research regarding the subject matter.

1.11 Summary

The information generated from this study is essentially beneficial in the design of Chinese opera cultural centre for Design Thesis. Relevant approaches and strategies are explored through the study to express the cultural identity of Chinese opera through architecture. The architectural solution would contribute to revitalise the faded history and culture of Chinese opera in an attempt of regenerate the Chinese cultural identity in Chinatown, KL.
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