

Islamic-Themed Graffiti: Potentials of Public Art with Islamic Attributes

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Abstract: The explorations of public art in cities and communities have received a growing attention from artists, designers and the public. Graffiti is a type of public art that is often associated with a medium of creative expression in the public space. Today, graffiti with religious, cultural, political and environmental themes are visible on the walls and other built structures. This study explores the potentials of Islamic-themed graffiti as a medium to convey positive messages that are executed through the incorporation of Islamic art attributes. The aim of this paper is to examine the perceptions of the public towards two Islamic-themed graffiti artworks that were installed in the campus public space. The methods comprise of creating the artwork and conducting a survey questionnaire among 200 respondents that consist of Muslims and non-Muslims. The analysis revealed three key findings. First, the presence of Islamic elements and the message conveyed influenced the respondents' perceptions of public art with Islamic attributes. Second, both graffiti artworks were regarded to make the public space lively. Third, Islamic-themed graffiti has potentials to act as a medium to spread positive messages. The study concludes that Islamic-themed graffiti can further be explored as a form contemporary Islamic public art.

Key words: Islamic art • Graffiti • Public art • Urban design

INTRODUCTION

The beneficial role of public art in the outdoor space has been recognised in recent studies as contributing to the liveliness of public spaces and engaging people's sociability [1, 2]. While numerous studies have been conducted on the various forms of public art and Islamic art, however, research on the placement of Islamic art in the outdoor spaces as public art is still in its infancy stage. The aim of this paper is to report and discuss the study that was done on two Islamic-themed graffiti artworks and how people perceived them as a form of public art with Islamic attributes.

Art in Public Space: Art in public space often complements the aesthetic qualities of buildings and enhance the image of a place. Nimmo [3], asserted that the placement of artistic work in public space facilitates the involvement of artists with the public and the integration

of artwork with architectural and civic programs. Minty [4] acknowledged other roles of art in public spaces as a creative and indirect medium to engage the public with political and cultural dialogues. Contemporary genres of artwork were found to focus more on critical social issues where art is used to evoke or provoke certain thoughts or opinions. As a form of creative expression, art in public spaces not only function to enhance the experience of users, but may also function as a landmark, to symbolize certain image of place, to represent an individual or collective representation of an idea, or simply as part of the beautification exercise of public space [1, 5].

Islamic Art in the Outdoor Space: The applications of detailed and rich artwork in the daily objects and architecture of the Muslims have dated back since the early Islamic civilizations. The adornment of Islamic art in the outdoors was primarily manifested through the creation of gardens and elements that have been

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interpreted based on the descriptions of heaven in the Quran [6, 7]. According to Nasr [8], whatever relationship exists between Islamic art and the Islamic revelation, it cannot be simply on the plane of political changes brought about by Islam. The relation is brought within the religion itself. Without the sources of Al Quran and the Hadith (the Prophet's sayings and actions to guide us), there would not be any Islamic Arts. The aesthetic expressions of the signs of *Allah's* Beauty are well translated and manifested in the Islamic Arts decorations, whereby its main function is to promote and enhance this feeling of remembering Allah [9]. Beauty is considered as the phenomenon of the experience of pleasure, through the perception of balance and proportion of stimulus. It involves the cognition of a balanced form and structure that elicits attraction and appeal towards a person, animal, inanimate object, scene, music and idea.

The representation of intricate Arabic calligraphy, arabesque and geometric patterns can be commonly found on the surface of minarets, walls, floors, facades and garden elements. The motifs of these crafts principally revolved around the idea of glorifying the Oneness of God (*Tawhid*) and to portray the essence of beauty (*Al-Jamal*) through the balance and harmony projected through the design and form of the motifs [10]. In the *Cultural Atlas of Islam*, Al-Faruqi [11] delineated six characteristics of Islamic art, which are abstraction, modular structure, successive combinations, repetition, dynamism and intricacy. These qualities can be commonly found in the traditional forms of Islamic arts, such as those found in the *masjids* and palaces in Islamic regions.

The Emergence of Islamic-themed Graffiti: In the recent years, more contemporary forms of Islamic arts have been applied to other types of artwork, such as sculptures and murals, particularly in the outdoor public spaces. eL Seed, a French-Tunisian street artist, combines Arabic calligraphy with the street graffiti through the use of vibrant colours, as a way of 'bringing art to everyone' [12]. In some of his projects, eL Seed chose words from the Quran to deliver a message of tolerance and peace. Although the expression of the Islamic art through graffiti is not directly similar to the characteristics of traditional forms of Islamic art, eL Seed's artwork still possesses the qualities of balance, harmony and clear symbolism of Islamic art attributes. Another graffiti artist who expresses street graffiti through the infusion of Islamic scripts and Islamic messages is Muhammad Ali, who is also known as Aerosol Arabic. Ali's works have appeared in the UK,

Sweden, New York and Australia. Long [13] wrote that, 'Ali's work suggests how to speak to issues arising while contributing to a sense of place, aestheticizing, enhancing while commenting on it.' The growth of Islamic-themed graffiti in contemporary cities show that graffiti has grown to be accepted as a form of public art, while at the same time, as a medium to express messages of faith and humanity. According to McAuliffe [14], street art, graffiti and other forms of public art are 'drivers of urban change and regeneration.' The rise of street art that has been 'formalized' and integrated with placemaking processes allow the city to engage with the public in a more creative way and opening up broader possibilities of how graffiti can be expressed and accepted.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The graffiti project was held on the campus of International Islamic University Malaysia as a testing ground, to ensure that the process of planning, executing and getting responses on the artwork could be completed within the stipulated time. There are two main methods employed in this study, which were creating the artwork and conducting a survey among the public on the artwork.

Method 1: The first method involved creating two Islamic-themed graffiti artworks, based on the Islamic public art attributes extracted from the literature review. The creation of the artworks was a participatory process that involved the research team, a graffiti artist and a group of student volunteers. The graffiti artist and the students were given a design brief that outlined the attributes of Islamic public art that they could refer as a guideline (Table 1). The theme given was "Journey to Fulfill My Promise" and "Save Gaza." Nevertheless, they were free to interpret and execute the forms of the artwork based on their creativity.

Method 2: The second method is conducting a survey questionnaire on 200 respondents, which included Muslims and non-Muslims. The questionnaire measured the respondents' perceptions on both of the graffiti artworks as a form of Islamic public art (Table 2).

Graffiti Artwork 1 (GA1): The artwork is titled "Khalifatul Ardh: Journal to Fulfill My Promise" (Fig. 1).

Graffiti Artwork 2: The artwork is titled "Save Gaza" (Fig. 2).

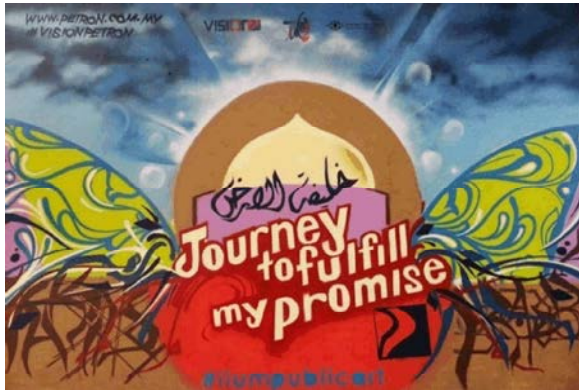


Fig. 1: Graffiti Artwork 1



Fig. 2: Graffiti Artwork 2

Table 1: Islamic public art attributes

Concept	Islamic artwork approach
Lettering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using Arabic calligraphy • Solid lettering structures • The script as the main focus of the artwork
Message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To address the remembrance of God, gratitude, calmness, a sense of belonging • To evoke one's expression
Colour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earth / natural tones • Bright • Harmony • Not too monotonous nor chaotic
Artwork criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-figurative (no human figure unless in stylized form) • Abstract but simple • Pleasing to the eye
Symbolism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspired by nature (plants, trees, floral motifs)
Patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geometrical shapes • Floral motifs • Calligraphy
Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proportionate • The main focus should be centralized • Effective use of forms or abstract techniques
Unity and variety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance of elements • Repetition • Visual rhythm and harmony
Craftsmanship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good quality of artwork • Originality • Simplicity

Table 2: Survey components

Section	Components
Respondent's profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender, age, religion, nationality, occupation
Perceptions of public art and graffiti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal opinion on what is 'public art' • Familiarity with 'graffiti' • Graffiti as public art
Perceptions of the graffiti artwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of 'Islamic' elements • The message that the artwork portrays • The graffiti as 'Islamic public art' • Perceptions of the graffiti's effects to the users and the public space
Suggestions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution of ideas for future artwork

RESULTS

Profile of Respondents (GA2): The survey was participated by 28.5% male and 71.5% female respondents. The 200 respondents comprised of 78% Muslims and 22% non-Muslims. 95.4% of the respondents are Malaysian, while 5.5% came from other countries, such as Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Uganda. The majority of the respondents were undergraduate students (90.5%), aged between 18 to 25.

Perceptions of Public Art and Graffiti: This section required the respondents to provide their own answers to reflect their perceptions of public art and graffiti. Most of the respondents viewed public art as artwork that is placed in a public area. They felt that public art delivers a certain message to the public and is often executed using colours, forms, textures and patterns. Some respondents expressed that public art could make a lively space for the public to enjoy. Several examples of public art according to the respondents are sculpture, graffiti, wall mural, architecture, buskers playing music and street art. When asked about whether they know what a graffiti is, 81% responded 'Yes'. 19% of the respondents were not familiar with graffiti and there were those that were unsure of this form of artwork. Approximately half of the respondents (55%) agreed that graffiti is a form of public art. About one-third of the respondents (35.5%) answered that for a graffiti to be considered as a public art, it would depend on the artwork.

Perceptions of the Graffiti Artwork

Islamic Elements: This section compares the Islamic elements of the artwork as perceived by the Muslim and non-Muslims respondents (Table 3). The results were extracted from the descriptions that were provided by the respondents.

Table 3: Islamic elements of the graffiti artwork

Respondents	Graffiti Artwork 1	Graffiti Artwork 2
Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arabic calligraphy • The message • The dome • Patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The words “Save Gaza” • The white bird symbolizing peace • Unsure of the Islamic elements
Non-Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arabic calligraphy • Dome • Patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The words “Save Gaza” • The white bird • Unsure of the Islamic elements

Table 4: Message of the graffiti artwork

Respondents	Graffiti Artwork 1	Graffiti Artwork 2
Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The journey of self towards God • Our role as a <i>khalifah</i> (vicegerent) • Duty as servants of Allah • Freedom and responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom for Gaza • Humanity • Concern for other Muslims in need • Calmness
Non-Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The journey fulfill one’s promise • Muslims to fulfill their promise to God • Journey of the artist to fulfill his/her promise • Journey to Makkah 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom for Gaza • Hope for the future • To save the Palestinians • Peace

Based on the results, there are similarities on how the Islamic elements in both graffiti artworks are perceived by Muslim and non-Muslim respondents. GA1 had clear symbolism of Islamic elements, such as the Arabic calligraphy, the dome of the *masjid* and some of the patterns. However, for GA2, most respondents could not identify the Islamic element, other than the words “Save Gaza” and the white dove that are universally regarded as a symbol of peace. The difference between these two artworks are primarily in terms of the incorporation of Islamic public art attributes as discussed earlier, whereby, the artwork that has some of these attributes were easily recognized to have Islamic elements.

The Message of the Artwork: Similar to the previous section, this section compares the message portrayed from the artwork as perceived by the Muslim and non-Muslims respondents (Table 4).

The results revealed that the presence of legible texts had allowed the respondents to directly interpret the message of both artworks, supported by the presence of the elements. Interestingly, the non-Muslims respondents perceived the messages of both artworks in a similar manner as the Muslims. This finding shows that a clear message in the artwork allows it to be understood by people, regardless of their religion or race.

Graffiti Artwork 1

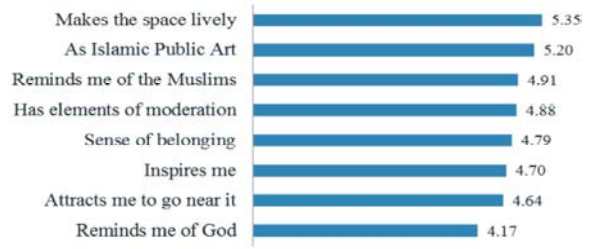


Fig. 3: Perceptions of Graffiti Artwork 1 (GA1)

Graffiti Artwork 2

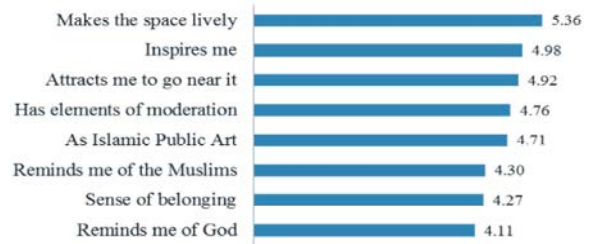


Fig. 4: Perceptions of Graffiti Artwork 2 (GA2)

The Graffiti Artworks as Islamic Public Art: The perceptions of the respondents towards both graffiti artworks were measured based on eight aspects (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Their responses were measured based a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 is ‘Strongly Disagree’ and 7 is ‘Strongly Agree’. Aspects with mean scores of 5 and more are considered to be in agreement with the statements given. Meanwhile, aspects that are between 4 and 5 are considered to be inclined towards agreement.

Based on the results, both graffiti artworks were almost equally considered to ‘make the space lively’, with mean scores of 5.35 for GA1 and 5.36 for GA2. However, GA1 was more regarded ‘as Islamic Public Art’ (mean=5.20), compared to GA2 (mean=4.71). This can be explained based on the results discussed earlier on the Islamic elements and message of the artwork, whereby GA1 shows a more direct representation of Islamic elements, while GA2 has universal elements.

Compared to GA1, GA2 was found to be more inspiring (mean=4.98) and able to attract people to go near it (mean=4.92). Opposingly, GA1 reminded the respondents of the Muslims or being Muslims (mean=4.91) and has more sense of belonging (mean=4.79), compared to GA2. The different perceptions can be attributed to the different messages of the artwork, as presented in Table 4. However, all of the respondents had an almost neutral perception of the aspects of ‘reminds me of God’ for both of the artwork (GA1, mean=4.17; GA2, mean=4.11).

Table 5: Suggestions for future Islamic graffiti artwork

Respondents	Suggestions of ideas
Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islam in other countries • Humanity and unity • Peace, love and freedom • Motivation, education, inspiring quotes • Awareness about current issues • Islamic values
Non-Muslims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good deeds and moral value • Shared values among different religions • Environment and nature • Anything relevant to culture and current society • Life and peace

Respondents' Suggestions: This section records some of the suggestions by the respondents on ideas for the Islamic graffiti artwork in the future (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

Islam promotes the idea of modesty, humbleness and simplicity. The meaning of beauty always relates to Allah and His creations. Therefore, any form of Islamic art should align with the teachings of Islam, whereby taking care of our environment for the benefit of mankind and spreading good deeds are always a priority. It is part of our obligation as a *khalifah* or vicegerent in this world. The wellbeing of our community has been always the priority through taking care and beautifying our natural and built environment. It is an act of *ibadah* or worshipping of Allah.

This study has identified three key findings. First, the presence of Islamic elements and the message conveyed influenced people's perceptions of public art with Islamic attributes. The recognizability of certain elements that are commonly and universally associated with Islam enabled most of the public to understand the artwork. Some forms of public art emphasize more on the artist's expressions and are not necessarily obligated to make the public understand the meaning behind the artwork. However, based on the attributes of Islamic art, Islamic public art should be about what the artwork contribute to the public, rather than about glorifying the artist. For instance, many of the intricate carvings that are found inside mosques during the early Islamic civilizations are widely accepted as a beautiful work of art. Yet, the artists or craftsmen are rarely known.

Second, the graffiti as a work of art contributes in making the public space lively. This finding is congruent with other studies on how public art and street art help to enliven the city or community spaces. The graphic style of graffiti has been often bold and colourful, which makes

it visually attractive when set against the wall. Graffiti that evokes a sense of vitality undoubtedly has potentials to revitalize underutilized or deteriorating spaces by giving them a new breath of colour. This approach has been widely adopted in the back lane revitalization projects in Malaysia and other parts of the world.

Third, graffiti has potentials to spread positive messages to the society. As graffiti is usually done on a large scale, it acts similar to an advertising billboard where its design can be seen from afar. Graffiti can become a medium to spread awareness and to educate the public about something through an informal and creative manner, particularly for the youth. Although Islamic-themed graffiti may be a contemporary style of Islamic art in public spaces, nonetheless, spreading good is in line with Islamic teachings.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined and discussed the potentials of Islamic-themed graffiti as a contemporary form of Islamic public art. The attributes of Islamic public art relate closely with the essence of Islamic art, which is in line with the values emphasized in Islam. The perceptions of people towards public art are subjective. Still, it is evident that the message of the artwork should be clear through the composition of the graphic elements, if the artwork is meant to make a contribution to the public. This study concludes that Islamic-themed graffiti can further be explored as a form of contemporary Islamic public art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was funded by the MyRA Incentive Research Grant Scheme from the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia. The authors would like to thank the research assistants, Shaibatul 'Islamiah Che Man and Syamim Azhari, for their assistance.

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