

Empowering Architectural Narrative Through Urban Sketching: A Symbolic Interaction Framework for Enhancing Public Belonging in the Built Environment of Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract

Urban environments in Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, are witnessing a growing detachment between citizens and architectural identity. Urban sketching presents a bottom-up method of engagement that may restore public connection with the built environment. This study aims to develop a symbolic interaction framework that integrates urban sketching, architectural narrative, and critical thinking to enhance a sense of belonging in urban spaces. Drawing from sociology, psychology, and anthropology, a qualitative case study was conducted using a phenomenographic lens. Data were collected from 12 participants in KL Sketch Nation's sketchwalks, through semi-structured interviews, sketch documentation, and field observation. Thematic coding was applied to generate outcome spaces representing symbolic, personal, and interactive dimensions of sketching experiences. Findings reveal that urban sketching facilitates three experiential dimensions: (1) symbolic encounters with architectural elements, (2) personal disposition through critical thinking, and (3) participatory interactive pattern fostering community connection. These informed a five-phase action framework for architectural narrative communication. Urban sketching operates as both a symbolic and cognitive tool that empowers individuals to construct meaning and foster urban belonging. The developed framework contributes to participatory urbanism and aligns with the SDG 11 goals for inclusive and resilient cities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As Southeast Asian cities rapidly urbanise, urban areas in Malaysia, particularly Kuala Lumpur, face a growing detachment between citizens and their architectural environment, resulting in diminished community engagement and weakened cultural identity (Qamaruz Zaman, 2021). The residents are increasingly alienated from the architectural narratives that shape their built environment. This detachment is particularly evident in Kuala Lumpur, where multicultural identities intersect with disjointed urban development and fragmented heritage narratives (Mior, 2025). Despite top-down efforts in urban planning and SDG-aligned initiatives, the lack of a sense of belonging persists. This research investigates how bottom-up tools like urban sketching can activate architectural narratives to bridge this gap. In response, this study presents urban sketching not merely as an artistic endeavour, but as a cognitive and participatory process capable of revitalising symbolic engagement with the city. The study draws upon Symbolic Interaction Theory and integrates psychological dispositions such as critical thinking to examine how citizens interpret, interact with, and contribute meaning to their urban spaces.

1.1 Problem Statement

Urban citizens in Malaysian cities, particularly Kuala Lumpur, increasingly experience a detachment from their architectural surroundings, which contributes to a diminishing sense of identity, heritage consciousness, and place attachment (Thirak et al., 2024). While governmental initiatives and sustainable development goals (SDGs) aim to foster urban inclusiveness, such top-down strategies often fail to activate personal and communal engagement with the built environment (Mohd Yusof et al., 2022). International case studies, such as in Rabat, have demonstrated that participatory urbanism fosters sustainable and culturally embedded city development (Najoua & Messaoudi, 2023). This lack of connection is exacerbated by the absence of participatory platforms that allow individuals to reflect upon, interpret, and contribute meaning to their urban spaces. Despite urban sketching being widely practised by enthusiasts and artists, its potential as a symbolic and cognitive tool for fostering architectural narrative and public belonging has not been thoroughly studied, particularly through the lenses of psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

1.2 Research Gap

Existing architectural and urban studies tend to overlook the bottom-up, experiential dimensions of public engagement with the built environment. While prior research in sociology, anthropology, and environmental psychology acknowledges the importance of narrative and perception, there remains a lack of integrative models that connect symbolic interaction theory, critical thinking, and participatory visual practices such as urban sketching. Specifically, the intersection of these domains in the context of Malaysian urban culture is underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding how sketchers develop meaning, identity, and belonging through their interaction with everyday urban elements. While participatory platforms such as urban sketching are widely practised informally, their role as a structured communication tool for urban narrative and identity-building remains under-theorised, especially within multicultural Southeast Asian cities like Kuala Lumpur.

1.3 Aim & Objectives

To develop a symbolic interaction framework that integrates urban sketching, architectural narrative communication, and critical thinking disposition to enhance public belonging and appreciation of the built environment in Kuala Lumpur.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do urban sketchers interpret architectural elements within the built environment of Kuala Lumpur through participatory sketching activities?
- In what ways does critical thinking disposition influence the reflective engagement of participants during sketchwalks?
- How can Symbolic Interaction Theory inform a conceptual framework for enhancing public belonging through architectural narrative communication?
- What symbolic meanings are co-constructed by participants during urban sketching, and how do these meanings contribute to a sense of urban identity?

1.5 Scope and Limitations

This study is limited to urban sketching activities conducted by KL Sketch Nation within selected locations in Kuala Lumpur. It focuses on the interpretive experiences of 12 participants who were purposefully sampled for their diverse backgrounds. The study does not aim to generalise findings across all urban populations or sketch communities, but rather to construct a deep qualitative insight into how symbolic meanings are co-constructed in a specific cultural context. The findings are also bound by the use of phenomenographic methods, which emphasise variation in experiences rather than statistical generalisation.

1.6 Significance of Study

This research contributes theoretically to the growing discourse on participatory urbanism and architectural pedagogy by positioning urban sketching as a powerful medium of symbolic interaction and reflective engagement. Practically, it offers a replicable framework for fostering public appreciation of heritage, encouraging citizen participation in city-making, and enriching community identity through architectural storytelling. The framework aligns with SDG 11 by promoting inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities through bottom-up strategies that revolve around cultural narrative, cognitive engagement, and social cohesion.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in three key frameworks: Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT), the concept of critical thinking disposition, and the use of urban sketching as an anthropological method. Together, these theories provide a multidimensional perspective to understand how meaning is constructed through engagement with the built environment.

2.1 Symbolic Interaction Theory (SIT)

Symbolic Interaction Theory emphasises the process through which individuals derive and assign meanings to their surroundings through social interaction (Azarian, 2023). Recent applications of urban theories, such as pattern language and mental mapping, have also contributed to participatory planning tools that enhance symbolic interpretation of space (Celiński & Szymańska, 2024). Within the context of urban environments, buildings, streetscapes, and architectural details function as symbols laden with historical, cultural, and emotional significance (De Jong & Lu, 2022). SIT posits that meaning is not inherent in objects themselves but emerges through human interaction and interpretation.

2.2 Critical Thinking Disposition

Critical thinking disposition refers to an individual's tendency or willingness to engage in purposeful, reflective, and reasoned thinking when confronted with complex or unfamiliar situations (Rauscher & Badenhorst, 2021). Literature in psychology underscores the role of self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness in fostering civic engagement and sense of place (Bandura, 1977; Facione, 1995). In the realm of architectural appreciation, critical thinking empowers individuals to move beyond surface-level observations and examine the underlying socio-cultural, historical, and environmental implications of urban spaces (Hazbei & Cucuzzella, 2023). With increasing digitalisation in urban planning, participatory tools are evolving to foster inclusive engagement with spatial narratives (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2022). This disposition is especially crucial in dense urban settings where sensory overload and social fragmentation can hinder reflective engagement with place.

2.3 Urban Sketching as an Anthropological Tool

Urban sketching is not only an artistic, leisure exercise but also a form of ethnographic inquiry (Fredriksson, 2023). It facilitates collaborative reimagination of urban space by enabling participants to observe, document, and share symbolic meanings derived from the built environment (Concilio, Molinari, & Morelli, 2022). As a visual method of participatory observation, urban sketching enables individuals to immerse themselves in the spatial and cultural textures of a place (Fredriksson, 2023). The act of sketching becomes a tool of embodied cognition, where participants engage in slow observation, contextual reflection, and tacit knowledge production. In this research, urban sketching is employed as a methodological bridge that links the disciplines of architecture, anthropology, and psychology. Informed by phenomenographic and ethnographic approaches, sketching captures the lived experience of urban spaces, revealing how individuals perceive, interpret, and communicate architectural narratives (Shields, 2023). The process of drawing on-site

allows sketchers to slow down, notice details, and internalise the multisensory and symbolic dimensions of the built environment. Consequently, urban sketching functions as a critical lens through which everyday cityscapes are re-evaluated, documented, and transformed into narratives of personal and collective identity. Urban sketching thus becomes a vehicle for narrative decryption and community identity construction.

2.4 Developing a conceptual framework for a phenomenography study of the urban sketching experience of the participants.

The literature reviews have highlighted a clear gap in the discipline of study on understanding urban sketching experience from the three major bodies of knowledge: psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Each component carries a particular critical understanding to explain the phenomenon in the study, the experience of urban sketching. After a thorough exploration and explanation of theories have been made, the research attempts to formulate the conceptual framework of the study. Derived from the core principles of the primary theoretical reference, Symbolic Interaction Theory (Blumer, 1986), three components become the focal attention in the next phase; (1) the built environment subject (symbol) (2) the social actor interaction (language) and (3) their motivation (thinking principle) and it is illustrated in the figure below. Being the primary research objective, a framework for symbolic interaction in the architectural built environment becomes the central goal of the research, expanded into the three-knowledge realm, discussed with the significant theories that influenced this research. The research gap is identified and resonates well with the research questions to be resolved in this research.

Integrating SIT, critical thinking, and sketching into a single framework positions urban sketching as a multidisciplinary approach to architectural narrative. The literature review supports the theoretical proposition that sketching can evolve into a structured form of narrative communication with cognitive and socio-cultural implications.

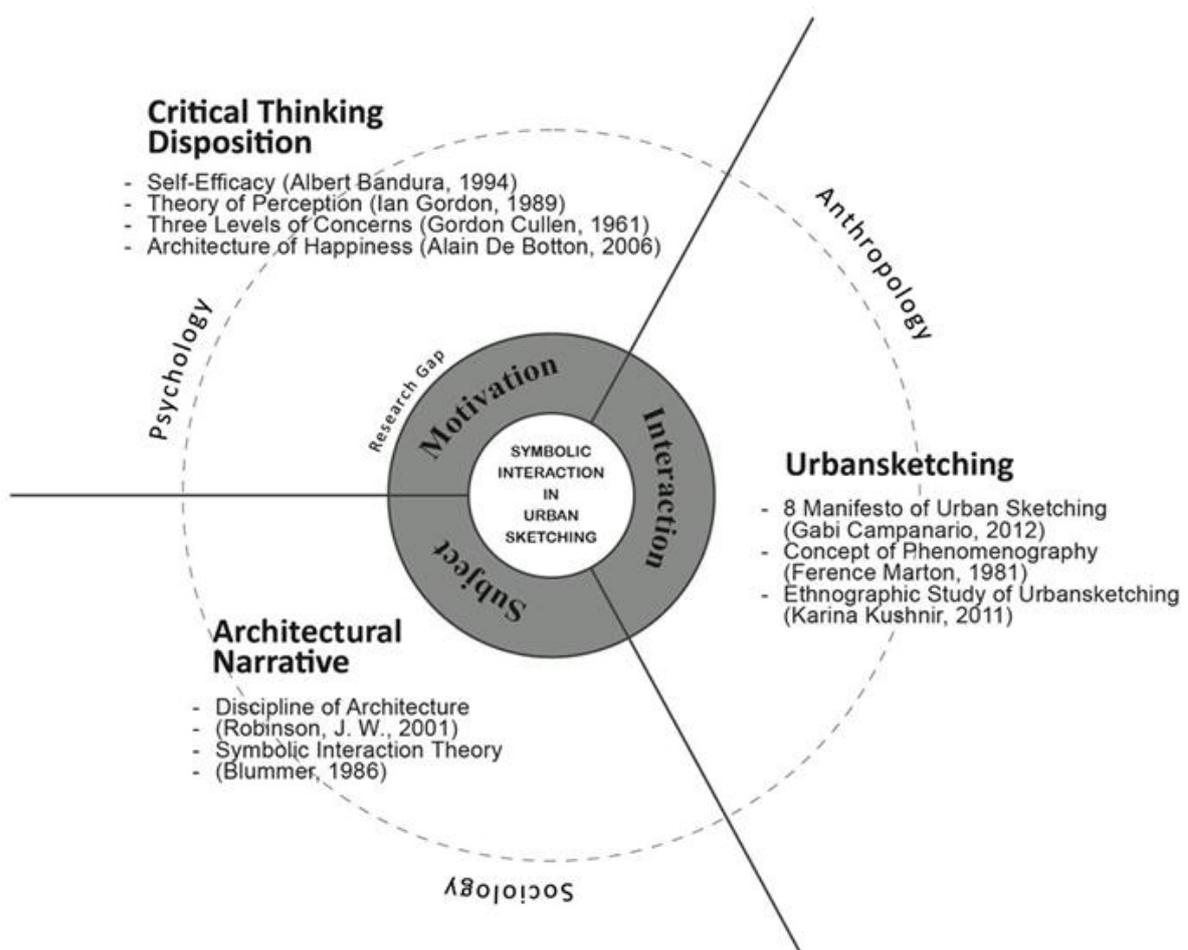


Figure 1. Research Framework with an indication of the research gap (source: Author)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research adopted an embedded single-case study design underpinned by a phenomenographic lens. The phenomenographic approach focuses on capturing the qualitative variations in participants' experiences and perceptions. This method was well-suited to uncover how individuals interpret architectural meaning through urban sketching and how these interpretations vary across different contexts.

3.1 Case Selection

This research adopted an embedded single-case study design underpinned by a phenomenographic lens, which focuses on capturing qualitative variations in participants' experiences and perceptions. This approach was best suited to uncover how individuals interpret architectural meaning through urban sketching and how these interpretations vary across different urban contexts. The case selected was KL Sketch Nation (KLSN), a well-established community-based sketching organisation that has conducted over 50 public sketchwalks across Kuala Lumpur's diverse built environments. These locations range from heritage districts to civic landmarks and commercial zones, providing a dynamic and varied setting for exploring symbolic architectural interactions. As such, KLSN was chosen not as a generalisable sample, but as a rich, contextually grounded case ideally suited for phenomenographic inquiry into how meaning is constructed through participatory sketching. While this single-community focus may limit broad generalisability, the study was designed to prioritise depth over breadth, and its findings are intended to offer transferable insights rather than statistical conclusions to further enhance external validity. The integration of case study and phenomenography supports a bottom-up exploration of meanings, capturing subtle shades of interpretation that inform the development of an action framework for architectural narrative communication. These activities created naturally occurring, socially engaged contexts ideal for reflective and symbolic exploration of the urban fabric. Similar participatory visual methods have proven effective in urban regeneration studies, such as collaborative mapping (Kyriakou, Veneris, & Georgiadou, 2021).

3.2 Participants

Participants in this study comprised 12 sketchers selected through purposeful sampling to reflect diverse demographic, educational, and professional backgrounds, including students, designers, retirees, and enthusiasts. This variation was strategically chosen to enrich the phenomenographic outcome space, which seeks to map different ways of experiencing and interpreting the same phenomenon.

Despite the small, limited sample size, the alignment with established standards for phenomenographic research emphasises the depth of experiential variation over numerical breadth. Each participant contributed through in-depth interviews and provided personal sketches accompanied by reflective narratives and observational insights, offering valuable interpretive depth, prioritising transferability of conceptual insights over statistical generalisability, while acknowledging the potential for future cross-community or cross-city studies to expand the applicability of the framework.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the research objectives and voluntarily signed consent forms prior to participation. Anonymity was preserved in all personal quotes and sketch attributions, unless explicit permission was granted.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, a cataloguing of over 50 sketchwalk events was compiled to identify thematic trends and symbolic encounters in the urban environment. A sketchwalk catalogue curated prior to interviews helped elicit rich reflection from participants. Second, semi-structured interviews were held with the 12 participants, focusing on their motivations, interpretations, and experiences during the sketchwalks. Third, field observations and sketch documentation were employed to triangulate and contextualise the findings.

Table 1. List of 50 First KL Sketch Nation Sketchwalks (source: Author)

CODE	EVENT	DATE	VENUE	COLLABORATION
SW01	Sketchwalk 1: Red Bungalow	Sunday, 30 March 2014	The Red Bungalow, KL	-
SW02	Sketchwalk 2: Neue Artisans	Saturday, 12 April 2014	Central Market, KL.	Neue Artisans
SW03	Sketchwalk 3: Chow Kit Road	Sunday, 20 April 2014	Chow Kit Road, KL.	-
SW04	Sketchwalk 4: Kampung Baru	Saturday, 17 May 2014	Kampung Baru, KL.	-
SW05	Sketchwalk 5: Johor Bahru	Saturday, 24 May 2014	Johor Bahru, KL.	Johor Sketchers
SW06	Sketchwalk 6: Brickfields	Saturday, 31 May 2014	Brickfield, KL.	-
SW07	Sketchwalk 7: Masjid Jamek & Medan Pasar	Saturday, 14 June 2014	Masjid Jamek, KL.	-
SW08	Sketchwalk 8: Art Row, Publika	Saturday, 6 September 2014	Publika, KL.	Titik Merah Galeri
SW09	Sketchwalk 9: Puduraya	Saturday, 27 September 2014	Pasar Pudu, KL	-
SW10	Sketchwalk 10: UTMKL	Saturday, 11 October 2014	UTM International Campus, KL	ARCO UTMKL
SW11	Sketchwalk 11: UiTM Shah Alam	Saturday, 25 October 2014	Dewan Sri Budiman, UiTM Shah Alam	UiTM Shah Alam
SW12	Sketchwalk 12: KTM	Saturday, 22 November 2014	KTM Station, KL.	Sketchwalk KL
SW13	Sketchwalk 13: Jalan Doraisamy	Saturday, 13 December 2014	Jalan Doraisamy, KL	-
SW14	Sketchwalk 14: KLCC Park	Saturday, 27 December 2014	KLCC Park, KL	-
SW15	Sketchwalk 15: Bukit Bintang	Saturday, 24 January 2015	Pavilion KL	-
SW16	Sketchwalk 16: Taman Tasik Titiwangsa	Saturday, 7 February 2015	Taman Tasik Titiwangsa, KL	-
SW17	Sketchwalk 17: Dataran Merdeka	Saturday, 7 March 2015	Sultan Abdul Samad, KL	-
SW18	Sketchwalk 18: UiTM Shah Alam	Saturday, 11 April 2015	FSPU, Shah Alam	UiTM Shah Alam
SW19	Sketchwalk 19: Masjid Negeri, Shah Alam	Saturday, 25 April 2015	Masjid Negeri, Shah Alam	-
SW20	Sketchwalk 20: Galeri Petronas KLCC AMxKLSN	Sunday, 17 May 2015	KLCC Park, KL	Arto Movement
SW21	Sketchwalk 21: KLxOBS	Saturday, 15 August 2015	Taman Botani Perdana	DBKL
SW22	Sketchwalk 22: Petaling Street	Saturday, 3 October 2015	Petaling Street, KL	-
SW23	Sketchwalk 23: Kenanga Wholesale City	Saturday, 7 November 2015	KWC Mall, Pudu	-
SW24	Sketchwalk 24: Masjid Negara	Saturday, 12 December 2015	Masjid Negara, KL	-
SW25	Sketchwalk 25, Bukit Nanas	Saturday, 26 March 2016	SMK St John, KL	-

SW26	Sketchwalk 26, Chow Kit Road	Saturday, 28 November 2016	Chow Kit Road	-
SW27	Sketchwalk 27, Jalan Sultan, KL	Saturday, 28 November 2016	Jalan Sultan, KL	-
SW28	Sketchwalk 28, SS13 Millenium Park	Sunday, 26 March 2017	SS13, Subang	Budak Subang Jaya x Epic
SW29	Sketchwalk 29, Chow Kit Run	Saturday, 8 April 2017	SK Jalan Batu	Chow Kit Runu
SW30	Sketchwalk 30: As-Syakirin Mosque, KLCC	Sunday, 21 May 2017	As-Syakirin Mosque, KLCC, KL	Sketchwalk KL, KL Urbansketchers
SW31	Sketchwalk 31: Jalan Hang Kasturi (KLAf2017)	Sunday, 23 July 2017	Jalan Hang Kasturi, KL	KLAf2017
SW32	Sketchwalk 32: Jalan Ampang	Sunday, 13 August 2017	Kun Yang Temple, Jalan Ampang, KL	Sketchwalk KL
SW33	Sketchwalk 33: Muzium Negara	Saturday, 30 September 2017	Muzium Negara, KL	Rumah Kartun & Komik Malaysia (RKKM)
SW34	Sketchwalk 34: Balai Seni Negara	Saturday, 25 November 2017	Balai Seni Negara, KL	KL Biennale
SW35	Sketchwalk 35: Ampang Park #onelastsketch	Sunday, 31 December 2017	Ampang Park, KL	Sketchwalk KL, KL Urbansketchers
SW36	Sketchwalk 36: Masjid Jamek Abdullah Hukum	Saturday, 6 January 2018	Masjid Jamek, KL	-
SW37	Sketchwalk 37: Little India	Sunday, 21 January 2018	Little India, KL	-
SW38	Sketchwalk 38: A&W PJ Drive-In #onelastsketch	Sunday, 4 February 2018	A&W PJ, Selangor	-
SW39	Sketchwalk 39: Muzium Telekom	Saturday, 17 March 2018	Muzium Telekom, KL	-
SW40	Sketchwalk 40: Lot 10 KL	Saturday, 11 August 2018	Lot 10 KL	YTL
SW41	Sketchwalk 41: Pavilion KL	Sunday, 25 November 2018	Pavilion KL	Pavilion KL
SW42	Sketchwalk 42: Kampung Baru	Sunday, 20 January 2019	Masjid Kg Baru, KL	-
SW43	Sketchwalk 43: Thean Hou Temple	Sunday, 9 February 2019	Thean Hou Temple, KL	-
SW44	Sketchwalk 44: Istana Budaya	Sunday, 10 March 2019	Istana Budaya, KL	Simone Ridyard
SW45	Sketchwalk 45: Lot 10 KL	Saturday, 21 July 2019	Lot 10 KL	YTL
SW46	Sketchwalk 46: Rumah Tangsi (P!NK Group Art Exhibition)	Saturday, 12 October 2019	Rumah Tangsi, KL	P!NK Group Art Exhibition
SW47	Sketchwalk 47: The River of Life – Art In The City 2019	Sunday, 20 October 2019	River of Life, KL	Cendana, DBKL
SW48	Sketchwalk 48: Lalaport	Saturday, 25 June 2022	Lalaport, KL	-
SW49	Sketchwalk 49: The Linc KL	Monday, 11 July 2022	The Linc KL	The Linc KL Management
SW50	Sketchwalk 50: Stadium Merdeka	Wednesday, 31 August 2022	Stadium Merdeka, KL	PNB Merdeka Ventures

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out through thematic coding and synthesis to identify distinct "outcome spaces", a key feature of phenomenographic analysis. A phenomenographic approach was used to identify variations in how participants experienced symbolic encounters, motivational impulses, and urban interactions. These outcome spaces were structured around three major dimensions: symbolic encounters (e.g., cultural, historical, or emotional significance of urban elements), personal dispositions (e.g., critical thinking and reflective capacities), and interactive patterns (e.g., engagement with environment and community through sketching). This multi-layered analysis allowed for the construction of a robust framework that illustrates how urban sketching can serve as a medium for architectural narrative communication. For the main sketchwalk archival catalogue, the photos were structured and appropriately labelled in a systematic manner, where it was organised accordingly to represent each sketchwalk event with the organised coding as follows:

Table 2. Coding System Applied for the Archival Documentation (source: Author)

Element	DESCRIPTIONS	CODE
A – Event Graphics	- Posters are used for promotional materials	SW<No.>AGR<No.>
B – Group Photos	- Group photos at each sketch point	SW<No.>BGP<No.>
C – Group Drawings	- Highlights on drawings gathered - Available individual drawings - Mug shots of participants with their drawings	SW<No.>CGD<No.>
Additional photos	- Any significant photos from the sketchwalk	SW<No.>PH<No.>

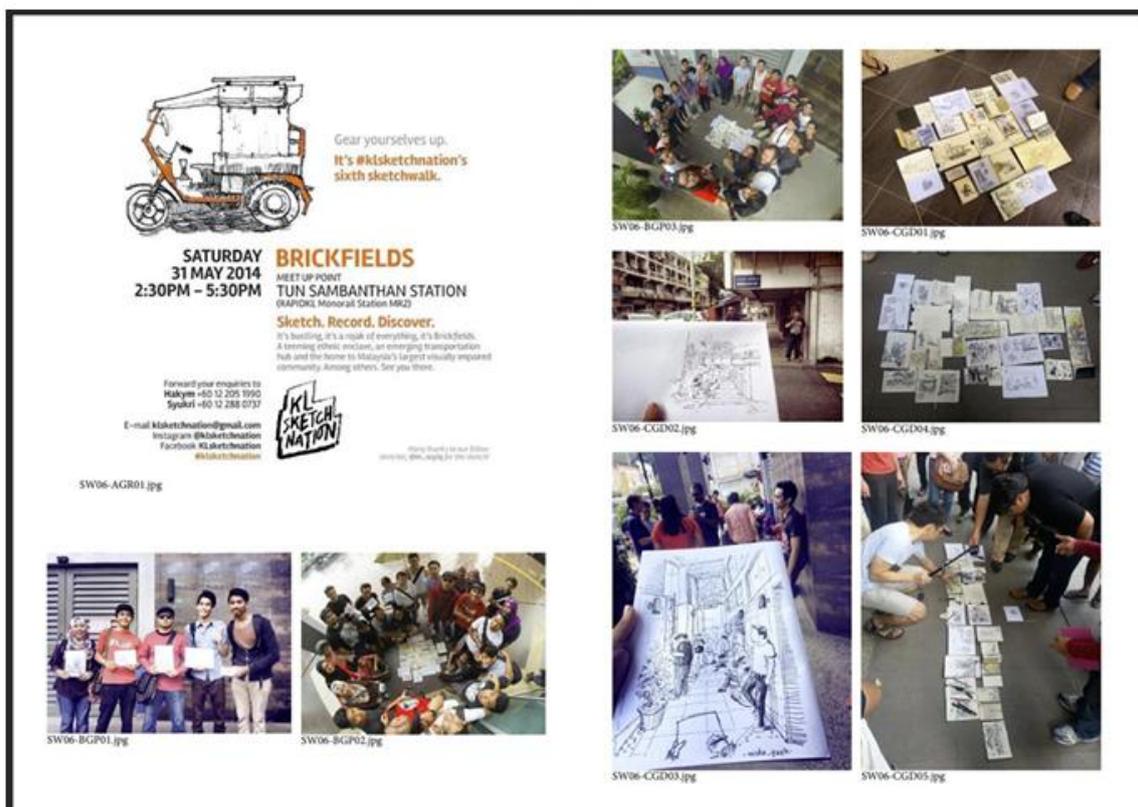


Figure 1. Screenshot Example of the Sketchwalk Archival Catalogue (source: Author)

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study were organised into three core dimensions: symbolic encounters, personal disposition, and interactive patterns. Each dimension revealed the underlying processes by which urban sketching contributes to architectural narrative construction and strengthens urban affinity. These categories represent distinct yet interconnected ways in which participants engaged with the urban environment during sketchwalks. These outcome spaces reflect how individuals relate to and reinterpret architecture through embodied visual practice. From this analysis, a five-phase action framework was developed to structure the process of narrative communication through urban sketching.

4.1 Symbolic Encounters

Participants frequently interacted with everyday architectural features such as five-foot ways, weathered signage, shophouses, urban streetscapes, community signage, and decaying facades. These were not merely aesthetic subjects but carried symbolic values of cultural memory and identity. Sketches served to isolate and reinterpret these elements, often revealing layered meanings. While these elements are often overlooked in daily life, sketchwalk participants consciously selected and portrayed them as significant cultural touchpoints. These encounters were symbolic, with participants attributing layered meanings derived from personal memories, historical connotations, and socio-cultural associations. For instance, a seemingly mundane building facade could represent colonial history, ethnic commerce, or community gathering, depending on the sketcher's interpretation. These symbolic associations played a vital role in shaping a deeper understanding and appreciation of the built environment. In this study, architectural elements in Kuala Lumpur are viewed as symbolic carriers that participants encounter, reinterpret, and reframe through the act of sketching. Buildings and spaces become more than utilitarian structures, serving as repositories of collective memory and cultural narratives. The sketchwalk becomes a space of symbolic dialogue where participants engage not only with the built forms but also with their memories, values, and social contexts that shape their interpretations. This lens allows us to understand architecture as a symbolic environment, where narratives are continuously rewritten through everyday encounters (Blumer, 1986).

Sketches revealed an intentional choice of overlooked urban symbols, such as five-foot ways, old cinema signage, or community murals that carried personal and communal significance. These symbolic associations suggest that urban sketching serves as a decoding process, transforming seemingly mundane structures into cultural touchstones. Sketching served to highlight these narratives, making them tangible through visual focus.

4.2 Personal Disposition

Critical thinking disposition influenced how participants interpreted what they sketched. A recurring theme among participants was the development and application of critical thinking during the sketching process. Participants demonstrated a reflective mode of thinking while sketching, which supports the role of critical thinking disposition in architectural interpretation. Openness to complexity, metacognitive awareness, and emotional receptivity shaped their perception. The act of drawing prompted deeper questioning of spatial narratives, transforming passive observation into active interpretation. For participants in this study, sketching served as a medium to practice critical reflection, encouraging them to question the aesthetics, functionality, and narratives embedded in their surroundings. Sketching thus became an introspective process that revealed personal values and social concerns. Participants often described the act as meditative and transformative, with one noting, 'I now see the city not for what it is, but what it could mean to others.'. Several participants noted that sketching encouraged them to "pause and question," leading to reinterpretations of urban decay as "beautiful decay" and not just urban neglect. Participants were not merely recording what they saw; instead, they actively reinterpreted spaces and challenged prevailing narratives. This disposition fosters cognitive engagement and challenges passive consumption of the urban landscape, transforming sketchers into active interpreters and agents of meaning-making within the city. Through reflective dialogue with their surroundings, many began to see neglected or dilapidated structures not as eyesores, but as repositories of identity and cultural memory. This shift in perception exemplified how critical thinking disposition empowered sketchers to reconstruct meaning and validate the overlooked or marginalised aspects of urban architecture. This shift also indicates an underlying transformation in the way urban spaces are perceived, not as static objects, but as layered narratives that evolve through individual reflection.

The process of sketching thus became a tool for personal transformation, encouraging deeper awareness and ownership of the built context. Critical thinking enabled participants to engage with the socio-political and emotional meanings embedded in architectural forms.

4.3 Interactive Patterns

The social dimension of sketchwalks emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing urban affinity. Sketching was more than a solitary artistic activity; it was a shared experiential practice that facilitated storytelling, dialogue, and community bonding. Sketchwalks were inherently social, fostering social learning and shared meaning-making. Participants often engaged in conversations about the sites they sketched, about architectural features, and collectively reflected on their shared environment in informal storytelling, shared techniques, and exchanged interpretations. Dialogues during the sketching sessions and reflective conversations after contributed to a co-produced narrative of place. The social setting conversations encouraged peer learning and co-construction of meaning. Sketchers reflected not only on physical space but also on each other's interpretations. This interactivity fostered a participatory culture of urban exploration, where meanings were co-constructed through engagement and exchange. This interactive process reconfigured isolated observations into collective memory and belonging. The communal nature of these sketchwalks encouraged participants to view themselves as contributors to the city's evolving narrative, reinforcing their emotional and cognitive attachment to Kuala Lumpur's architectural identity.

Participants reported increased awareness of place identity and a sense of civic engagement. These communal interactions transformed the act of drawing into a participatory urban ritual, strengthening ties between citizens and the built environment. These findings collectively reinforce the central study: urban sketching, when grounded in symbolic interaction, critical thinking, and participatory reflection, becomes a transformative tool for urban narrative construction and public belonging. The proposed action framework encapsulates five sequential phases that translate the experiential findings into a structured model of urban engagement through sketching.

Phase 1: Observation. In this initial phase, participants immerse themselves in the urban environment during sketchwalks, engaging their senses and observational faculties. This encounter initiates the process of symbolic interaction by allowing sketchers to perceive the spatial, aesthetic, and cultural nuances of architectural elements. The act of observing, often overlooked in fast-paced urban life, becomes a deliberate effort to reawaken awareness and attentiveness to one's surroundings.

Phase 2: Symbolic Deconstruction Following observation, participants begin to dissect the built environment by identifying architectural elements that hold symbolic value. This involves isolating features such as signage, facades, building styles, and urban artefacts that represent cultural, historical, or emotional meanings. Through sketching, these elements are visually deconstructed, enabling participants to translate their implicit meanings into tangible representations. This phase is crucial for uncovering the layered narratives embedded within the built fabric.

Phase 3: Reflective Engagement This stage emphasises the application of critical thinking dispositions. Participants reflect upon their interpretations, questioning their assumptions and the socio-cultural significance of the spaces they are documenting. The reflective process is dialogical and cognitive, as sketchers negotiate between personal experiences and shared urban identities. This step serves to deepen their emotional and intellectual connection to the urban landscape.

Phase 4: Communicative Output Participants share their sketches and narratives within the community, either through exhibitions, social media platforms, or informal dialogues during and after sketchwalks. These outputs serve as vehicles for disseminating architectural narratives and perspectives, opening avenues for broader societal engagement. The act of sharing transforms individual reflections into collective discourse, fostering a shared understanding of urban space.

Phase 5: Feedback Loop The final phase completes the cyclical nature of symbolic interaction by facilitating feedback and reinterpretation. Community responses, reinterpretations, and subsequent discussions influence how meanings are continually reshaped. This iterative loop ensures that architectural narratives remain dynamic and participatory, sustaining a culture of reflective urban appreciation and reinforcing a sense of belonging among citizens.

This study advances the understanding of architectural narrative-making through an interdisciplinary lens. The integration of Symbolic Interaction Theory with urban sketching practice reveals a process wherein meaning is constantly reconstructed through visual, emotional, and social interaction. This expands SIT by illustrating how visual practices serve as both medium and process in urban meaning-making. The emergence of critical thinking as a mediator between perception and narrative construction supports earlier findings in environmental psychology and design pedagogy. The data affirms the relevance of critical thinking disposition in reframing neglected or mundane spaces as sites of cultural value. It aligns with environmental psychology's assertion that reflective interaction fosters stronger place attachment. Moreover, the social dimension highlights the participatory potential of sketchwalks in terms of communal dynamics observed during sketchwalks align with theories of participatory urbanism, suggesting that such grassroots practices can complement top-down urban strategies. The findings are consistent with participatory urbanism theories (Concilio et al., 2022; Kyriakou et al., 2021), where informal practices contribute to the production of urban meaning outside formal planning systems.

The proposed five-phase framework—Observation, Symbolic Deconstruction, Reflective Engagement, Communicative Output, and Feedback Loop translate these theoretical insights into an actionable model. This model situates urban sketching as both a symbolic and cognitive intervention capable of transforming passive observation into participatory urbanism. This framework can inform design education, heritage engagement programs, and inclusive urban planning strategies. This study contributes to architectural pedagogy by offering a structured framework, the five-phase symbolic interaction model that merges theoretical insight with pedagogical application.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Urban sketching emerges from this study not just as a creative outlet but as a multidimensional tool for interpreting, narrating, and connecting with urban spaces. Through the integration of Symbolic Interaction Theory and critical thinking disposition, the act of sketching becomes a symbolic dialogue between the citizen and the city. This framework highlights the role of urban sketching as more than just an artistic practice. It is a symbolic and cognitive process that empowers citizens to become co-authors of urban identity. This aligns with sustainable development goals, such as SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, by encouraging inclusivity, resilience, participatory, and cultural continuity and sensitive urban narratives. The fusion of architectural sociology, cognitive psychology, and visual anthropology positions this approach as a scalable model for urban resilience and design education. The proposed symbolic interaction framework offers a bottom-up approach to strengthen a sense of belonging through architectural narrative communication. The proposed symbolic interaction framework poses potential contributions towards architectural pedagogy by demonstrating how reflective, visual practices can instil a more profound sense of belonging and spatial awareness. Future research could explore its adaptability in other urban contexts or investigate the impact of digital tools and AI-enhanced sketching on narrative depth and user engagement. This research contributes theoretically to architectural pedagogy and practically to urban cultural strategies. In practice, this approach offers new avenues for citizen-led urban interventions, heritage awareness, and community storytelling. Future research could explore comparative studies across cities where crowdsourced public engagement methods are emerging as viable alternatives to formal planning.

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