Developing Place Character Appraisal Tool Through Phenomenological Inquiry on City Branding

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ABSTRACT

The research investigates the essence of place branding through the lens of phenomenology of the cityscape. Place branding is a subset of city branding, which is an interdisciplinary strategy involving multiple stakeholders. Identifying tangible and intangible attributes would help plan, design, develop and revitalize places in the city with its own uniqueness. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among key informants of urban professionals working in the design, planning and development of cities within the research protocol. The inquiries were based on their diverse experience in related fields of design, architecture, city planning, urban design, event management, branding, marketing and property development all in the context of the city. Data was analysed using multi-method urban analysis, content, thematic and cross-case analysis to achieve empirical results. The results reveal that in appraising place character, the thematic domains are categorized into comprehensive key areas namely *Place Value*, *Integrated Design*, *Stakeholder Synergy*, *Sense of Belonging*, *Signature District*, *Archetypal Landmark*, *Public Interior* and *City Information Design*. An in-depth finding from this research would assist in assessing a place's uniqueness through appraising place character using a systematic tool. The place character appraisal tool could facilitate city branding strategies through holistic and sustainable urban design.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Place branding research is an emerging area in scholarly studies with its foundational domain rooted in branding. Place branding is a discipline with its theoretical framework rooted in practice (Vuignier, 2017). It connects multiple branches of knowledge that originate from the field of communication, business, tourism and marketing and since the early 2000s the interdisciplinary research area has evolved from city branding, into a more integrated field of knowledge in place research, through the disciplines in urban design, architecture, sustainable urban development practices and city governance. The area of city branding has emerged as an internationally recognized research domain characterized by a high degree of multi-disciplinary, rapid proliferation in and between disciplines (Lucarelli & Berg, 2011). From the context of cities, a much more focused context emerges from scholars in place research. Place branding is a research area that has evolved and attracted scholars in the field of built environment design, as it is important to view the subject in a comprehensive manner similar to the strategies of brand building.

Place branding is a discipline that is rooted in practice (Vuignier, 2017). The research paradigm in city branding offers cross-disciplinary knowledge from the field of branding, brand identity, communication, marketing, business, urban studies, environmental psychology, architecture, land science and tourism. In the research, the main keywords that narrowed the scope of the research area were identified to form relationships within the research topic. The study of city branding, and place branding are both intertwined, with city branding being in the context of the city. Place branding, however, is a term closely related to place research in the social constructivist realm of phenomenology. This is a developing research area which seeks a comprehensive understanding and is multi-disciplinary. The concept of the *city* and *place* requires an understanding that both terms are embedded. The phenomenology of *place* which includes sense of place, place image, place identity and place character (Canter, 1977; Lewicka, 2008; Friedman, 2010; Clouse & Dixit, 2018) are areas closely related to architecture, urban design, urban planning and environmental psychology. Hence, the context of this research brings forth that *Place Character Appraisal* merges perspectives of three (3) main fields which are *City Branding*, *Phenomenology* and *Urban Design* (Refer Figure 1).

CITY BRANDING

PLACE CHARACTER APPRAISAL

PHENOMENOLOGY   **URBAN DESIGN**
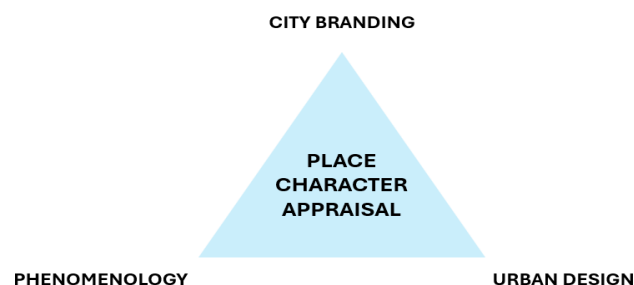
Figure 1. Place Character Appraisal (Author, 2024)

The issue of cities losing their identity, place character and place uniqueness is due to the domination of the international style in the architectural design approach of the city. City centers are dominated by capitalistic privileges, which results in the dominance of the international style which is a global design approach (King, 1990; Ebuz & Donatus, 2018). The lack of understanding of distinct place character results in the city being only a collective of buildings and elements that grow to become identical and a carbon-copy with no *sense of place*. The richness of local culture, heritage buildings, landmarks and historical context in districts and pockets of the city are slowly being erased (Ghafar et al, 2022). The design of the cityscape deserves a more integrated approach as the concept and scale of the townscape has increased with the growth and evolution of the contemporary city. A city like Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for instance, is a rich urban fabric, layered with diverse and distinct elements of place character. From the review of the major cities in Malaysia with the 'Bandaraya'-status, a total of sixteen (16) cities were assessed (Source: KPKT, 2021). As a pre-assessment, the major cities (Refer Figure 2.) presents the necessity for further research to be conducted on place character of cities in Malaysia that contributes to city

branding and city imageability from the perspective of urban design. There is a lack of scholarly research being conducted and the issues presented in the paper is inadequately recognized in the urban design process of cities in Malaysia. The list of sixteen (16) cities has been identified as having high, medium to very low city imageability.

Through systematic literature review, the study has identified the research on city branding in the context of urban design and architecture are still in its infancy, especially in the context and locality of cities in Malaysia. City branding as a research area connects multiple disciplines for the practice of city development. It necessitates the integration of knowledge from urban design, architecture, environmental psychology and the built environment as it provides a comprehensive understanding of place and place character. The study posits the importance of place character appraisal in reviewing and assessing cities to benefit not only city branding strategies but good urban design practice. Cities in Malaysia have its distinct character and through the understanding of phenomenological inquiry, development of place character appraisal tool could assist urban designers, architects, city managers, place developers, municipalities and place leaders to develop their cities to its fullest potential.

Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur
Bandaraya Ipoh
Bandaraya Kuching
Bandaraya Johor Bahru
Bandaraya Kota Kinabalu
Bandaraya Shah Alam
Bandaraya Melaka
Bandaraya Alor Setar
Bandaraya Miri
Bandaraya Petaling Jaya
Bandaraya Kuala Terengganu
Bandaraya George Town
Bandaraya Iskandar Puteri
Bandaraya Seberang Perai
Bandaraya Seremban
Bandaraya Pasir Gudang

List of cities in Malaysia with Bandaraya-status (Data as of 2021)
Image source (from top left): unsplash.com (Kuala Lumpur), theculturetrip.com (Ipoh), nst.com.my (Kuching), Hafidz Abdul Kadir (Johor Bahru), amazingborneo.id (Kota Kinabalu), kayak.com.my (Shah Alam), expedia.com (Melaka), expedia.com (Miri), Nalidsa Sukprasert (Alor Setar), propertyguru.com.my (Petaling Jaya), malaymail.com (Kuala Terengganu), tripadvisor.com (Georgetown), iskandarputeri.com (Iskandar Puteri), malaymail.com (Seberang Perai), hmetro.com.my (Seremban) and durianproperty.com (Pasir Gudang).

Figure 2. An overview of a pictorial compilation (image source as stated) of arial view depicting cityscape character of major cities with '*Bandaraya*' status in Malaysia. Compilation by Author (2022).

2.0 METHOD

The study conducted is in the research paradigm of social constructivism. In the focused sub-paradigm of phenomenology. The phenomenology of brand-oriented practices in the contemporary reality of many areas and districts in the city, for example, the heritage district, cultural district, creative district and business improvement district are becoming common strategies in city revitalization efforts. According to Seamon (2023, p.247), *architectural phenomenology* can be defined as the "phenomenological study of architectural experiences and meanings as constituted by qualities and features of both the built environment and human life". Therefore, through this study, a multi-method research inquiry was conducted in dissecting the components of place character through the integrated lens of city branding, phenomenology and urban design. Firstly, a systematic literature review was conducted. Secondly, in a sequential process, key informants of professionals working in the urban environment in various related fields were engaged for a semi-structured interview to identify the essence of city branding and place branding. As place branding is embedded in practice, hence the phenomenology of place branding could systematically be analyzed through an on-field observation of a case study area in the city. Hence, the multi-sources of evidence were consolidated as two main data sets; (1) semi-structured interview and (2) on-field observation of a selected case study area which were examined and consolidated in an empirical process to design the *place character appraisal* tool.

2.1. Stage 1: *Semi-structured Interview*

The semi-structured interview identified key individuals with professional experience in the holistic field of urban development, urban projects, urban design and community engagement. The key informants (aged between 30 – 65) were identified through a purposive sampling, which included all working adults in the field of architecture, urban design, urban planning, city governance, cityscape artists, place developers, tourism industry, as well as advocates and scholars who have worked in the realm of the built environment in Kuala Lumpur city as well as other major cities in Malaysia. The diversity of background within related fields, as well as having international exposure from travels to global cities with its own place uniqueness and city branding strategies, provided data in a comprehensive and holistic assessment of the topics discussed. The data collection was conducted between July – September 2022 and a total of thirteen (N=13) respondents of key informants have provided rich thick data through an in-depth interview. The background of key informants is listed as urban designer, architects, architectural designer, interior architectural designer, urban planner, cityscape artist, branding consultant, marketing consultant, place developer, city festival curator, government official in city planning, official from the tourism ministry, scholars in urban design, scholars in architecture and urban design including a community leader.

The exploratory qualitative data collection was used to gather rich thick data drawing professional and personal experiences of the key informants. Each transcription resulted in rich thick data where the respondents discussed in depth the topics related to place branding and city imageability in the context of their role as professionals working and contributing to the urban environment. The five (5) stages of data analysis included content analysis, thematic coding and mapping, axial coding through thematic domain, attribute and criteria and a cross-case analysis. The process of thematic coding has undergone an analysis through the software application NVivo 11 to produce thematic coding diagrams to facilitate the process of identification of the thematic from the semi-structured interview into essence of city branding.

2.2. Stage 2: *On-field Observation of a Case Study Area*

The research methodology assessed the tangible and intangible components of cityscape character conducted through an on-field observation of a selected case study area. Assessment tools that were used by scholars were for the purpose of evaluating the quality of townscape and cityscape character consisting of its built form, streets, public furniture, landscape, city image and public space (e.g. Lynch, 1960; Reeves et al, 2007; Landscape Institute, 2017). Place character of a city is understood from the visual elements of city imageability introduced by Lynch (1960) that identifies Landmark, Path, Nodes, Edge and District as key elements of the city image. Reeves et al (2007) described the townscape character through its streetscape quality and maintenance, private space in view and heritage in view, that gives the impression score. The key criteria of the case study area selection are its location in the city. It represents an area in a capital or a major city in Malaysia. The case study site must also be

an area having signature elements and identity that could be a cultural, heritage, creative or having a core identity component. Among other criteria is that it has an established reputation that is known among the community, Malaysians at large and been promoted as a destination to local and international tourists alike. The case study area was selected based on several site selection criterions developed from the findings of city brand essence through the semi-structured interview. The case study area investigated in this research was the Kuala Lumpur Chinatown. It has fulfilled the site selection criteria of being a signature district.

In the sequential development of the place character appraisal tool, aspects in city branding were critically analysed through the viewpoint and principles of urban design. Similarities and concepts in urban design were explored to obtain and refine a comprehensive checklist that could be used to assess and appraise an area, street or district of a city of its place character. A case study area is an important aspect in the research, as phenomenology is understood as the lived experience and reality on the ground. A case study area can provide the reality of place character through observation. In developing the selection criteria of the case study area, a combination of four (4) indicators were used (Lynch, 1960; Kavaratzis, 2009, Che Ghani, 2024). The criterion is, (1) the case study area must be located in the city center, (2) it must possess a place character that is of high to medium imageability, (3) possess evidence of place branding projects and initiatives and (4) it personifies a signature identity that is clearly seen by a lay person which also represents its place brand potential. The empirical research methodology was conducted through an Appraisal Checklist used as the research instrument during the on-field observation process. In the final stage of the study, the checklist was cross-examined and consolidated before being finalized into a comprehensive place character appraisal checklist.
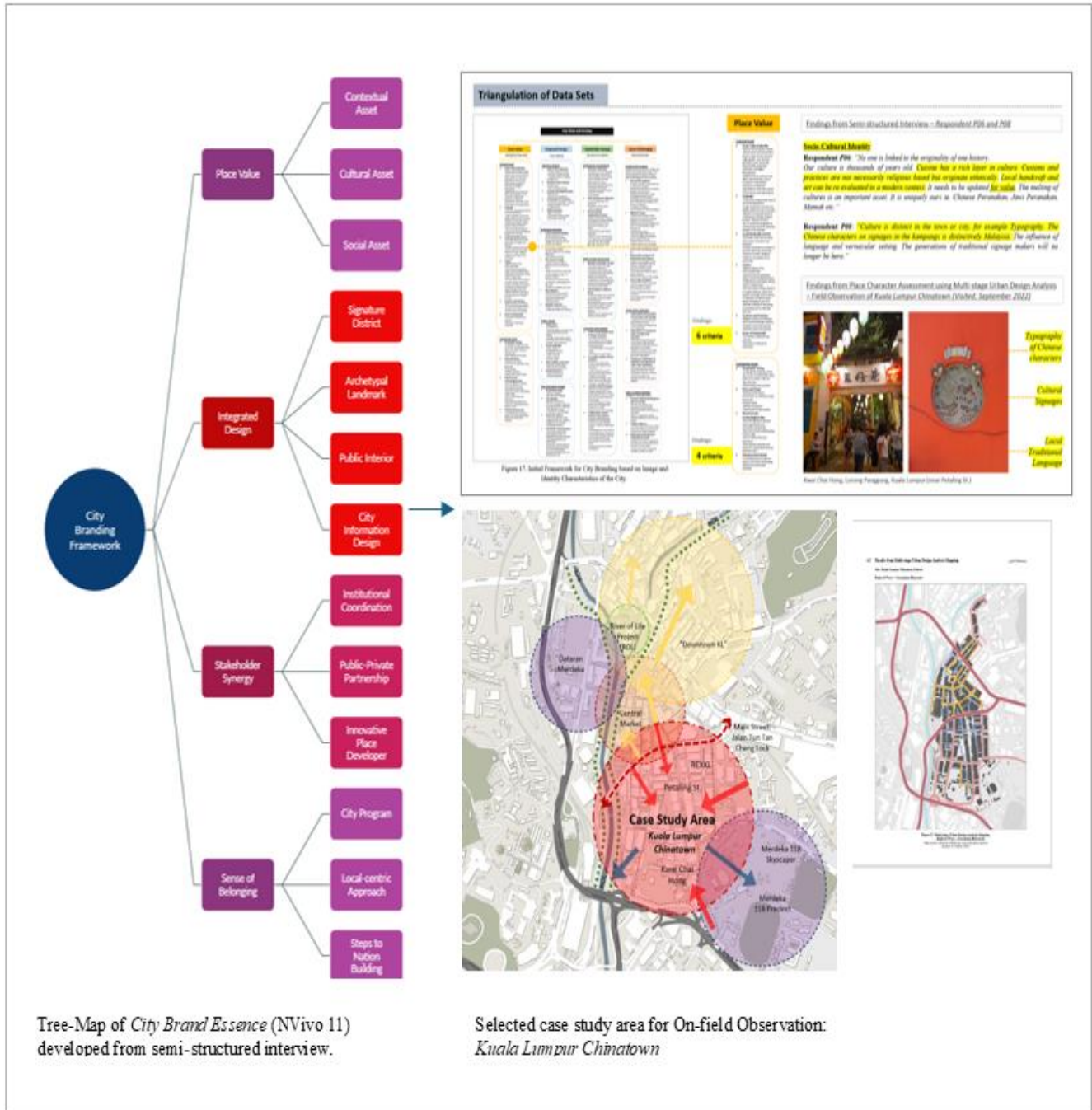
2.3. Stage 3: *Multi-stage Urban Design Analysis*

Through the phenomenological approach, an immersive and experiential analysis was conducted while walking along the streets of Kuala Lumpur Chinatown. The observation of the case study was conducted between primary main roads, secondary lanes, as well as back lanes to comprehensively investigate its place character. First-hand experience as a pedestrian walking in the city and visually observing its place character is a method of analyzing the phenomenological inquiry of city branding of the area from an actual setting. An unobstructive observation technique was applied to gather data systematically and in a neutral approach to be immersive in the setting of the local culture, customs and practices. The phenomenology analyzed of the sample site is conducted in an immersive and true experience. Content and thematic analysis were conducted from data collected from the on-field observation through multi-stage urban design analysis that were conducted in five (5) parts. The stages are (1) immersive on-field critical analysis, (2) analysis of written notes, mapping and sketches post-observation, (3) detailed analysis of photographs from case study area, (4) mapping analysis using attributes from appraisal checklist and (5) cross-sectional analysis of all data sets gathered from the case study area.

The multistage urban design analysis conducted a cross-case analysis of the ten (10) selected streets in Kuala Lumpur Chinatown of the case study. The cross-case analysis was a key methodology adopted to review and critically compare the distinct place characters of each street in the context of the overall district character. The selected case study was chosen for its robust and distinct character with its own place branding and reputation as being a signature district of Chinatown in Kuala Lumpur city. The phenomenology of 'Chinatown' is understood and experienced as having a signature identity relating to the Chinese culture, businesses, customs and practices. In the first part of the multi-source data collection, the semi-structured interview was a seminal research method to discuss and identify components that relate to the urban morphology and urban design of the environment that resulted in its place character. Practitioners in architecture, urban planning, urban design, cityscape artists and designers, place developers and brand consultants have a comprehensive viewpoint and experience drawn from practice.

The multi-stage urban analysis technique is a method to analyse urban context in a systematic and comprehensive layer of information. The analysis was conducted by extracting and organizing comprehensive elements of tangible and intangible aspects that included built form, architectural style, district character, visual communication, dominant place function, city events, activities, brand culture including place leadership and

stakeholder synergies of the selected case study area. The multi-stages involve analysing the case study site in a macro context of the overall district character and components, and the analysis is conducted further in a micro context. The micro context involves critically analysing the detail character of the street, building typology, street and building elevations, spatial character and its public interior in a comprehensive and immersive manner on-field. The multi stages are then organized accordingly in their respective categories, as explored on-field through the observation conducted on a case study site. The sequential data collection process is described in Figure 3.

Tree-Map of *City Brand Essence* (NVivo 11) developed from semi-structured interview.

Selected case study area for On-field Observation: *Kuala Lumpur Chinatown*

Figure 3. Development of the *Place Character Appraisal Tool* using a sequential data collection process of (1) *semi-structured interview* and (2) *on-field observation* of a selected case study area.

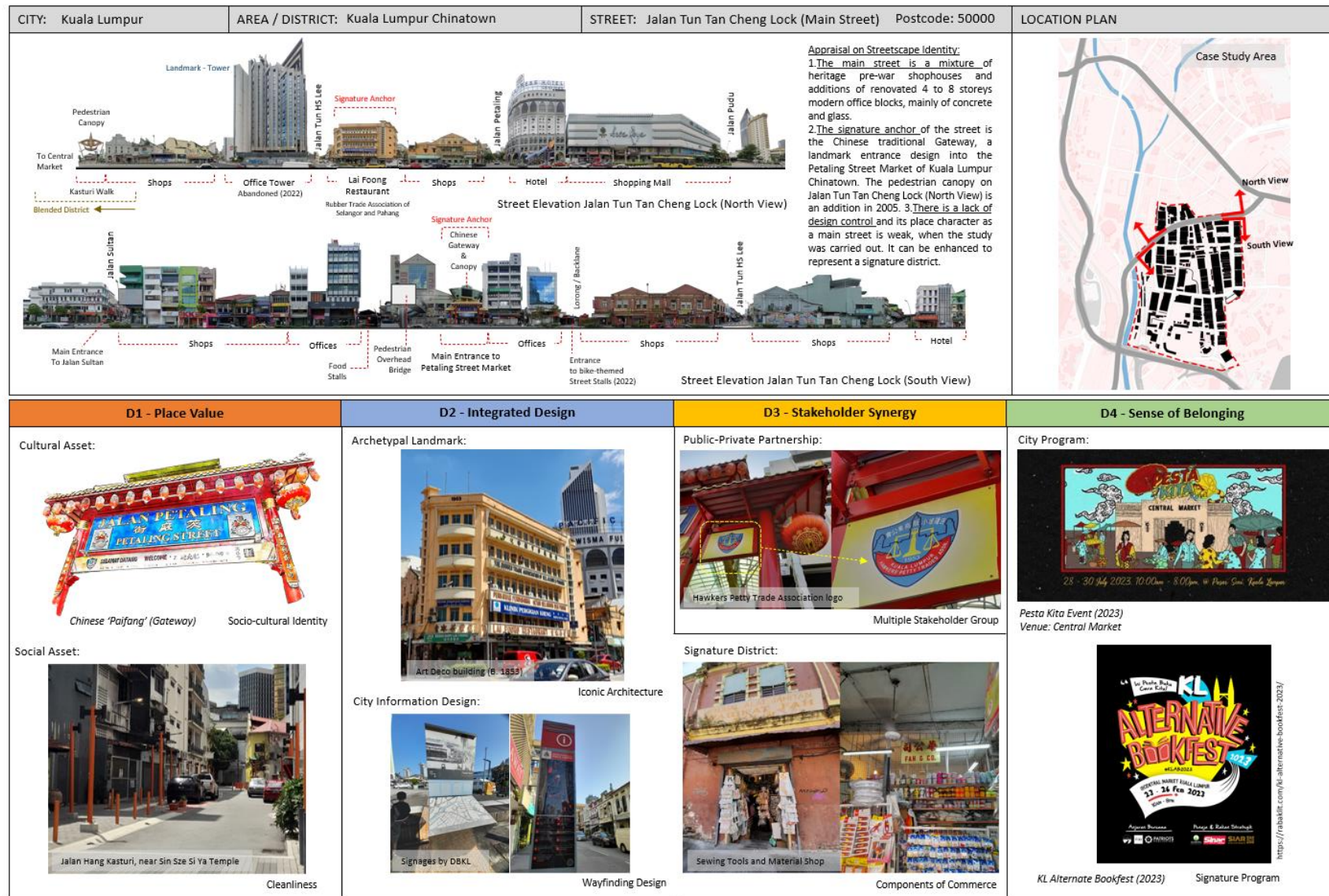**Figure 4.** Findings from Observation through Place Character Appraisal of Street No.1

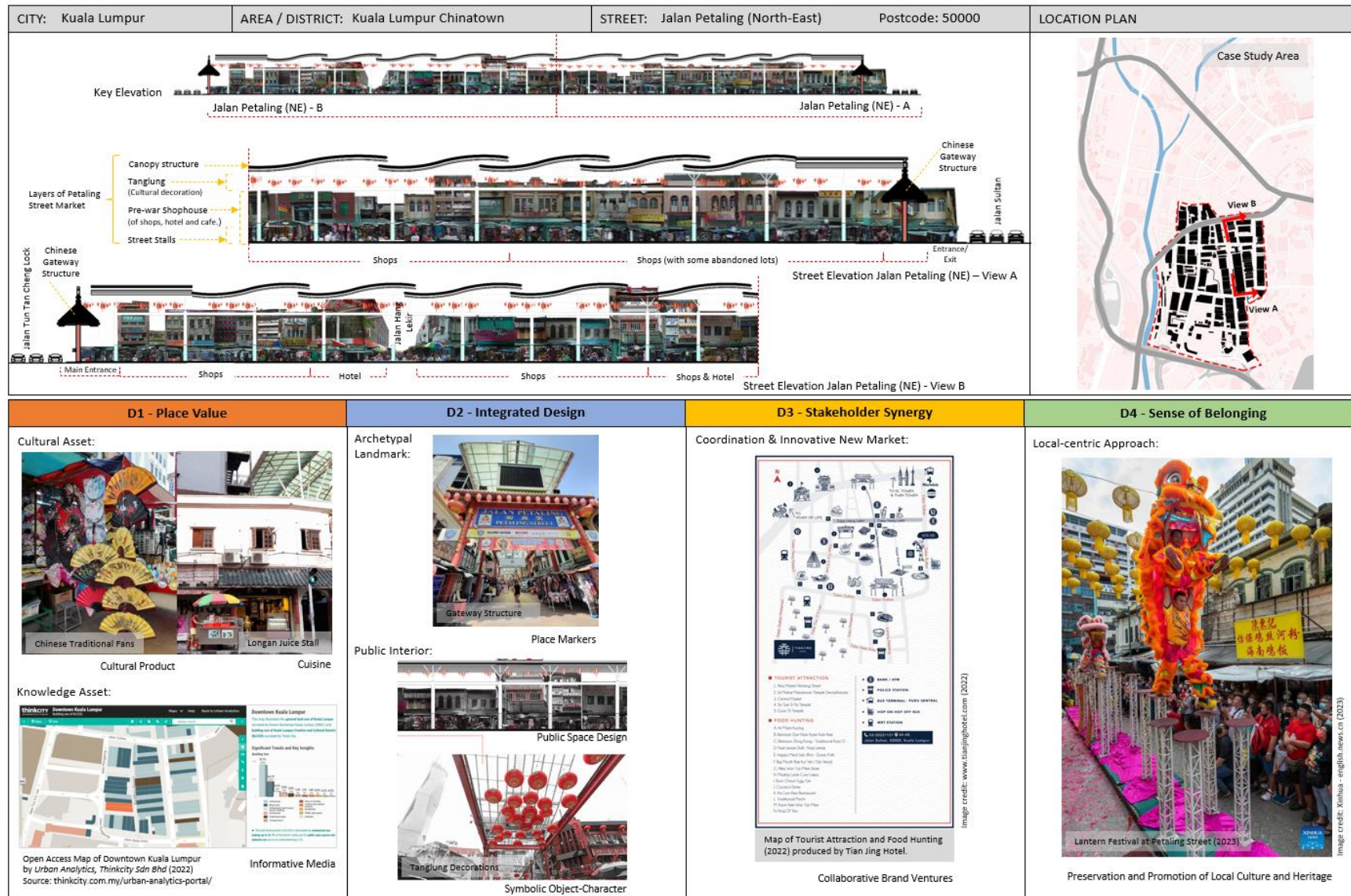**Figure 5.** Findings from Observation through Place Character Appraisal – Street 2

Figure 6. Findings from Observation through Place Character Appraisal – Street 3

3.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The multiple sources of datasets were analysed through a systematic process to critically examine and consolidate the place character of the selected case study area. The final phase of the multistage urban design analysis consolidated the rich thick data of both semi-structured interview and on-field observation. The results provided the essence of city branding from the semi-structured interview that became a foundational roadmap to develop the framework of attributes and criteria to design the place character appraisal checklist that was validated on-field through the site observation process. From the study, the results presented four (4) domains, twelve (12) attributes and fifty-two (52) criteria of tangible and intangible components in the cityscape. The findings from both datasets were consolidated in a mapping page describing the categories of the four domains which are (1) *Place Value*, (2) *Integrated Design*, (3) *Stakeholder Synergy* and (4) *Sense of Belonging*. The results are described through the city, area, district, street name, elevational study, diagrammatic mapping, photos and images obtained by the author and reliable secondary sources. The results and findings of the on-field study are described in a holistic manner through the four (4) domains. The results presented are from ten (10) streets of the selected case study area of a signature district, Kuala Lumpur Chinatown, of which three (3) are presented here in the article through Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Tangible and intangible attributes of the cityscape require a comprehensive and holistic method to assess a city's place character. The role of the empirical research process is to conduct the research in a valid, reliable, and structured method. Physical place character could be enhanced through the understanding of integrated design disciplines in the built environment. City brands that distinguish one city from the other. While city reputation may be an important goal from an economic perspective, the city and place identity stems from a genuine context defined by the history, local culture and community. There are multiple benefits of place branding in the context of cities through the understanding of its assets and place value. Brand simplifies decisions, brand create awareness and impact and brand align businesses and people. In the phenomenological perspective, cities evolve over time experiencing their own urban morphology due to multiple forces, cultural and social construct happening to the urban environment, yet certain uniqueness of traits and identity remains steadfast.

The diversity of culture and place identity in cities in Malaysia is an opportunity to be further explored and studied in the context of place branding and city branding. *Place value* has been identified as a key component in identifying a place or city asset. A city asset is any tangible and intangible component that brings value to a city (Carmona, 2019). The process of city branding first includes the identification of authentic local characteristics of a place. Authentic or distinct characteristics of a place is key in appraising its element of merit that could develop the place brand or city brand (Nursanty et al, 2023). As design is an instrumental component in the process of building the image and identity of a city, it is important to include the many design disciplines that create the image of a city (Lynch, 1960; Ghafar et al, 2022).

The phenomenology of identity through brand-oriented place character can be further understood. The practice of brand identity in a place enforces and highlights the character of the place and its organization. Brand-oriented strategy is able to design and manage a strong branding presence and equity, as branding is a holistic and sustainable approach in emphasizing quality in all aspects. Design sense and curatorial vision enhances place image and identity. Furniture design of both public and private space is among key attributes in streetscape character. It gives the street and area a distinct place character. Vernacular typography and signage design exhibiting cultural references are among key attributes in enhancing place image and identity through a signature brand identity. Delightful streetscape becomes an attraction of place through an integrated design. There must be a new approach in place development for the city of Kuala Lumpur. This should be researched in both its macro and micro level by the relevant stakeholders, especially in the real-estate sector represented by developers who make proposals and investments in the city. The governance of the city, who approve such proposals should take into account not only financial gains of the city, but the social and cultural significance of a Malaysia that is rich in culture, tradition and identity, unlike any other nation in this world. The strategy for emerging developers and city managers in the country must be a balanced approach of innovation and local values.

City brand identity combines the component of city imageability and city branding. When city brand identity is introduced and applied authentically in urban revitalization and city development projects often

result as a well-received attraction and perceived as organically grown and original, despite showcasing attributes of a hybrid identity. The opportunities should not only be measured through economic returns, but the contribution that place character provides in elevating the sense of belonging of local communities and attract sustainable place development practices. Projects discussed in this research have encompassed samples of emerging place developers who look into quality design, maintenance and managing the brand value of the place. Design, together with good city brand identity management is an important influencing factor in urban branding and effective sustainability (Rehan, 2013). From the research, the place character appraisal tool is described in a comprehensive manner through domains, attributes and criteria in the checklist in Figure 7 below.
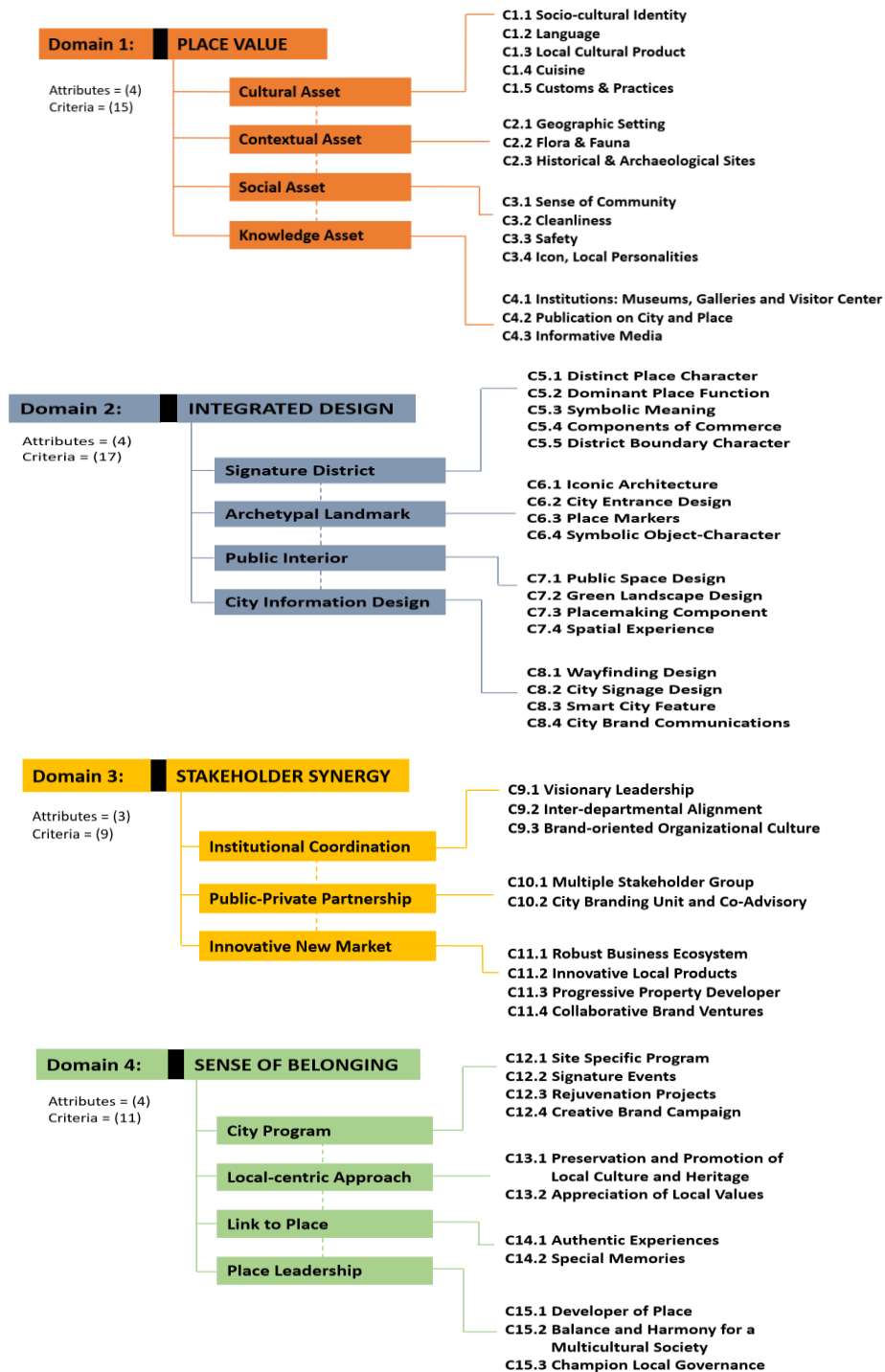

Figure 7. Place Character Appraisal Tool Checklist (Author, 2024).

4.1. Strengths and limitations

Through our qualitative approach, we had the opportunity to individually gain an in-depth understanding of their professional and personal views on components of place character in the city context from their vast experience in living and working in the city. The key informants were selected based on their credentials and conversance with projects in urban developments. The comprehensive topics discussed in the semi-structured interview is an important aspect in obtaining rich thick data, covering topics not only limited to tangible aspects of the cityscape, but the intangible aspects that are equally important and are both assets for a city to be delightful, prosperous and sustainable. The thematic domains and attributes had undergone internal validation. The second stage of the main data collection method using an on-field observation of a selected case study area is an important process to validate and re-iterate the attributes in the place character appraisal checklist instrument used in reality on-site. The on-field observation method selected a signature district in Kuala Lumpur city as a case study area that provided real-time evidence from the lived-experience and emerging reality on the ground.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Place character appraisal tool is an empirical method through the understanding of the cityscape's tangible and intangible attributes in developing city branding strategies. City branding is a holistic strategy to appraise place character and its place value for sustainable development of cities (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Phenomenology as a methodological approach is uniquely employed through this study as using qualitative methods provides an empirical process to learn from the experiences of others. The lived experiences and practice of place branding could be better recognized through the integrated elements and principles of urban design. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's firsthand experiences within the settings and context in this world. In the context of place branding for city development, distinct place character becomes a highly valuable asset that is often overlooked as a comprehensive prospect.

The research area of city branding, and place branding is still in its infancy in Malaysia, yet it could be observed that approaches in city branding with its phenomenological impact are seen happening in pocket developments throughout the city. The phenomenology of place branding is a new explorative subject among scholars, yet the study of place branding and city branding is a study with an increasing interest among cross-disciplines like communication, tourism, architecture, urban planning, environmental psychology and more. Neighbourhoods and districts with a distinct place identity in the city require a holistic understanding and better attention in urban development decisions that could integrate economic, social, cultural, environmental benefits. The place character appraisal tool developed in this study identified four (4) domains that comprehensively identify the overarching aspects of both tangible and intangible features in the cityscape for city branding. The domains are (1) *Place Value*, (2) *Integrated Design*, (3) *Stakeholder Synergy* and (4) *Sense of Belonging*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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