

Adaptable Place-Making Strategies for Urban Inclusivity: Insights for Mediterranean Cities

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This study explores adaptable place-making strategies to foster inclusive public spaces in Mediterranean cities. It examines how Penang's community-driven urban initiatives, as a successful urban planning case, can be transferred to Mediterranean contexts. Through in-depth interviews with urban planners, cultural practitioners, and community leaders, along with participant observations, successful strategies for place-making were identified. This research emphasises the role of gastronomy, cultural festivals, and street art in strengthening place identity and the significance of participatory governance in fostering long-term inclusivity. It offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and urban planners, advocating for an integrated approach that combines universal design principles, self-organised initiatives, and effective governance frameworks. This flexible strategy ensures that public spaces are inclusive and adaptable to diverse needs, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging and community.

Keywords: *Urban Inclusivity, Place-Making, Participatory Governance, Cultural Vibrancy, Mediterranean Cities*

Introduction

Urbanisation remains one of the most transformative forces of the twenty-first century, shaping not only the physical form of cities but also the quality of life within them. While urban growth offers opportunities for innovation, economic development, and cultural exchange, it also brings challenges related to inequality, exclusion, and the fragmentation of public space (UN-Habitat, 2022). Against this backdrop, inclusive public spaces have become central to sustainable urban planning. Such spaces provide arenas for civic participation, encourage social interaction across diverse groups, and contribute to a shared sense of belonging. Designing and maintaining inclusive urban environments is therefore critical to ensuring that cities are both resilient and equitable (Moreno et al., 2021).

The Mediterranean region illustrates these tensions particularly well. Cities across Southern Europe and North Africa are experiencing pressures from mass tourism, migration, and rapid urban change. These dynamics frequently exacerbate issues of affordability, gentrification, and cultural displacement, raising urgent questions about how public spaces can remain accessible and meaningful for local residents (Mejjad, et al., 2022). Developing adaptable models of place-making that can withstand such pressures is thus essential for the region.

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This paper investigates whether strategies from Penang, Malaysia, might offer transferable lessons for Mediterranean cities. Over the last five decades, Penang has undergone remarkable economic and cultural transformation. Its GDP per capita rose from RM4,739 in 1970 to RM69,684 in 2023, alongside an annual average growth rate of 5.0% (Penang Institute, 2023). The island has also developed a thriving tourism economy and is now one of Malaysia's most urbanised states, with 92.5% of its population living in urban areas as of 2020 (Hilmy, 2024). Beyond these statistics, Penang has become internationally recognised for its street art, multicultural gastronomy, and annual festivals, all of which contribute to the city's identity and vibrancy. While these indicators suggest economic success, this study also examines how such practices foster inclusivity, cultural dialogue, and community pride.

The research is guided by the question: How can the place-making strategies employed in Penang be adapted to promote urban inclusivity in Mediterranean cities? To address this, the study has three aims:

- To identify the place-making strategies in Penang that underpin its cultural vibrancy and social cohesion;
- To evaluate the extent to which these strategies may be relevant for Mediterranean urban contexts; and
- To develop evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners seeking to create more inclusive public spaces in Mediterranean cities.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the scholarly literature on inclusive place-making and its intersections with cultural practices, governance, and participatory design. This is followed by a description of the research methodology and data collection. The findings highlight Penang's use of gastronomy, cultural events, and participatory governance in cultivating inclusive urban environments. The paper concludes by considering the transferability of these practices to Mediterranean cities and offering recommendations for urban planners and decision-makers.

Literature Review

Inclusive place-making is an approach to urban development that emphasises accessibility, equity, and representation in the design and use of public spaces. It is underpinned by the principle that cities should reflect the needs and aspirations of all residents, not only dominant groups (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012). This notion aligns closely with the "right to the city" framework (Harvey, 2008), which calls for democratic participation in urban planning and equitable access to urban resources. Scholars argue that inclusive place-making requires active community involvement, culturally sensitive planning, and governance structures that prioritise diversity and social justice (Gehl, 2011; Landry, 2012).

Yet, many urban areas continue to suffer from fragmentation, where public spaces become either privatised, inaccessible, or disconnected from community needs. Mela (2014) and Van & López (2010) highlight that such dynamics often lead to exclusion and alienation. More recently, Qi et al. (2024) demonstrate how

unequal access to public spaces reinforces socio-economic divides. Segura (2023) introduces the concept of urbicide—the destruction or hollowing out of urban life through displacement, disinvestment, or over-commercialisation—reminding scholars and practitioners that inclusive place-making is not only about construction, but also about resisting forces that undermine community life.

Cultural expression and gastronomy are increasingly recognised as powerful tools for inclusive urban regeneration. Food markets, street food stalls, and culinary festivals can activate public spaces, strengthen intergenerational ties, and promote cross-cultural interaction (Montgomery, 2007; Mariano et al., 2022). For example, the George Town Festival in Penang combines arts, performance, and food in ways that celebrate multicultural heritage while engaging local communities. Comparable dynamics are evident in Mediterranean cities such as Barcelona and Palermo, where food and festivals are intertwined with civic identity and tourism (Richards & Palmer, 2010; Caselli et al., 2024). By embedding everyday practices into shared public experiences, gastronomy and cultural events can reduce social divides and foster resilience (Zukin, 1995).

Emerging scholarship also points to gastronomy as a component of creative place-making, where food practices are used to advance sustainability, health, and inclusivity agendas (Visković, 2021). The integration of technology and art further expands this scope, with interactive installations, projections, and digital storytelling being used in cities like Sydney and New York to animate public spaces and encourage participation (Wall, 2013).

Another key dimension of inclusive place-making is participatory design, which involves citizens directly in shaping urban environments. Ingrassia (2022) highlights the importance of participatory design in promoting sustainability and diversity, while her later work (2024) demonstrates how gamification and interactive “design games” can engage children and young people in co-creating public spaces.

Street art provides a particularly striking example. Once seen as peripheral or even illicit, murals and interactive installations are now recognised as catalysts for social engagement and urban revitalisation. In Penang, large-scale murals have transformed alleyways into cultural landmarks, fostering both civic pride and economic activity. Similar outcomes have been documented in cities such as Lisbon, Athens, and Naples, where community-led art projects have revitalised neglected areas and built new forms of collective identity (Zukin, 1995; Richards & Palmer, 2010).

Taken together, these strands of literature demonstrate that inclusive place-making is a multifaceted practice drawing from participatory governance, cultural heritage, gastronomy, and creative interventions. By prioritising accessibility and equity, these practices can transform fragmented spaces into vibrant public realms. However, inclusivity is not automatic: it requires intentional design, community collaboration, and governance mechanisms that safeguard diversity. This review suggests that while the theoretical principles are broadly shared, empirical evidence from different cultural contexts, such as Penang and Mediterranean cities, offers valuable opportunities for testing transferability and identifying best practices.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine place-making strategies in Penang, Malaysia, and to explore their potential relevance for Mediterranean cities. A qualitative design was selected due to its capacity to capture complex cultural and social dynamics embedded in everyday practices of urban life (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research team was based in Penang for the duration of the fieldwork (March–July 2023), which provided continuous exposure to the local urban environment and facilitated strong connections with planners, cultural practitioners, and community groups. This embedded presence strengthened trust with participants, enabled access to insider perspectives, and allowed for repeated visits to sites of interest. The researchers' sustained engagement also ensured contextual sensitivity and cultural familiarity, reducing the risk of outsider bias.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted in Penang with urban planners, municipal officers, cultural practitioners (artists, festival organisers, and culinary experts), and community leaders. Participants were identified through local professional networks and snowball sampling, made possible by the researchers' strong connections in Penang. Interviews took place in person at workplaces, cultural venues, and community centres, lasting 45–70 minutes.

Each participant received a written explanation of the study's aims, along with a definition of place-making and inclusivity, and assurances of anonymity. The open-ended interview questions explored participants' needs and motivations for inclusive place-making, as well as the success factors and benefits of related initiatives. They also examined the roles of gastronomy, cultural events, and street art, identified barriers to inclusivity, and considered issues of governance and participation. Finally, participants were invited to reflect on lessons that could be transferable to other contexts. Interviews continued until saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2006).

Participant observations were carried out at cultural and social events between April and July 2023. Key sites included: George Town Festival (three days of observation of cultural performances, exhibitions, and workshops). Food markets such as Chowrasta and Pulau Tikus, weekly visits over six weeks, recording social interactions, inclusivity practices, and accessibility. Street art locations in George Town (Armenian Street, Hin Bus Depot, and adjacent neighbourhoods), documenting the role of art in activating space and engaging diverse publics. The researchers' base in Penang enabled frequent, repeated observation, which offered a richer longitudinal view of community participation and inclusivity than one-off visits.

All interviews and observation notes were transcribed and coded in NVivo 14. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic process, complemented by Gioia et al.'s (2013) pattern-induction strategy. Themes were generated inductively and validated through triangulation of interview data, field notes, and documentary sources such as festival brochures and planning reports. Member checking with five participants further strengthened credibility. Direct quotations and observation excerpts were incorporated to ground findings.

Findings and Discussion

Data collection involved qualitative method, data revealed key themes of gastronomy, cultural celebrations, and participatory governance as pillars of successful place-making (Gehl, 2011; Landry, 2012; Malek and Costa, 2014).

Findings highlight how Penang's strategies promote inclusivity and social integration. Gastronomy emerged as a powerful tool for fostering inter-community dialogue, with open-air food markets and festivals transforming urban spaces into hubs of cultural exchange (Montgomery, 2007). The fusion of Chinese, Indian, and Malay cuisines in Penang's culinary landscape exemplifies this phenomenon, where dishes like Nasi Kandar, Char Koay Teow, and Asam Laksa reflect the harmonious blend of diverse cultural influences, further enhancing social cohesion and mutual understanding. This concept is also applicable to Mediterranean cities, where food plays a central role in daily life. However, adaptation requires addressing issues of commercialisation and gentrification, which risk displacing local food cultures.

Events such as the George Town Festival and smaller community-based cultural programmes demonstrated the potential of festivals to revitalise urban spaces and create a sense of shared belonging (Richards & Palmer, 2010). Cultural festivals have revitalised urban spaces and strengthened local identity. These events encourage diverse participation and challenge socio-spatial segregation. Crucially, participatory governance ensured that these initiatives were inclusive and sustainable, with collaborative networks involving government agencies, local businesses, and community organisations driving decision-making processes (Caselli et al., 2024; Healey, 2006). When assessing the adaptability of these strategies to Mediterranean cities, key considerations included balancing cultural preservation with urban modernisation, ensuring equitable access to public spaces, and leveraging the outdoor-friendly climate for enhanced public engagement (Mariano et al., 2022). The research found that the gastronomic and cultural focus of Penang's place-making aligns with Mediterranean cities' characteristics, where food and heritage play central roles in public life (Morris, 2019). However, successful adaptation requires addressing unique local challenges, such as the integration of migrant populations, managing over-tourism, and ensuring the sustainability of cultural initiatives. Similar initiatives in Mediterranean cities must consider the impact of over-tourism and ensure that cultural festivals do not lead to exclusivity or social stratification.

Street art, including murals and interactive installations, contributed to the reimagining of neglected urban areas, attracting a diverse audience and fostering civic pride (Zukin, 1995). These artistic expressions played a crucial role in transforming urban spaces into vibrant cultural hubs. The integration of street art into urban planning helped to create visually engaging environments that promote social interaction and community engagement. Participatory governance ensured that these initiatives were inclusive and sustainable, with collaborative networks involving government agencies, local businesses, and community organisations driving decision-making processes (Caselli et al., 2024; Healey, 2006). When assessing the adaptability of these strategies to Mediterranean cities, key considerations included balancing cultural preservation with urban modernisation, ensuring equitable access to public spaces, and leveraging the outdoor-friendly climate for enhanced public

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Adaptation to Mediterranean Cities

The concept of place-making strategies rooted in participatory governance, as demonstrated in Penang, is applicable to Mediterranean cities, where food and heritage play central roles in public life (Morris, 2019). When assessing the adaptability of these strategies, key considerations include balancing cultural preservation with urban modernisation, ensuring equitable access to public spaces, and leveraging the outdoor-friendly climate for enhanced public engagement (Mariano et al., 2022).

Mediterranean cities could benefit from adopting Penang's evidence-based practices to foster public spaces that celebrate diversity, strengthen community bonds, and support long-term urban resilience. However, successful adaptation requires addressing unique local challenges, such as the integration of migrant populations, managing over-tourism, and ensuring the sustainability of cultural initiatives. Similar initiatives in Mediterranean cities must consider the impact of over-tourism and ensure that cultural festivals do not lead to exclusivity or social stratification.

Future research should explore the scalability of these frameworks in diverse socio-political contexts, as well as their impact on economic and environmental sustainability. By integrating local actors in decision-making processes, Mediterranean cities can ensure inclusive urban development and create vibrant, culturally rich public spaces.

Implementation Strategies for Inclusive Place-Making

To translate theoretical insights into practice, several strategies can be employed to ensure the successful integration of gastronomy, cultural events, and street art into urban public spaces. These approaches include the use of universal design principles, the promotion of self-organised initiatives, and the establishment of effective governance frameworks that empower local communities and stakeholders.

Universal Design Principles

One effective strategy for promoting inclusivity in public spaces is the adoption of universal design principles. These principles aim to create environments that are accessible and usable by all people, regardless of their physical, mental, or sensory abilities (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012). Universal design in public spaces, including

those incorporating gastronomy, cultural events, and street art, ensures that people from diverse backgrounds and abilities can participate fully in the social and cultural life of the community. For example, food markets and street art installations can be designed with accessibility in mind, ensuring that they are welcoming and usable by individuals with disabilities. By incorporating universal design, public spaces can become truly inclusive environments that promote equal participation and engagement.

Self-Organised Initiatives

Another important strategy is to support self-organised initiatives, which are grassroots efforts led by local communities to transform public spaces. These initiatives, often emerging from within marginalized or underrepresented groups, are effective in fostering inclusivity by empowering local people to take ownership of their spaces and influence the way those spaces are used. Self-organised initiatives, such as community-led food markets, street art projects, or cultural festivals, have been shown to reduce social inequalities by creating spaces that reflect the needs and aspirations of local populations (Omholt, 2019). These bottom-up initiatives can bypass the bureaucratic barriers often associated with top-down urban planning, allowing for more organic and context-specific interventions. By encouraging activism and community-driven decision-making, these approaches can significantly enhance social inclusion in urban areas.

Governance Frameworks

Governance frameworks are integral to the successful implementation of inclusive place-making initiatives. Governance structures that empower local communities and encourage collaboration between different stakeholders—such as local governments, businesses, and civil society—are essential for the long-term success of inclusive urban development (Malek & Costa, 2014). Collaborative planning models, which involve partnerships between various stakeholders, have been proven effective in ensuring that public spaces reflect the needs and aspirations of the local community. In Penang, participatory governance has enabled local residents to have a voice in the development of public spaces, fostering a sense of ownership and promoting the agency of marginalized groups (Malek & Costa, 2014). Effective governance frameworks not only facilitate the integration of gastronomy, cultural events, and street art into public spaces but also ensure that these initiatives are sustainable and beneficial for the entire community.

Introduction of an Integrated Approach

The call for a re-imagining of urban studies suggests that planners should focus on the dynamic processes of urbanisation rather than viewing the city as a static entity. Segura (2023) emphasises the need for new theoretical and methodological approaches to better understand the complexities of contemporary urban life. This highlights a significant gap in the current knowledge, as traditional urban studies may not fully capture the evolving and fragmented nature of modern cities.

Addressing this gap is crucial for developing inclusive place-making strategies that can adapt to the dynamic and diverse needs of urban populations. To respond to this call this research introduces an integrated approach that combines universal design principles, self-organised initiatives, and effective governance frameworks to create inclusive public spaces. Considering the dynamics of facing different governance structures, which may be beyond the control of urban planners and local communities, and the fact that each area may have different cultures and tolerance to change—some areas being very multicultural and others not—this research recommends conducting a preliminary feasibility study before implementation. This feasibility study should assess the local context, including cultural diversity and governance structures, to ensure that the integration of approaches is tailored to the specific needs and conditions of each area. Additionally, it is crucial to remain open to change and modify the approach if it does not work as intended. By adopting this flexible and context-sensitive strategy, urban planners can create public spaces that are truly inclusive and reflective of the diverse needs and aspirations of the community.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the academic discourse on urban inclusivity by examining Penang's adaptable place-making strategies. Findings suggest that gastronomy, cultural festivals, and participatory governance offer valuable frameworks for fostering inclusive public spaces in Mediterranean cities. However, adaptation must be context-specific, accounting for unique socio-political conditions. Future research should explore the economic and environmental impacts of these strategies and their scalability across different urban settings.

While previous research has highlighted the importance of culture and art in urban inclusivity, our study underscores the significance of street art as a new finding. Additionally, the innovative and creative gastronomic mix of cultures in Penang is emphasized as a crucial element in promoting social cohesion and cultural exchange.

The introduction of an integrated approach, combining universal design principles, self-organised initiatives, and effective governance frameworks, is highlighted as a key contribution of this research. This approach ensures that public spaces are not only inclusive but also adaptable to the diverse needs and aspirations of different communities. By conducting preliminary feasibility studies and remaining open to modifications, urban planners can tailor these strategies to specific local contexts, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability. This flexible and context-sensitive strategy is essential for creating vibrant, culturally rich public spaces that promote social cohesion and community building.

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