

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A PUBLIC ART GALLERY AS AN EDUCATION CENTRE IN KUCHING, SARAWAK

**Wong Neng Lee**

*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*

**Wan Jamarul Imran Bin Wan Abdullah Thani**

*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*

**Mohamad Faizuan Bin Mat**

*Universiti Malaysia Sarawak*

Corresponding Author

[16020106@siswa.unimas.my](mailto:16020106@siswa.unimas.my)

Building a Public Art Gallery is a dream of many individuals in Kuching, Sarawak. Kuching possesses colourful multicultural identities and has been producing different types of art that reflect the uniqueness of these identities. However, until now no public art gallery serves as a platform for Sarawakian artists, particularly in Kuching, to display their artworks and crafts and at the same time educate the community. This paper compiles the literature review on the importance of a public art gallery as an education centre for the society. The data was collected using the qualitative method, focusing on in-depth interviews to identify and analyse why a public art gallery is vital in Kuching, Sarawak, like a lot of other states in Malaysia. The informants were selected by purposive sampling and then analysed using Data Analysis Lamnek. This paper analyses the informants' perceptions. It concludes with a suggestion of a temporary public art gallery in Kuching, Sarawak and some future studies.

**Keywords:** public art gallery, data analysis Lamnek, education centre, purposive sampling, Sarawak.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Situated at the west coast of Sarawak, Kuching is a cosmopolitan city with various ethnic groups; each has a unique cultural heritage, identified from the distinctive handicrafts and costumes. These traditional heritages need to be captured and transferred to papers and canvases for the next generation.

Countless creative artists in Kuching have created and painted unique and stunning masterpieces. If these art pieces are appropriately preserved, they will increase in value in fifty to a hundred years' time. Based on this, there is a need for Sarawak to own a gallery to exhibit all the artworks of the local artists (Liong, 2016 December 13, Sarawak Tribune).

In other states of Malaysia, the improvement and management of beautiful art buildings are ongoing. National Visual Arts Gallery is the first National Public Art Gallery in Malaysia, and it was built in 1958 to not only display artworks but also to document all the artworks and activities carried out for future study and research. The vision of National Visual Arts Gallery is to become the centre of development and collection of National Fine Arts masterpieces as well as becoming a National Art trust holder. With more than 4,300 permanent art pieces collected by National Visual Arts Gallery, they not only help artists to display their artworks but also introduce the artists to the public (Salmah, 2015 August 21, Metro). Exhibitions have brought the artists to a higher level (Anonymous, 2017 August 9, Press Reader). Now, National Visual Arts Gallery has opened its branches in Ipoh, Perak in 2015 and Langkawi in 2018 (Salmah, 2015 August 21, Metro).

Johor Art Gallery used to be a building called Bangunan Dato' Abdullah Jaafar which was the official residence of Dato' Abdullah Jaafar who used to be Johor's Chief Minister. It is being used as a gallery since 1910. Pahang Art Museum was a former District Office JKR No. K130 and was renovated on 24 February 1999. Terengganu Art Gallery was built to ensure teenagers could continue to participate in the making of local crafts such as silk painting, Batik, and songket. Negeri Sembilan Art Gallery was built to mainly focus on arts especially dance, theatre, music and fine arts. Kelantan Fine Art Gallery was officially opened by YB Dato' Haji Mohd Amar Bin Abdullah, on 9 December 2013. Sabah State Art Gallery which is called Bangunan Konservasi Balai Seni Lukis Sabah (BSLS) was built with the cost of RM16 million under the local government which became the first green gallery in Malaysia.

This gallery showcases more than 3,376 art pieces created by local and foreign artists, estimated to cost about RM10 million. Sabah Art Gallery has encouraged more visitors to visit Sabah. In 1941, a small art museum was built in St Xavier Institute in Penang. Sarawak Art Museum was started in 2006 but closed in 2016 for displaying Sarawak Museum artefacts which were moved from Dewan Tun Abdul Razak. It shows that every state has its focus in art. Some art galleries were even opened since 1910 and Kuching is disappointingly left behind without a single public art gallery.

Hence, it is essential for Kuching to have a public art gallery that can be fully utilised for community building in the form of exchanging ideas between local and foreign artists. It is a necessary pre-requisite for the growth and development of Kuching's art industry, the tourism industry and the preservation of the unique cultures of Sarawak.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. *Art galleries in Kuching***

Although there is no public art gallery in Kuching, there are a few ongoing art exhibitions in private art galleries and art fairs in shopping complexes or hotels by local artists. Famous art galleries in Kuching for the past few years were Nepenthes Art Gallery, Ramsay Ong Art Gallery, and Gallery M. However, these galleries were already closed, mainly attributable to high rental costs and maintenance.

Nonetheless, there are new architectural-based art galleries, namely, Galleria, Saradise and Haus. Haus art projects are carried out by young art lovers. Borneo 744 is another space for art lovers, which has started its operation earlier 2017. It holds numerous art projects with conscious efforts to create awareness on the importance of arts in Kuching.

The researchers observed a positive development in the art industry with the proliferation of art projects and exhibitions in recent times. In July 2017, Sarawak Artists Society (SAS) held its exhibition at Hilton Hotel in conjunction with the Rainforest Music Festival. During Sarawak Teacher's Day celebration in 2017, several paintings were displayed in Summer Mall. Also, this year, 2018, a fine art exhibition by UITM Diploma students was held at Vivacity Mall. Another significant event was the Hornbill International Conference and Art Exhibition 2017 held in May 2017 at Riverside Majestic Hotel.

Local artists showcase and sell their paintings in shops like Indah Cafe and Museum Cafe. It is clear that the number of art exhibitions is springing up in Kuching. However, it is doubtful that hotels and shopping malls are suitable sites for exhibitions, especially in sustaining the arts industry. Art experts stated that art museums are magical places where visitors enjoy and stay more focused on the art masterpieces as compared to having art exhibitions at hotels or shopping malls (Friedland & Shoemaker, 2008). Therefore, art exhibitions should be displayed in public art galleries.

In the recent past, the Sarawak Museum Art Gallery was opened for the public to showcase artworks. However, it was closed due to lack of space to display the artefacts. Moreover, art activities in Kuching have been increasing these days. For instance, the Sarawak Museum Art Gallery was highly patronised and fully occupied from 2009 to 2016.

## **2.2. The objectives of the study**

The present study aims to broadly examine the relationship between art, artists and society, focusing on a group of art enthusiasts in Kuching, the capital city of Sarawak. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Identify the importance of a public art gallery in Kuching, Sarawak
- ii. Analyse the importance of a public art gallery as an education centre in Kuching, Sarawak

## **2.3. The importance of a public art gallery as an education centre**

Data collection focuses on the importance of a public art gallery in Kuching. The analysis hopes to convince the community, government and NGO on the importance of a public art gallery for the community in Kuching, Sarawak. Establishment of a public art gallery in Kuching is nowhere to be seen. Kuching did have a few art galleries before such as the Textile Art Gallery and the Fine Art Gallery under the Sarawak Museum. Though they were not perfect, the galleries did disseminate educational information to the visitors especially the local students from schools and universities. Exposure to these arts is of educational value to students. Now they were all closed. How do we educate the next generation on culture, beliefs and Sarawak's art without a public art gallery?

A mixed-method study on art museums and their links to neighbourhood change was conducted by Meyer (2016). Art museums were found to be a support bridge between diverse social groups. Privileged groups were able to build relationships

with art museums in developing economies, thus improving their statuses amongst their institutional peers. This observation is relevant and applicable to Kuching as a city which is experiencing tremendous growth in economics. A public art gallery in Kuching will help make a positive change in the socio-economic aspect of the people. When this happens, education automatically takes place when we learn to do something.

The establishment of a public art gallery in Kuching is an essential step towards the development of the art, culture and tourism industry as well as the creation of new jobs; a contribution to the socio-economic development of the Sarawak state and Malaysia. As artworks on Sarawak's rich and unique culture will be preserved and displayed in a public art gallery, visitors will gain more knowledge about the identity and origin of the people of Sarawak. Now, we only know more about the Iban and Bidayuh heritage; what about the Penan, Punan, Bisayah and lesser-known tribes? A public art gallery is important to educate our new generation in getting to know more about our rich culture.

A study is exploring the use of art galleries in small rural or suburban state colleges within the Florida College System and the function of those galleries by the public, campus communities and students were conducted by William (2016). The findings concluded that small state college art galleries are crucial resources for students, campus and community users and each reflects a small-scale function of a state college as a whole. Based on this, it suffices to say that a public art gallery will be a great resource to college students in Kuching as there are many campuses and colleges in Kuching. Art students especially those in upper secondary and form six will significantly benefit from it. College and university students will have more research options. As educational values are dispersed through a gallery, our community will have more knowledge and appreciation for fine arts.

Research has been conducted by Soltis (2013) in three art museums located in Washington, D.C., examining the art museum attendance of school children aged 5 to 18 years old. He surveyed and interviewed four educators from three art museums. Sixty-six percent of elementary students who had been to an art museum came with their parents while 70% of high school students visited an art museum on school trips. There is a high percentage of students ranging from ages 3 to 18 who had visited the galleries. Why do we not bring our children to the private galleries for a visit? One of the main reasons is that private and public art galleries have different objectives and aim for their existence. We need a public art gallery to reach out to school children. Money and space have always been issues for small private

museums. According to York (2010), her findings show that every museum endeavours to preserve, educate and present according to its missions. Funding must be there to support the museums' projects which is usually the biggest obstacle to providing the best standards for preservation and managing collections. This is one of the biggest reasons why a private art gallery usually stops operating after 5 to 8 years. A public art gallery is, therefore, a necessity to educate our younger generation.

Kindler and Darras (1997) explained that museums could offer valuable opportunities for development of skills for a lifetime of learning, learning that is sometimes most effective when it is unexpected and informal. In a quiet setting of an art museum, large groups of school children can be seen gazing a huge art piece which is more significant than their bodies. Art-making activities and engaging in discussion; these children can learn with the masters and gain an understanding of the world through art. As art museums are learning institutions, visiting museums can provide visualisation to the stories and lessons children have learned both in school and in their private lives. It can also help to educate the public to foster a love of the arts.

An art gallery also helps to address health concerns. Hill (2015) surveyed Art Engagement Program (AEP), a non-clinical, specialised arts program for adults with Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) and their caregiver at The Phoenix Art Museum (PAM) and Banner Alzheimer's Institute (BAI). Interviews with informants revealed that both groups experienced pleasure in the PAM's environment. This proved that communities with different kinds of health concerns could be educated with involvement in taking care of their loved ones, including their neighbours and friends.

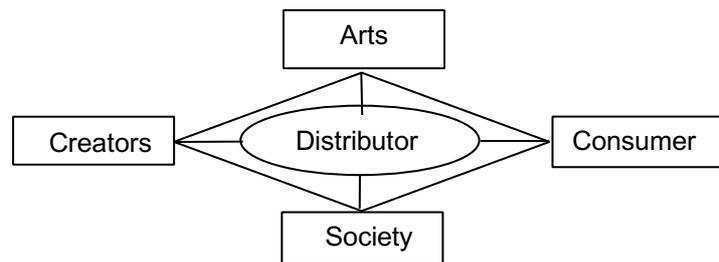
Camic, Ischler, and Pearman (2014) agreed with Hill (2015) upon his discovery after carrying out an eight-week art gallery based intervention at two different galleries for mild to moderate dementia patients and their caregivers. His participants enjoyed themselves and were satisfied with his programme where social inclusion and social engagement were encouraged. The caring relationships between the carers and PWD were enhanced. There was support for the personhood of PWD and stimulation of cognitive processes in attention and concentration; all through the interventions at both galleries. Lamar (2015) research on impacts of Art Museum-based Dementia Programming on the Participating Care Partners. Care partners reported that the program afforded them multiple benefits for their well-being, including stress relief and reduced feelings of social isolation. Care partners also reported positive impacts on their relationship with the person with dementia as they

are enjoying the arts. Gallery also plays a role in educating the community on health concerns.

The role art museums play in neighbourhood change, especially socio-economic changes and in creating high quality, inclusive and economically sustainable neighbourhoods were examined by Meyer (2016). His research discovered that art museums are more inclined to give benefits to their neighbourhoods in dwindling economies as well as more likely to be a supporting bridge between the diverse social groups. His studies suggested that human resource and public financial investments in art museum programming should be increased, especially in cities proliferating. It is proven that a public art gallery does not only display art pieces but also educate the community in different fields.

#### **2.4 Relationship between arts and society**

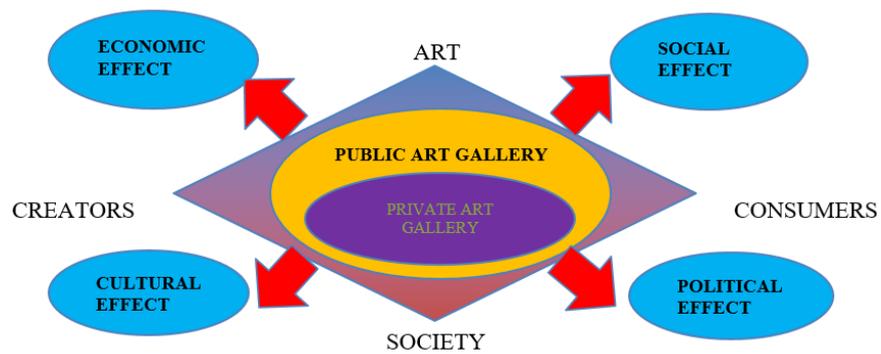
The modified cultural diamond model shows that one major obstacle in the promotion of arts is the distributor, which refers to the gallery owner for a private art gallery or a government body that establishes the public art gallery (Alexander, 2003). The gallery owner plays the most crucial role in the development of the art industry.



**Figure 1:** Cultural Diamond by Alexander (Source: Gandhi, 2008)

The provision of an art gallery will play a central role when the creators, art consumers and society can come together to advance the art industry in Kuching. The aim of the private art gallery is mainly to earn profits as compared to a public art gallery where many non-profit activities can be carried out to educate our new generation.

The contribution of an art gallery in a community cannot be undermined. Figure 2 shows the effects of a public art gallery in a city. When a public art gallery is established, it has positive effects on the economic, social, cultural and political aspects of the society. The development of arts has the potential of professional career development, thereby, giving many career choices to members of the public.



**Figure 2:** A modified diamond model (Source: Adapted from Gandhi (2008))

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative design by using an in-depth interview guide as the primary instrument for interviewing ten selected informants in Kuching. Ten informants are selected based on purposive sampling (Sarantakos, 1993). The informants are chosen based on their experiences related to the field. The informants are divided into five categories including artists, curators and presidents of art societies, art Institutions, non-governmental organisations and government bodies that deal with arts. Two informants are selected from each category. Selected artists are pioneers and prolific artists who had involved in local and overseas exhibitions and had won prizes. They were selected through discussion with the presidents of active art societies. Selected curators and presidents of art societies are chosen from those active private art galleries and active art societies. Informants for art institutions, non-governmental organisations and government bodies are those active lecturers or officers. Curators, lecturers and officers are suggested by the head of the art institution, non-governmental organisations and government bodies. Participants individually expressed their views on the importance of establishing a public art gallery in the city and were recorded using a tape recorder, which was later transcribed and thematically analysed using qualitative analysis (Lamnek, 1989). In addition to the data generated from the interviews, the research also used information from the library by focusing on educational topics from past events which were related to the importance of art gallery establishment.

### 4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Informants' points of view

Ten informants were interviewed to fulfil this research. Most of the informants expressed their wish to have a public art gallery in Kuching, Sarawak one day. It will be an essential building with objectives to collect art pieces, carry out art activities,

documentation, exhibitions and other events related to the community. This is vital, as we are preserving our precious culture for our descendants.

**Table 1:** Information from Selected Informants (Source: In-Depth Interview (September 2017-March 2018))

INFORMANTS	IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC ART GALLERY
1 Respondent 1	To showcase our rich cultural heritage To promote local artists and Sarawak arts
2 Respondent 2	To develop our economy To preserve and capture intellectual property
3 Respondent 3	To showcase our strong and original cultural backgrounds
4 Respondent 4	To develop our economy To promote our identity
5 Respondent 5	To promote our unique culture To be a platform to gather artists and the public
6 Respondent 6	To give values and status as a capital of Sarawak To promote the state's economy
7 Respondent 7	For education
8 Respondent 8	Essential establishment in every city To show people our identity For cultural appreciation
9 Respondent 9	More focus on Sarawak ethnic dances and costumes
10 Respondent 10	To educate the public To be a platform to showcase artworks To increase the state's economy as Sarawak is a multicultural state

From the data collection in table 1, the researcher is linking the data collection to the importance of a public art gallery as an education centre. Out of 19 answers given by the informants, the researcher received 15 responses from ten informants that are linked to education. Overall, the role of a gallery are: (1) to display the rich culture of Sarawak; (2) to expose local fine arts and local artists; (3) to showcase ones' identities; (4) to show the creative art pieces done by the local artists; (5) to be an arts appreciation centre; and (6) to be an education centre related to fine arts. All of these are related to education that takes place in an art gallery.

Table 1 above shows the various participants and their opinions on the importance of a public art gallery in Kuching. Most of the informants rooted in the establishment of a public art gallery. Each participant voiced his or her own opinion on the importance of a public art gallery in Kuching. Informant 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10 agreed that

the establishment of a public art gallery would actively promote Kuching or Sarawak which is known as a rich cultural heritage in the country. Either Kuching specifically or Sarawak, in general, has its strong and original cultural background such as the Dayak, which includes but not limited to Iban, Bidayuh, Penan, Punan, Kedayan, Bisayah, Kenyah and more. Each ethnic group has its cultural background. Sarawak has roughly 27 ethnic tribes which are mostly the indigenous groups. Indigenous Art exhibitions of various ethnic groups in Sarawak will surely attract the public to the exhibitions and educate them about art programmes organised by the gallery. Peron (2010) identified that educational programs at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) effectively increased knowledge and appreciation of the indigenous art at the gallery. The indigenous visual arts sector is one of Australia's most successful and dynamic cultural and economic exports on the international scene and contributes an estimated USD 400 million per year to the Australian economy. Besides, it increases knowledge and appreciation of indigenous art among the public. Furthermore, indigenous art exhibitions aim to build relationships and strengthen outreach to indigenous artists and communities. The public will communicate with the artists. By doing so, the public will gain knowledge and experience and at the same time learn how to appreciate indigenous art.

Soulliere (2008) mentioned that the role of an art gallery is to upgrade, to improve and to display our culture to the locals and internationally. As we can see from the data collection, most of the informants stated that the role of an art gallery is to promote the identity and unique culture of our community. The education process is ongoing. A gallery is a place to collect and display artefacts regarding cultures of a place or community. It is impossible for these activities to take place in other venues. It would be a missed opportunity of not having an art gallery as the community will not be able to gain the experiences mentioned above from an art gallery.

Informant 7 emphasised on education. Education today is more test-oriented, and there is no fun in education nowadays. Rhee (2013) carried out a case study on six student groups during school trips to one of the contemporary art museums in South Korea and their learning in school. The studies had shown that students were engaged with the artworks by adopting a proactive role in creating their meaning at art museums, while they served as passive receptors of large amounts of knowledge under the test-oriented school system. The students were not only motivated to learn voluntarily with diverse opinions but were also able to have a creative experience involving imagination and embodied learning. This study suggests that exposure to artworks in museums increased students' autonomy and reinforced their identity as confident learners. Optimum learning outcomes could be achieved if art museum

visits were designed in ways to integrate the learning at art museums and that at school.

Hosting different activities in the art gallery can contribute towards making a better public art gallery. For instance, attending art festivals and watching art masterpieces produced by the local artists will give the community knowledge and experience. These are the use of special events to attract audiences (Axcelson, 2006). The parents will bring the children to join the events, and as a result, it helps to connect the family with artists. Special events will involve the combination of exhibitions, family activities, performances, art talks and educational programmes (Gomez, 1998). Vap (2004) said that the art gallery is an art, culture and education centre for fine arts. She is very realistic. A public art gallery is essential as a culture and education centre. This is true as we see educational progress happening in art galleries.

Most of the informants agree that a public art gallery will be significant in Kuching, but everyone has their focus. Informants that represent the Ministry of Tourism and Culture said that they know the importance of fine arts, but in the case of Sarawak, the focus is more on ethnic dances and costumes. The ministry started an art gallery in Old State Legislative Assembly (DUN) in early 2018. This is an excellent initiative. In March 2018, DUN started an exhibition, but the researcher found that the facilities and space are not suitable. To display fine arts, we need a standardised space to bring out the beauty of the paintings and art crafts. Besides that, the gallery also requires a team of committed and specialised workers. Hopefully, this is a starting point to start a public art gallery in Kuching, Sarawak.

The establishment of a temporary art gallery will be a better alternative in this case rather than put everything together as what had happened in DUN. The researcher suggests the Old Court House as a temporary public art gallery in Kuching, Sarawak. Although the DUN is a venue planned to promote the arts activities by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, the art gallery needs a huge space to accommodate all the paintings and to carry out artistic programmes. DUN is also situated a bit far from the city centre as compared to the Old Court House which is near Merdeka Square. The Old Court House consists of a few small buildings which can be turned into different halls to display the different art genres from the gallery.



**Figure 3:** Old Court House, Kuching Sarawak (Source: <http://baltyra.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/>)

## 5. CONCLUSION

The establishment of a public art gallery in Kuching is a necessary pre-condition in promoting art education to our present and future generation. A city without its heritage or history is almost soulless. Therefore, the establishment of a public art gallery in Kuching is a step towards improving the social, economic, political and cultural developments of Kuching, the Sarawak State and Malaysia at large.

Furthermore, the many talented artists in Sarawak have a strong desire to use a public art gallery for their personal developments. Sarawak's local artists desire the opportunity to express their creativity and innovations, which will further develop the fine arts industry as artistic and lucrative commerce in Sarawak. Establishment of a public art gallery in Kuching will open the eyes of the society of all ages. They will stop buying commercial art in the supermarket. They will be more equipped with art knowledge, and they will buy artists' art pieces as they know the value of the paintings in future.

Besides, artists' art pieces which are currently being displayed in hotels and cafés are more beneficial to the owners, serving as decorative pieces to the hotels and cafés. Buyers seldom purchase these pieces because customers usually go to these places to order food and beverages and have no intention to focus on the paintings.

A public art gallery with a proper management team and suitable equipment will help to display these art pieces. DUN had just started to make full use of the space in old DUN early this year to give a place for artists to showcase their work. It is a good start, but the place is not adequately equipped.

Establishment of a public art gallery will create more creative and innovative individuals. As we can see now, all the handicraft and souvenirs at the waterfront are more or less the same. Competition carried out by the public art gallery will inevitably produce more talented individuals in the field to create more beautiful and unique art pieces for the public. This will increase job vacancies for the public and produce home-grown talented individuals such as artists, craftsmen, sculptors, designers, art managers, curators, and even art critics. At the moment, we are so left behind as compared to other states in Malaysia including our neighbour, Sabah.

Furthermore, art will be more appreciated by the society. Parents will encourage their children to take up arts. Many fine art graduates from art institutions in Kuching end up with other jobs. They have wasted their time and effort in the universities. We have art schools and art graduates, but we do not have a public art gallery as a platform for the artists to continue their route especially fine art artists. Establishment of a public art gallery will also increase sales in public art galleries as the public will appreciate arts more. As a conclusion, a public art gallery in Kuching is a must.

Last but not least, these potential titles are suggested for future studies. "The Significance of a Public Art Gallery as one of A Tourism Centre in Kuching, Sarawak" will go to be an interesting title. Many visitors from overseas came to visit Sarawak each year, and they love to visit art galleries. The research can focus on the in-depth interview with the visitors from outside Sarawak. Besides, research on "A Public Art Gallery in Kuching, Sarawak for the future of the next arts generation" is suitable as there were many art schools in Kuching but there is no public art gallery as a platform. So, a mixed-method study can be used for this research by focusing on art students in several art schools or even those who have graduated from the art school. A very challenging research title, "Design and propose a Unique Public Art Gallery in Kuching, Sarawak to Upgrade Art Development in the State." Suggest by designing a unique public art gallery in Kuching will be a tough job. This is more to the job of an engineer, but the proposal will give the engineer an idea to build a better one. Finally, "To Study and Analyse a Government Building to be a Temporary Public Art Gallery in Kuching, Sarawak" is a very suitable research title as we can see it is not easy to build a huge and unique public art gallery in Kuching at the moment. So, maybe further research can go into several government buildings and analyse and

study the buildings and suggest the most suitable building for this purpose. We can try on a government building before we move to a huge and unique public art gallery as what Sabah did.

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