

Hubs for Good Malaysia
Report by Rachael Turner

**Situational Analysis
of Creative Hubs in
Malaysia**

July 2020



Contents

Contents.....	2
Foreword.....	4
Introduction by the author	5
1 Definitions.....	6
1.1 Malaysia country overview	7
1.2 Malaysia Hubs Typology.....	11
2 Impact.....	13
2.1 Hubs contribute to the (creative) economy	13
2.2 Hubs create social impact.....	14
2.3 Hubs educate.....	14
2.4 Hubs bring communities together	15
2.5 Hubs provide ways for artists to develop	16
2.6 Hubs invigorate cities and towns.....	17
2.7 Hubs collaborate	18
2.8 Hubs innovate	19
2.8.1 New forms of creative hub.....	19
2.8.2 Continuous innovation.....	20
2.8.3 Engaging audiences in new ways	20
3 Challenges.....	22
3.1 Finding the right sustainability model	22
3.2 Staffing and talent retention	23
3.3 Evidencing impact.....	24
4 Recommendations.....	25
4.1 Personal development for hub leaders and future leaders.....	25
4.2 Audience development	26
4.3 The environment.....	26
4.4 Further research	27
4.5 A focus on buildings and placemaking.....	28
4.6 Hubs advisory network.....	28
4.7 UK-Malaysia hubs collaboration.....	29
4.8 Repositioning the creative industries, nationally	29
4.9 Quantifying the impact of Creative Hubs.....	30

5 Hub profiles..... 31

5.1 Arts-ED 31

5.2 Arus 32

5.3 Hin Bus Depot..... 33

5.4 Obscura Festival of Photograph 34

5.5 Penang Art District 35

5.6 Projek Rabak 36

5.7 A Place Where (APW) 37

5.8 Five Arts Centre 38

5.9 New Naratif 39

5.10 Perbadanan Kota Buku..... 40

5.11 Rimbun Dahan..... 41

5.12 REXKL..... 42

5.13 Zhongshan Building 43

5.14 Asylum Art Club 44

5.15 Bentarakata 45

5.16 Kota-K..... 46

5.17 Borneo Laboratory 47

5.18 HAUS KCH 48

6 Directory 49



Foreword

The British Council has worked with over a thousand creative hubs globally since 2014. We see creative hubs as communities of support for artists and creative professionals first and foremost, as well as key elements contributing to a growing, inclusive and sustainable creative economy.

We focus on nurturing networks of hub leaders who share, learn, innovate and support each other towards strengthening their communities, and when appropriate, we help facilitate platforms for dialogue between these largely grassroots (and sometimes informal) organisations and the relevant policy makers. Big or small, rural or urban, creative hubs almost always respond to a local need, bringing about potential for social and economic advancement in their areas. Nevertheless, they face many challenges, from ensuring sustainability, to communicating effectively their impact.

In Malaysia, creative hubs are numerous, spread across the country, and extremely diverse - by type of community, mission or business model. Yet, stakeholders remain largely unaware of their potential and positive impact on local communities. Little support exists for those who are not versed in business development; however, their overall resilience and innovation aptitude is nothing short of impressive. Therefore, this country wide situation analysis report aimed to study as many creative hubs and community-based collectives as possible, in an effort to understand who they are, what they do, share their successes and challenges, and imagine what a preferable future could look like.

The research exercise was commissioned in September 2019 as part of the Hubs for Good programme led by British Council Malaysia, in-line with a South-East Asia regional effort. It aimed to produce an analysis on the sustainability and potential social and economic impact of creative hubs across the country. This report is a follow-up to 'Mapping Creative Hubs in Malaysia' (2017) which came out of 'Connecting Creative Communities: Creative Hubs in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines' (2017). The research was carried out in the latter part of 2019, before the COVID-19 virus crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis has disturbed the culture and creative sector too, the full impact of the pandemic on the sector remains to be seen. Halted tourism, the bans on live gatherings and necessary digital transformation, among other reactions, will most likely be damaging the livelihoods of creative practitioners and could precipitate temporary and even permanent closures of spaces.

We hope this report would help in the restoration process, by enabling creative hubs to find, share, learn and inspire each other, and by encouraging others to see the resilience and innovation potential these organisations embody.

May 2020

Roxana Apostol & Florence Lambert

British Council

Introduction by the author

In October 2019, I travelled all over Malaysia - from Penang in the north to Sabah in the east, to meet creative hubs participating in the Hubs for Good programme and to conduct in-depth interviews.

Prior to, during, and after my visit I undertook desk research on, and conducted phone interviews with the creative hubs, as well as on the wider Malaysian creative hubs and creative sector. Additional follow-up was conducted over WhatsApp and email post-visit for clarification purposes with some hubs. All interviews were conducted in English.

The aims of the visit and this resulting report were to:

- Provide an overview of the different types of hubs operating across Malaysia, their profiles, sustainability, impact and challenges
- Facilitate the charting of growth, progress and change of Malaysian hubs through a big picture lens

This report will also feed into the British Council's planning for new activities, to further facilitate opportunities for growth and learning for Malaysian creative hubs.

In total 31 people were interviewed – mainly hub leaders, staff, and members representing the hubs. I also spoke to more than 100 members of the public (in public-facing hubs), tenants, residents, and visiting artists.

The recent and rapid rise of Malaysia's creative economy makes this an exciting time for creative hubs, which act as community hotspots for the nation's rich talent ecosystem. Whilst there are connections and similarities with hubs globally – driven and continuous evolution, a love of playful experimentation, as well as the universally discussed challenges around finding and operating well-suited and flexible physical spaces – the hubs surveyed are nonetheless distinct and unique. They are representative of the incredible diversity to be found across the country – from George Town, Ipoh, and Kuala Lumpur in the West, to Sabah, and Sarawak in the East.

Creative Hubs are much more than just a 'shop front' – they are places where creative work happens, and as Malaysia's creative economy thrives and grows their future holds great potential.

Rachael Turner

MadLab, UK

February 2020

1 Definitions

Creative Hubs has become a nebulous term over the years, but the British Council uses a working definition referring to a hub as a physical or virtual place that brings together enterprising people working in the creative and cultural industries. There are estimated to be 1.2m people working from creative hubs globally¹, generally made up of micro SMEs and freelancers, which represent 85% of global employment and 3.3 million people in the UK (2015)².

Creative hubs are made up of many shapes and sizes, from buildings that house creative practitioners and businesses to temporary labs and incubation spaces which ignite innovations, as well as online networks that bring people together through an annual programme of events. While some spaces specialise in a specific sector (e.g. design hub), others welcome a wide range of disciplines together; these can be as small as a handful of people or as large as a 3,000-strong tribe.

Every creative hub is as unique as a fingerprint, as its model is determined by its geographic placement, cultural context, community requirements and unique funding model. Creative hubs have ultimately become 'nests for freelancers and micro SMEs to gather' (Prof. Andy Pratt: City, University of London).

Hubs are people-focused and are facilitated by trusted individuals who are well-connected in the sector(s) – referred to as 'hub managers' or 'hub leaders' – and who broker, maintain, and curate relationships among their community.

The broad typologies of global hubs are:

- Cluster: Co-located creative individuals and businesses in one geographic area
- Studio: Small collective of individuals and/or small businesses, in a co-working space
- Centre: A building including assets such as a café/bar, cinema, maker space, shop or exhibition space
- Network: Dispersed group of individuals and/or businesses – tend to be sector or place specific
- Online platform: Uses only online methods (website, social media) to engage with a dispersed audience
- Alternative: Focused on experimentation with new communities, sectors, cultural practices and financial models

¹ [DeskMag, "The Members: Who works in co-working spaces?" \(September 2017\)](#)

² [British Council, "Creative Hubs: Understanding the new economy" \(2016\)](#)

1.1 Malaysia country overview

Creative Hubs have recently been recognised by the Malaysian government as an essential building block in its strategic plan to grow the creative and cultural economy. They are seen as a way of providing much-needed infrastructure to this fast-growing sector, particularly in Kuala Lumpur. Indeed, they are a key pillar of Kuala Lumpur's five-year plan as laid out in 'Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural and Creative City' (Cultural Economy Development Agency - Cendana, 2018).

Outside of the capital, Creative Hubs are working with regional government to create new cultural (hub) opportunities - such as Penang Art District in Kuala Lumpur, an initiative mooted by the state government to catalyse the economic growth of the creative industry in Penang, and Projek Rabak in Ipoh which has been commissioned to develop and manage a new Artists Village, '30300 IPOH: ARTIST VILLAGE'. This indicates that from a political standpoint, hubs are increasingly seen as key social and economic drivers.

The typology of Creative Hubs across Malaysia is diverse. According to Think City (a subsidiary of Malaysia's Sovereign Wealth Fund) there are 'at least several hundred creative hubs in Malaysia, virtual and physical, comprising online Facebook groups, to studios and makerspaces.' The Creative Hubs surveyed in this report come from a broad range of art forms and typologies (see pages 8-12) of which there has been a proliferation in recent years - indeed the majority of hubs surveyed for this report have been established for three years or less.

Amongst the public - and even amongst the hubs themselves - the term Creative Hubs is not yet widely known. In fact, hubs are currently far more likely to identify themselves per artform (such as 'performing arts', or 'gallery').

Official recognition of the value which creative hubs inevitably bring is a vital first step towards concrete action at the policy level. New support programmes and targeted financial support aimed at boosting Malaysia's high-potential hubs ecosystem would bring significant positive change to communities, creatives, and businesses in all parts of the country. That is why the timing of this report, and its recommendations, is key.

Hubs featured in this situation analysis

Penang	Arts-ED Arus Hin Bus Depot Obscura Festival of Photography Penang Art District
Ipoh	Projek Rabak PeaceBeUponYou ³
Kuala Lumpur	APW (A Place Where) Five Arts Centre New Naratif Perbadanan Kota Buku Rimbun Dahan REXKL Zhongshan
Sabah	Asylum Art Club Bentarakata KOTA-K Tamparuli Living Arts Centre ⁴
Sarawak	Borneo Art Collective HAUS KCH

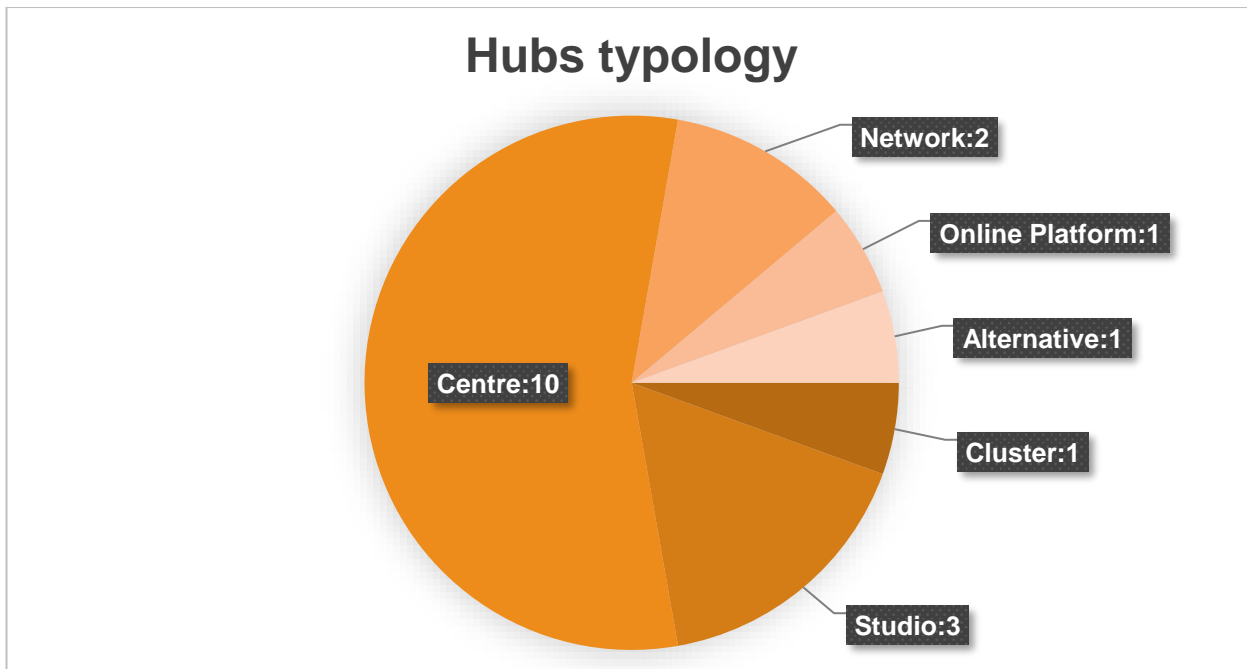
³ * not featured, but spoken to/ visited

⁴ * not featured, but spoken to/ visited

Malaysian hubs by typology

Using the global British Council typology metric, the hubs visited can be categorised as follows:

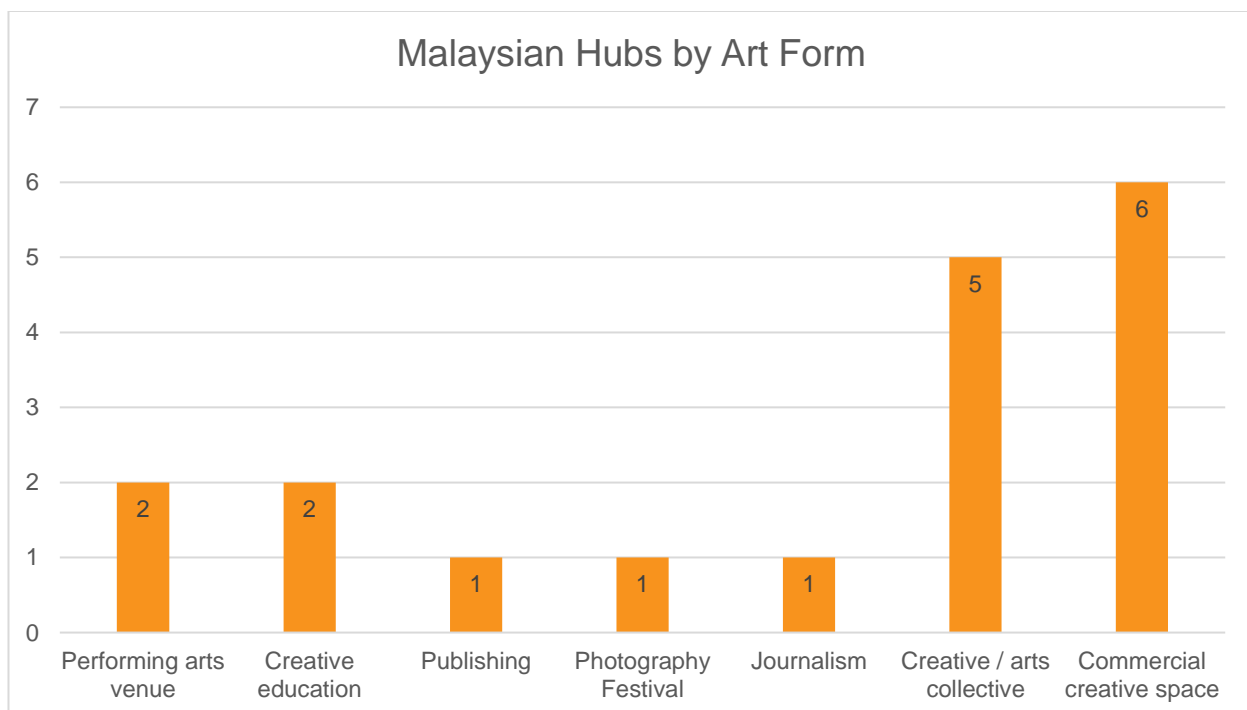
Cluster	Asylum Art Club
Studio	Borneo Laboratory, Kota-K, Projek Rabak
Centre	APW, Arus, Five Arts Centre, HAUS KCH, Hin Bus Depot, Penang Art District [when realised], Perbadanan Kota Buku [when realised] REXKL, Rimbun Dahan, Zhongshan Building,
Network	Bentarakata, Obscura Festival of Photography
Online Platform	New Naratif
Alternative	Arts-ED



Malaysian hub by art-form

They can broadly be categorised by artform as follows:

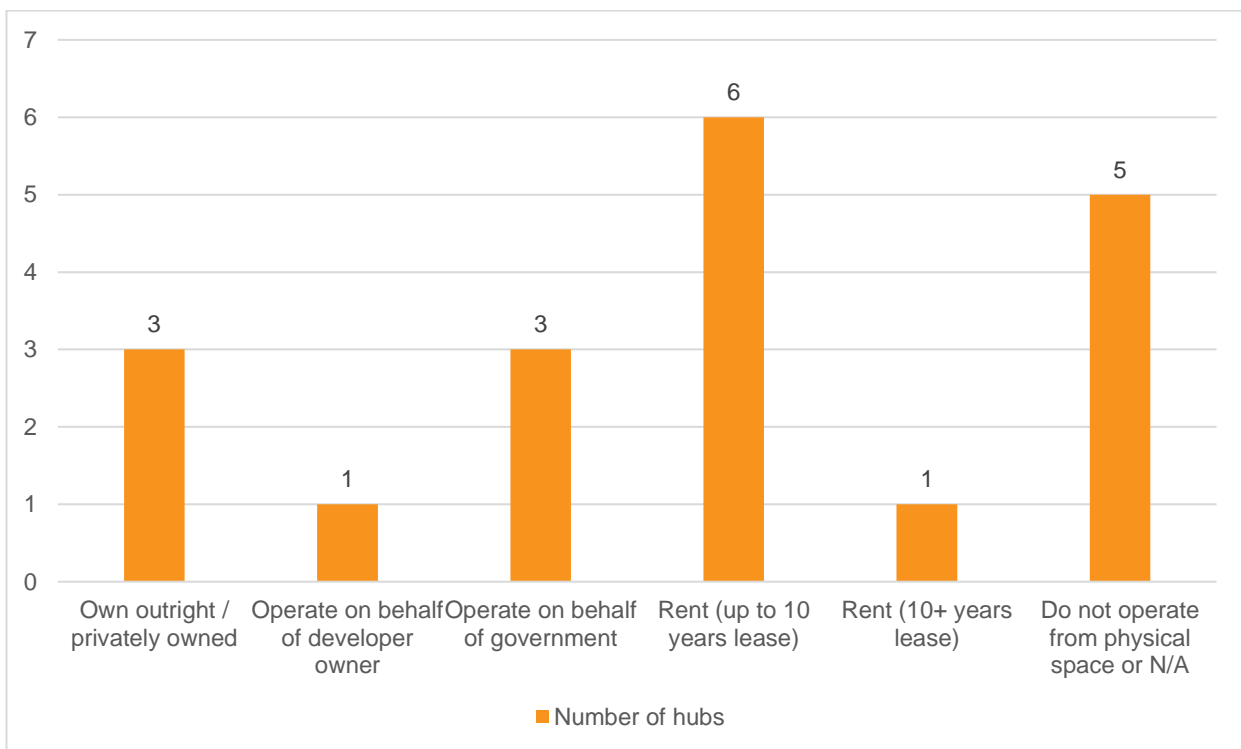
Performing arts venue:	Rimbun Dahan, Five Arts Centre
Creative education:	Arts-ED, Arus
Publishing:	Perbadanan Kota Buku
Photography Festival:	Obscura Festival of Photography
Journalism:	New Naratif
Creative/ arts collective:	Projek Rabak, Asylum Art Club, KOTA-K, Bentarakata, Borneo Laboratory
Commercial creative space:	APW (A Place Where), Hin Bus Depot, Zhongshan Building, Penang Art District, REXKL, HAUS KCH
* <i>PeaceBeUponYou, Tamparuli Living Arts Centre</i> * - not featured, but spoken to/ visited	



Support to the ecosystem:

Staffing and volunteering	Total people employed	122
	Volunteers	164
Communities and audiences	people who consider themselves hub members	3943
	annual public attending in person	350 000+
Businesses	Businesses supported	114

Premises ownership structure of Creative Hubs surveyed:



The experience in Malaysia suggests every hub evaluates themselves and their impact differently, and rarely. The figures described above may be approximations provided by the hubs interviewed.

1.2 Malaysia Hubs Typology

Creative Hubs in Malaysia are, by their very nature, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. In practice they fall under several different categories, including tourism, visual arts, business, retail, education and literature. This diversity of hubs is borne out of the need to perform several functions, and from the specific financial circumstances of each organisation.

The shape of hubs can broadly be defined by economics. The largest hubs surveyed - in terms of space - were in Kuala Lumpur. APW and REXKL are both centrally located in areas of high-value real estate. The next largest, Hin Bus Depot in George Town, Penang, is also situated in a rapidly gentrifying area. As such the shape of all three is broadly similar: they are mixed-use spaces that focus on anchor tenants - predominantly in retail and F&B (food & beverage) to support creative initiatives.

All three also host regular markets - usually their biggest draw in terms of events - which supports local artisans, from makers, to food start-ups.

Their size also dictates the organisations' priorities - to grow users and footfall, spend, and customer loyalty. This then allows them to support other creative start-ups, social enterprises or art exhibitions. For example, social enterprise Asli Barbers at REXKL trains underprivileged Malaysians hairdressing skills so they can set up barbers' salons in their home regions, or regular art and sustainable design markets at Hin Bus Depot. When launched, Penang Art District will also follow a similar method - using key anchor tenants and international brands to subsidise the rents of smaller scale creative organisations.

As we travel to the fringes of cities, the topography of hubs changes. Zhongshan, Five Arts and Arts-ED are three such organisations who have stability in their buildings due to the security of long leases or owning their buildings. This enables organisations to focus on their key creative aims. Due to the lack of centrality, the unifying factor with these organisations is a central core of members (Five Arts), tenants (Zhongshan), or a base from which to operate externally (Arts-ED).

Outside of George Town and Kuala Lumpur – Malaysia's two largest cities – organisations are more diverse. In Ipoh, collaborative collective Projek Rabak is able to expand and contract in response to festivals, individual members' projects (including PeaceBeUponYouCafe), and consultancy. Being more independent of a physical space means that the provision of a hub space is less compatible - although Projek Rabak has ambitions to open an arts village, a new hub, and potentially a school this year.

In Borneo, hubs tend to operate to serve specific, rather than a general audience, centred around areas of interest for hub customers and their networks. Kota-K for example is a collective of two architects and a world-renowned artist, Yee I-Lann. The hub space is their shared office and events are ad-hoc. However, the group has ambitions to run a heritage space, and preserve the historic character of their neighbourhood (one of the only areas in Kota Kinabalu not bombed in World War II).

2 Impact

The hubs surveyed for this report have a wide-ranging variety of structures, sizes, focuses and goals. These organisations range from government and business-led enterprises to community collectives; some are for profit, and some non-profit. But what they all have in common is that they are all positively impacting Malaysia's lifestyle and economy. Being a part of creative hub operations has led to clear, tangible benefits on a local level, including investment, tourism and the livelihood of individual communities. These hubs are also positively affecting the way the general public perceives art and design. They are also providing a platform for entrepreneurs of the future to build upon. They have led to the creation of strong networks and collaborations.

2.1 Hubs contribute to the (creative) economy

A global picture is emerging about the increasing importance of creative hubs to the sustainability and growth of the creative economy and the creative city. As countries move from manufacturing to a knowledge-based society, economic impact and progression comes from the creative classes. Creative Hubs are poised to play a key role in this transition in Malaysia. In Kuala Lumpur alone, the cultural and creative industry contributed RM11.2 billion to the country, accounting for more than 2% to the Kuala Lumpur economy and more than 86,000 jobs⁵.

In times of recession also, the creative industries demonstrate resilience: from figures taken globally, jobs in creative industries have been seen to grow at a significantly faster rate than those in other sectors such as manufacturing and retail⁶.

The 19 Creative Hubs surveyed employed 122 people, supported 164 volunteers, and provided support to more than 100 social enterprises and businesses.

Other examples of economic impact include:

- The OBSCURA Festival draws 55,000 annual attendees bringing both local and international visitor spend into the economy.
- Five Arts is an active grant giver, having awarded 50 grants totalling RM362k to artists and arts practitioners during the period 2006-2016 through private funding.
- Kota-K is working with skilled weavers who make thousands of baskets for tourists, and as of this year (2020) will be working on making them for the National Gallery Singapore.
- Acting in an advocacy and enfranchisement capacity for local arts talent, HAUS KCH has helped raise the local rate for artists. For example, they have more than quadrupled the average pay for dancers in Kuching as a whole.
- APW has repurposed an under-utilised printing factory, turning it from a failing business into a thriving cultural centre.

⁵ [Cendana, "Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural & Creative City" \(2018\)](#)

⁶ [World Economic Forum, "Why is the creative economy growing so strongly?" \(2015\)](#)

Money is clearly not all that is to be made, with connections also forged through their work - creative hubs are, overall, community concerns. But the hubs' ability to innovate and stimulate the economy points a way forward for these smaller creative players to band together and build a substantial case for their local and regional economic impact.

2.2 Hubs create social impact

As the programme title – Hubs for Good – implies, Malaysian Creative Hubs are highly impactful in terms of social development and innovation.

- REXKL supports social enterprises such as Asli Barbers, which provides opportunities to underprivileged young people from Orang Asli to learn the skill of barbering and earn a living, helping to break the cycle of poverty. They are also responsible for providing social enterprise training blind masseuses, a sustainable fashion boutique, and a second-hand bookstore.
- Arus teaches coding, programming, and digital making to children aged 15 to 17. The region of Penang in which they are based – Bukit Mertajam – has a high concentration of low-performing state schools, with high levels of drop-out by the age of 15. Arus was set up to combat this by providing after school STEAM-based learning (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics), and raising the technical and scientific ambitions of children locally.
- Arts-ED works collaboratively with institutions, arts educators, artists, community activists, and local agencies to promote education for cultural conservation and revitalisation, particularly in marginalised urban communities.

2.3 Hubs educate

Skills and knowledge exchange is a major theme of the Creative Hubs surveyed, with the majority offering a wide range of opportunities for learning.

- Since 2017, Borneo Laboratory has run an annual 'Design and Make Summer School' inviting in talented, ambitious and creative designers – supported by a palette of craftsmen and suppliers from the Borneo region and beyond. Over 30 days, they share and celebrate their creativity in the community or in the nature of Borneo. To date, tutors and participants have come from University College London (UK), Feng Chia University (Taiwan), Chiang Mai University (Thailand), CanopyU (Worldwide), UCTS (Malaysia) and UCSI (Malaysia).
- Arus - a social enterprise working towards making learning relevant to modern needs through a 'maker-education' approach - runs around 15 programmes a year. These range from three to five-day camps, to year-long programmes, supporting up to 70 individual student projects as well as running workshops in schools and training for teachers. Director Daniel Russell said: 'Our education system is not moving fast

enough. We need to move with the times - Arus is providing the opportunity for our children to be innovators and problem-solvers, instead of people who answer exam questions.'

- Arus is now planning on becoming a school itself. It wants to be seen as an alternative to formal schooling. To date it has developed two years of lessons, piloting these in three Kuala Lumpur schools in 2019. It is currently working on putting together a Form One curriculum, based on the new Secondary School Standard Curriculum. Projek Rabak is also planning to set up an independent school in Ipoh, where members of their network will teach arts and culture.
- Arts-ED is well-known for its creative and innovative approaches to education developed from its 18 years of experience and through exchange and learning with organisations within Malaysia - as well as regionally (Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea and Japan). It engages with approximately 1,500-1,800 school students and 600-800 educators and creative practitioners every year.
- Since 2013, Obscura Festival of Photography has delivered photography masterclasses and workshops to more than 200 participants around the world, and its free-to-attend portfolio reviews are a highly anticipated event. In 2016, it hosted the inaugural Southeast Asian Masterclass, bringing together some of the most promising young photographers from the Southeast Asian region under the tutelage of photographers from the Ostkreuz Photographers' Agency, Berlin. The resulting work, titled 'We Will Have Been Young' is a photobook made in collaboration with Calin Kruse from Dienacht-Publishing. The photo exhibition and book have since been exhibited in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines and will soon be shown in Frankfurt, Germany.
- Rimbun Dahan also facilitates and promotes educational opportunities for students of architecture, ecology, and botany.

2.4 Hubs bring communities together

Creative Hubs are first and foremost places for people. Those surveyed have mostly been founded by a group of friends or peers, or they are a family matter.

- Bentarakata was formed as an online collective, with a focus on the inclusion of marginalised communities through art and theatre. They connect with each other through a mix of online and offline meetings. Creative Director Ana Jonessy says: 'People put a lot of trust in us. We felt we needed to get a physical space where people can share - some of our community is quite vulnerable, hence why we're also offline. This dictates our shape, and how we engage with our audience.'
- Five Arts was formed in 1984 and is committed to articulating the complexity of Malaysian culture and identity through explorations and fusions of local vocabularies, forms and traditions, in relation to global, modern, and cross-cultural concerns. As such,

it has been instrumental in the growth of a Malaysian identity in the arts that draws from multiple influences and hybrid histories.

- Since its formation in 2000, Arts-ED has worked with more than 16,000 young people in Penang. Some of the communities they have worked with include the urban historical city of George Town, the agricultural prefecture of Balik Pulau, and an urban public housing area in Sungai Pinang.
- REXKL is connecting with and fostering a network of community leaders who will in turn bring their communities in. It also wants to become a host from which creatives can develop their own businesses and events, and to foster a sense of shared ownership as the hub develops.
- Liza Ho, manager of the Zhongshan building, notes that ‘it is the alchemy between the community members that drives hub development... the space facilitates that connection’.

2.5 Hubs provide ways for artists to develop

Creative Hubs help connect audiences to the arts. For the artist, they are a platform - for the public, a means of discovery. Artist collectives and residencies are particularly crucial in this role. These spaces help artists develop their work, as well as providing guidance on curation, exhibitions and sales. They can also be a rare alternative platform, pushing boundaries in countries where censorship presides over mainstream art and media.

Such spaces include Rimbun Dahan which offers residencies for visual artists, dancers, choreographers, writers, arts managers, curators and researchers. Their programmes have hosted more than 100 individuals to date.

Recognising the need to encourage the practice of photography in Malaysia and to have more photographic works produced within Malaysia, Obscura Festival of Photography also holds a residency program, where past artists-in-residence include Arko Datto (2016) and Peter Bialobrezski (2018). Obscura’s artist-in-residency programme, combined with its masterclasses and workshops, have produced a culturally, socially and historically significant repository of photographs which are invaluable as a living documentary of Penang and George Town.

Markets are a popular way for hubs to provide support to emerging artists and local businesses. Hin Bus Depot holds a very popular Sunday pop-up Market, attracting around 1,000 visitors weekly - and two of its market vendors were recently invited to exhibit at the Asia Pacific Urban Forum. REXKL, APW, and Kota-K also hold regular artisan markets.

Other examples of how hubs support artists and communities include:

- As well as being host to a gallery showcasing contemporary Malaysian artwork, community members at the Zhongshan Building work collaboratively with a broader network of artists, cultural practitioners and institutional partners to investigate how modern and contemporary art is able to instigate new avenues of thinking about social, cultural and aesthetic knowledge. Five Arts is committed to articulating the complexity of

Malaysian culture and identity through explorations and fusions of local vocabularies, forms and traditions. As such, it has been instrumental in the growth of a Malaysian identity in the arts that draws from multiple influences and hybrid histories. For over three decades, Five Arts has been at the forefront of creating experimental, interdisciplinary and intercultural work, providing platforms for the next generation of arts practitioners. Contemporary social, political and cultural issues impinging on Malaysian life are explored by way of performances, exhibitions, creative seminars and research workshops.

- REXKL sees itself as a creative and cultural platform for local and regional art, creative and design talents and entrepreneurs.
- Projek Rabak have been the catalyst for arts and culture in Ipoh, with its highly networked members ever-present in the town's arts scene - be that supporting autistic children through creative workshops, hosting talent events, or running events and festivals. They constantly shape-shift, to maximise the collective's talents and interests, as well as capitalise on external opportunities.

2.6 Hubs invigorate cities and towns

Hubs can have a transformative effect on secondary cities, they become leaders in the cultural landscape and provide a place for creative people to come together.

Penang Art District (PAD) is an initiative mooted by the state government to catalyse the economic growth of the creative industry in Penang. It is envisioned as the central creative hub for Penang's contemporary arts and culture. When built, it will be more than 80,000 square feet, making it the largest container city in the world – housing galleries, art spaces, studios, workshops, artisanal shops, and premium outlets to support the thriving creative industry in Penang.

Hin Bus Depot has been the main driver of street art in Penang, and its wider adoption in the city. Lonely Planet calls George Town the 'unexpected street art hub of South East Asia'. This has led to street art being seen as a new 'vision' for the city, and a way of attracting international visitors - in the same way that places like Melbourne, Australia draw tourists in to see its street art specifically, bringing huge economic impact along.

Creative hubs also have a huge impact on their neighbourhoods. While some hubs - like Hin Bus Depot and REXKL - have revitalised abandoned or derelict spaces (a bus depot and former cinema respectively), others have reinvented heritage buildings. Zhongshan Building sits in a series of restored 1950s shop lots in Kampung Attap, near central Kuala Lumpur. Rimbun Dahan conserves Malaysian architecture - its grounds are home to several exceptional heritage houses, including one brought from Penang in 2004, and a Malay house from the Malay area, featuring carved Chinese motifs and designed by skilled Chinese craftspeople.

There is a note of caution over the vigour that hubs can inject into an area. Several of the hubs – particularly APW, Zhongshan, and Hin Bus Depot - are in rapidly gentrifying parts of their respective cities (Kuala Lumpur and Penang). This raises a question about the value of the land

on which the hubs are situated - which is fortuitous when the hubs themselves are the owners of the land, but brings huge amounts of uncertainty when they are not. And ultimately – owner or not – the pressure of selling land for development in these hotspots means that the hubs' futures are uncertain in the medium-term.

Other hubs - such as Arus and Benterakata provide unique services to neighbourhoods that might otherwise be marginalised due to their location, class, and lifestyle. HAUS KCH reports that, as a result of their presence, new shops have started popping up around their site - which until a year ago was a completely deserted area of Kuching.

2.7 Hubs collaborate

Creative hubs thrive on exchange and collaboration. Research carried out during the production of this report has clearly shown that creative hubs in Malaysia are strongly networked amongst each other, as well as internationally.

Borneo Laboratory focuses on 'innovation through collaboration'. It states that 'through conversing with the world, Borneo can turn itself into a destination for experimental art'. The idea of having a tangible manifestation of that belief led to the creation of Borneo Laboratory. To date, they have collaborated extensively with regional artisans, major brands, choreographers, and chefs.

Hin Bus Depot is another hub that collaborates widely. Like Borneo Laboratory, it works extensively – running events with international brands, NGOs and other local hubs such as Obscura Festival of Photography, Penang Arts District, and George Town Festival.

Zhongshan Building residents come together to run their own events, as well as provide each other with business advice and support. In-house designers will make fliers, another organisation will DJ, others will cater for an event. 'It's not a straight landlord/tenant relationship', says Liza Ho. 'We help each other.'

HAUS KCH has worked on a number of collaborations, including with Miss World Malaysia and other partners on an 'Indigenous Digital Outreach Programme' - a tech-based training programme at a school in Marudi.

PAD's long-term goal is to act as an umbrella hub to Penang organisations. In time, it hopes to become an umbrella hub for South East Asia, acting as the regional connector.

Arts-ED is well-known for its creative and innovative approaches to education that it has developed across 20 years of experience and through exchange and learning with organisations within Malaysia as well as regionally (Singapore, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea and Japan). The use of creative and critical pedagogical approaches is encouraged in all Arts-ED activities which include mapping, documentation, promotion and celebration of cultural capital by community participants.

2.8 Hubs innovate

Malaysia's creative hubs are innovators by default – they bring together diverse communities in order to discuss, co-create, and shape the world in new ways.

2.8.1 New forms of creative hub

Malaysian creatives are bringing new models for hubs to the country – importing successful hub blueprints from overseas, as well as innovating in their own right and building new sustainability models which reflect their own personal motivations.

APW's 'cultural department store' model is the first of its kind in Malaysia. Founder Soon Wei is now consulting on a number of similar projects in Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere in Malaysia, and sees APW transitioning increasingly into that of a property developer role within the creative space.

'I'm selling creativity to be a stakeholder at the table. If I'm going to do something, I want to be in the room and bring value'

– Soon Wei, Founder of APW

Zhongshan Building and REXKL are also early adopters of the cultural hub being utilised to bring businesses and activities under one roof – inviting DJs, pop-up restaurants and retailers, and community events promoters to co-create new offerings in their spaces.

And in East Malaysia, HAUS KCH is the first creative hub in Sarawak. HAUS KCH aims - in its own words - to be *'a catalyst in our state, that uplifts the creative industry, and accelerates creatives to be sustainable. It is our hope to destroy the narrative that 'artists cannot succeed' and allow the next generation confidence to pursue a career in creative fields'*.

Rimbun Dahan has a unique focus on dance, heritage, and the conservation of indigenous and endangered plants.

Arus operates a typical 'fabrication laboratory' – with space for low-cost DIY electronics, coding, and 3D printing – importing ideas from the global makerspace movement (e.g. project-based learning, hack days) and adapting them to the local need.

One of the goals of Kota-K is to have 'an architectural space - with arts, for women, and for young people'. Behind the Kota-K office is a four-floor 40,000sq. ft heritage building that's currently up for rent at RM40000 a month. The team is very keen to get this - but don't have experience in running a building and would need support. The building was once home to the oldest running newspaper in Sabah, and Kota-K has made overtures to the family who own the building (and ran the paper) to also host an archive of the newspaper. 'There is enough material in the archive to drive years and years of activity.'

OBSCURA Festival is Malaysia's premiere photography festival – hosting exhibitions, workshops and masterclasses, and portfolio reviews centred around storytelling and photojournalism.

Perbadanan Kota Buku was inspired in line with the ambitions of the National Book Policy that recommends the establishment of a 'Book City' in Malaysia. This ambitious, government-led programme describes itself as a one-stop centre to gather readers, writers and publishers and help them engage with each other in literary activities.

2.8.2 Continuous innovation

Five Arts Centre: 'For us, we have this model of working in the arts for 35 years and still making new works, having a venue, having many productions. [We're] not sure if it's an innovation but we've not figured out what we did that made it happen. It's our own collective model – which may be useful for others.'

Arts-ED is at the forefront of this relatively uncharted territory, as a long-standing community-based arts and heritage education programme – sustaining and revitalising both tangible and intangible heritage for almost two decades. Numerous educational programmes by Arts-ED were dedicated to the exploration of George Town, and young people in particular have been encouraged to understand the past and contemporary meanings of 'heritage'.

2.8.3 Engaging audiences in new ways

Borneo Laboratory's 'Plastic Fantastic', an installation designed with zero waste strategy for Skechers Sundown Festival (2019), was the first of its kind. As they describe it: 'Conventionally, people do not associate the environment with entertainment. We see a need to change that through collaboration with game changers from different disciplines. We also see the need to talk about the elephant in the room, namely the carbon footprint that a number of festivals have unintentionally created.' Borneo Laboratory worked with several collaborators, including Weave Artisan Society, EPIC Home, and BOPE to produce the work - and are now looking at repurposing the structure for community use.

Borneo Laboratory also launched the region's first Kickstarter (in the arts and documentation category), the success of which led to another six crowdfunding campaigns from Borneans within 12 months, two of which Borneo Laboratory helped organise. Other projects include Nomadic Fine Dining - a nine-course menu created by Bornean chefs, and plantations, to explore the culinary potential of regional produce, and site-specific theatre in collaboration with Projek Spektrum, using theatre as a springboard for developing talent. 'To be honest, we want to push ourselves to grow. Creating things is in our comfort zone. Running a venue (or gallery, space or hub) is a whole new entity and would require a different level of commitment.'

Thanks to its growing contributor network, New Naratif is an internationally prominent platform for Malaysian writers, publishing a prolific 160+ articles each year (and a further 90+ translations of these articles). In December 2018, they compiled their best articles into a 650-page book to commemorate their first year. As of March 2019, 600 copies of 'New Naratif: The First Year' had been distributed, including copies sold to individuals and libraries in the USA, Europe, and across South East Asia. A successful experiment, they intend to produce a new edition of New Naratif in the future.

Rimbun Dahan hosts Choreolab South East Asia, an international and collaborative artistic research platform for dance and choreography.

Arus believes in supporting and empowering teachers for long-term sustainability. It makes selected content from its learning programmes freely available on its website for others to adapt and use. Its members also go into schools and organise training at selected venues for in-service and pre-service teachers on 21st century teaching pedagogies, coding and programming skills, online content development, developing engaging lesson plans, integrating 21st century skills into everyday teaching and learning, and many more areas. Arus also co-innovates with business. In 2018 Arus worked with Cytron (Malaysia's largest digital maker marketplace) to create a simplified \$6 Arduino microcomputer, which helps children learn about the basics of electronics.

3 Challenges

3.1 Finding the right sustainability model

The Cendana Report (2018) notes that ‘hubs, clusters, networks, and professional bodies lack the capacity and investment seen in well-established economies around the world’ and for the Creative Hubs surveyed, this rings true.

Challenges around balancing the books are real for creative hubs; becoming sustainable is a key objective for the majority of hubs interviewed. Continuous experimentation with new models is key to this, and the ways in which hubs surveyed either supported themselves, or are in the process of trialling, was diverse – from crowdfunding and subscriptions, through to provision of creative workspace, popup events and businesses, and donation drives.

Overall, hub leaders saw grant funding as a steppingstone towards sustainability and creative self-determination. Based on interviews, there is widespread recognition of the value of diverse income streams and the need to move away from a reliance on grants for sustainability.

Social entrepreneurship is still a relatively new concept in Malaysia – in a recent British Council survey of 132 social enterprises, more than two thirds are less than 5 years old. It is however a natural fit for creative hubs, the majority of which are social enterprises by definition – aiming to create sustainable products and services which satisfy the needs of their creative communities, generating income, and producing visible social impact at a local level.

John-Paul Davis, Co-founder and Director of HAUS KCH states ‘one of our biggest goals is to see whether our model (of not relying on grants) works. A lot of people are saying it won’t, that it’s not sustainable. We beg to differ that the creative scene is grants dependent. We just need to figure out the model.’ HAUS notes that its next step is setting up a second hub in Miri, where ‘there are lots of traditional artists who need space’, notes John-Paul.

Obscura Festival of Photography advised that it is difficult to sustain their programme financially, with a lack of funding opportunities available. It is the only photography festival in Malaysia to have sustained itself over several years.

REXKL recently discovered its landlord is charging them 10 times the rate of the previous tenant – placing enormous effort on this nascent organisation and creating the impetus to succeed. At the time of interview in October 2019, they were still operating at a loss, although this had been planned for.

Some have found a happy balance. Five Arts, for example, has a long lease with a supportive landlord whose costs are shared with members.

Some hubs have been successful in applying for building grants - both Zhongshan Building and APW have been beneficiaries of grants from Think City, a social-purpose organisation (funded by the Malaysian Government’s sovereign wealth fund) with the mission of ‘making cities more people-friendly, resilient and liveable’. This support has allowed them to carry out essential building works on their properties, which in turn has allowed both organisations to grow.

The Zhongshan Building derives income from tenant rental and reports a recent increase in interest in their units. Liza Ho of Zhongshan Building notes ‘we’d love to have funding, but we are clear that we don’t want to depend on it’. She points out that funding would allow them to pilot and test new cross-collaborative events between tenants, which would serve the dual purpose of building people’s skills and draw new audiences. She states that they now receive many enquiries about space, demonstrating increasing demand for this type of ecosystem.

Arts-ED’s director Chen Yoke Pin says that moving away from reliance on grants is a key priority for the hub. The organisation, which launched as an informal group in 1999 and was incorporated in 2007, is now deciding what business model to adopt.

Sustainability is a key question and goal for Arts-ED. Chen says she is looking at her options, including linking up with organisations in SEA or the UK to investigate how Arts-ED can plan better.

‘I want to know that we are not just doing good, but we are pushing for new things - are we a changemaker? Are we putting something new together, and asking the right questions?’ Chen asks. *‘To move forward you can’t stay still.’*

New Naratif says it wants a strategy going forward, including what steps it needs to take to be sustainable.

3.2 Staffing and talent retention

The difficulty of finding and retaining staff over time is a common problem encountered by Hubs, and this had a knock-on effect on their ability to grow and scale their organisation whilst managing their existing operations.

Arts-ED works predominantly with schools. As such, it is vital to grow long-term relationships and build trust over time. A school’s liaison post within the organisation would support Arts-ED’s growth, as it wishes to work more closely within school curricula and during school time (it currently runs workshops after school hours and at weekends). However, this post would require someone to develop the role over a number of years. Although the core team has been with the organisation for years, they recognise that this new role requires a very specific skill set. They say: ‘We are still at the stage where it is hard to plan to get people - and to say that next year people will have a job. If I put in the time to train the person, I want to keep hold of them.’

Arts-ED plans to recruit 10-15 young people in paid roles, to investigate and test creative community programming. The rationale behind this is that they will be able to maintain their involvement with the organisation, rather than having them come in and out on a per-project basis. In turn, it will attempt to flip its current model on its head. Rather than senior management driving planning, with younger staff supporting it, Arts-ED wants to put this new team in the driving seat to initiate and plan work themselves, and therefore give them more ownership. The hope is that this will help with staff retention and increase capacity.

Hin Bus Depot is known for the striking graphics and visuals used in their marketing, but note that it is difficult to retain freelance designers for longer than six months on average, as they are in such high demand across Penang.

Arus is also cautious about recruiting new staff beyond the core team members - 'It's not easy to hire - we are only as big as the funding we have, and the people we have' says Daniel, explaining that recruiting the right people can be difficult.

The academy is open to learning about new approaches and people; someone external who can bring in a different offer, perhaps in design. They point to a positive experience last year with Me.reka, a makerspace in KL. They ran a camp together which was 'really good fun, bringing together a talent pool of makers and creative technologists from both spaces to socialise, learn, and share hands-on knowledge'.

APW's Soon Wei said that it is a 'huge issue to build capacity and get the right staff'.

Zhongshan Building would very much like to hire a social media and marketing specialist: 'Everything we do is on a shoestring. Taking into account limited budgets, how can you do marketing?' New Naratif have talked about the possibility of co-developing this learning with ZB. Deborah Augustin of New Naratif adds: 'For us it's essential we grow outside of Malaysia.'

3.3 Evidencing impact

John Dovey and Andy C. Pratt write in 'Creative Hubs: Understanding the New Economy' that the success or failure of creative hubs can only be assessed with 'multi criteria evaluation.' Indeed, for the hubs surveyed, although their impact is demonstrably wide-ranging, their impact is predominantly qualitative rather than quantitative. Few hubs surveyed track metrics, financial impact, or user outcomes - this is mainly due to the way they operate as individual, independent, entities which are under pressure to prioritise new activities and programmes over the evaluation of past work.

Grant-giving organisations are developing their own impact assessment checklists and tools in order to evaluate the reach and sustainability of the social enterprises they support. As a result, hubs report that the complexity of such assessments is often beyond their capacity. For those in receipt of multiple grants, the lack of an established approach creates additional work.

That said, this is a long-standing global hubs challenge, as opposed to a Malaysia-specific issue. The need for an in-context social and cultural impact measurement framework is discussed in Recommendations, on pages 25-30 of this report.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Personal development for hub leaders and future leaders

Due to the predominantly nascent Creative Hubs sector in Malaysia (with the exception of Five Arts, Arts-ED, and Rimbun Dahan which have each been established for 21+ years) the 'routes in' to being a hub owner, director, or manager are exceptionally varied. Malaysian hubs are led by architects, artists, developers, educators, musicians, journalists, photographers, and lawyers – to take but a few examples.

Given the fact that Creative Hubs are a worldwide and growing phenomenon, with potential to bring enormous economic and social value, it is essential to develop the skills of the individuals behind such enterprises.

Development is essential not just in terms of ensuring the growth and longevity of the hubs featured in this report, but also in terms of developing the skills of individuals to become more ambitious, to develop and lead the sector as it matures and grows its impact.

Leadership learning is therefore a priority for hub leaders. There is precedent for this in the UK, through the Clore Fellowship, a unique tailored programme of leaders who 'aim to enrich and transform cultural practice and engagement.' Its offer has to date included residential courses, secondment opportunities, training and skills development, coaching and mentoring, and study visits.

The recommendation therefore is to create a Clore-style development programme for Malaysian hubs in order to strengthen leadership in the sector – creating opportunities for cross-sectoral learning in the hubs community, as well as facilitating partnerships with individuals and groups in the UK's rich and diverse creative hubs ecosystem.

4.2 Audience development

The Creative Hubs surveyed have all requested support in one or more areas relating to audience development:

- Building and improving the skill sets of Creative Hub managers and owners, as well as the artists and creative practitioners they support, in terms of management, audience development, and other specialised creative and cultural skills are key priorities (this will also help with staff retention - a common issue amongst hubs)
- Improving skills and knowledge around inclusive practice in the arts and culture
- Preparing hubs to work in inclusive contexts, especially with groups of audiences they see as under-presented and/or vulnerable
- Using social media marketing. For example, Zhongshan Building wishes to do this in order to best publicise its events, and New Naratif is looking to drive subscriptions in Malaysia and overseas
- Effective data gathering and analysis. Hubs require support in identifying their own rationale for data collection, and in developing an organisational plan that is appropriate (and manageable) for the size of the organisation and the resources at its disposal. For those that already have a high level of data collection, such as Arts-ED, the challenge is in how to leverage this data to 'make the case for' additional support and investment

4.3 The environment

Creative Hubs in Borneo specifically (but also Rimbun Dahan in Kuala Lumpur) have a strong environmental/conservation emphasis. This may be through heritage conservation, landscape conservation, an emphasis on local materials and tools, and highlighting the threat of deforestation, and depletion of local natural resources.

Hubs variously spoke of the imminent threat of ecological crisis, and of a need to act. Hubs in Borneo were – of all the hubs visited in Malaysia – more likely to be embedded or well-networked with environmentally-focussed NGOs. Several were working in remote regions, supporting artisans and craftspeople in-situ. Others were investigating the study of material culture, the natural environment and regional climate in urban contexts (such as Borneo Laboratory Summer School Workshop 2017).

In 2017 Eleanor launched 'Sompoton Farm' with her father to grow all the natural materials needed to make the Sompoton – a 'free' and 'reed' mouth organ whose descendants begat the harmonica, leading to the creation of blues music and, ultimately, pop music. 'A mind-blowing example of how artists and musicians can create across borders' says Eleanor.

Malaysian materials and craftsmanship are unique to the region, and highly regarded regionally. The Creative Hubs ecosystem in Borneo is relatively new, with most organisations forming in 2017 or later. There is an exciting opportunity to contribute to the development of the ecosystem by:

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- The creation of a pilot programme to support innovation in Bornean hubs. A small grants scheme to generate innovative activity and ideas which could lead to a strengthening of the hubs sector, and recognition of the movement more widely internationally
 - A ‘go-see’ visit for all Creative Hubs members to visit Borneo, in order to foster further creative links with Bornean hubs, and to visit craftspeople. There is for example a commercial opportunity for organisations to support and sell the work of regional artisans - with hubs HAUS KCH, APW, Zhongshan, REXKL, and more either having a retail outlet already, or looking into developing a retail strategy
 - Renowned artist I-lan of Kota-K expressed the possibility of working with traditional basket weavers to elevate their works from tourist fodder to works of highly desirable art. There is an opportunity here for hubs to combine their resources to make this happen. Retailers like the UK’s The New Craftsmen demonstrate the idea’s potential.

4.4 Further research

The World Cities Culture Forum has identified the affordability crisis as one of the biggest threats to culture in member cities. It poses two major areas of risk:

- the flight of creative people to more affordable areas
- the loss of performance, exhibition, creation, production and administrative spaces where creative people work (i.e. Creative Hubs)

In London, one of the few cities to track the latter issue, 35% of grassroots music venues have been lost over the past eight years. The number of artist workspaces ‘at risk’ of closing in the next five years has fallen from 28% to 17% over a three-year period, due to intervention.

In most major cities 4-12% of the workforce is employed in the creative economy – and the creative economy is dominated by microenterprises and self-employed people, those most vulnerable to the affordability crisis.

This report recommends that action is undertaken to monitor changes in the Creative Hubs ecosystem in Malaysia to identify trends and changes over time, in order to be able to identify upcoming trends, shape ecosystem development, understand emergent sustainability models, and target support where it is most needed.

Work could include:

- Establishing a Creative Hubs database, to map hub openings and closings.
- Track demand for space from creative hubs or potential creative hubs (as well as creatives in general)
- Undertake research on cost per square foot in each town/city, and how these are changing over time

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- Ascertain the range of tenures. Those on rented or leasehold agreements are vulnerable to change of use or redevelopment. Many Creative Hubs surveyed would like to obtain their own building, yet few have a secure freehold

4.5 A focus on buildings and placemaking

The majority of hubs surveyed have a physical space. Modes of possession are varied, from ownership to short-term leasing and meanwhile use. Overall, there is a strong desire for sustainability – of which buildings play an integral part.

It is clear that the need for buildings will increase in the coming years. Rapid urbanisation is shrinking available space to communities. Old buildings are making way for new malls, offices, and schools. Creative Hubs can therefore play a key role in anchoring communities in areas of high redevelopment. It is also worth noting that commercial pressures play a part even for those who own their buildings, typically facing demands from family members and external stakeholders to continue demonstrating an appropriate return on their shared investment.

They can also play a part in the long-term preservation of heritage buildings. Examples of Creative Hubs already doing this include Zhongshan Building, formerly a row of 1950s shop houses, and APW - formerly a commercial printing factory. Rimbun Dahan plays a key heritage role in preserving traditional 20th century traditional Malay houses from Perak and Penang.

Other Creative Hubs have identified opportunities for expansion – either to more than one site, to bigger premises, or to make the move from renting into ownership. It is worth noting that each hub's needs are quite specific – depending on hub use, budget, organisational priorities, and so on. However, taken as a whole, a focus on buildings would bolster the Creative Hubs sector.

4.6 Hubs advisory network

The creation of a select network of creative hubs advisors and mentors is recommended. Types of advice that could be provided include:

- Contract negotiation
- Land/ building acquisition in Malaysia
- Building renovation
- Securing investors
- Protecting / renegotiating leases
- How and when to expand
- Financial modelling
- Specific support could also be given - such as creating an artists' village, or forming a school

We also recommend that some advisors come from outside of the creative industries in Malaysia. There is precedent for this – for example, the board of London’s Creative Land Trust (funded by Arts Council England, Bloomberg Philanthropies and The Mayor of London’s office, amongst others) comprises leading experts in retail, charity, the law, and real estate. Bringing in specialists from complimentary fields will bolster the collective knowledge of Malaysia’s Creative Hubs, whilst bringing timely and specific support – advisors could be available on an ‘as needed’ basis, or to give specific training to a number of hubs where needed, followed by one-on-one bespoke support.

The majority of the hubs have specific challenges or needs at the moment. Therefore, one course of action could be to provide mentors with related specific expertise to each hub. Some international incubator programmes require participants to pick their ideal mentors (either globally, or within fixed parameters). One might also recruit a wide panel of potential people to call on – from the UK and overseas – on an ad-hoc basis.

4.7 UK-Malaysia hubs collaboration

Most (if not all) of the organisations are highly open to collaboration with similar organisations overseas, and many are well-networked internationally, including with creative organisations and individuals in the UK.

An option therefore would be to pair organisations with those they feel affinity within the SEA region, and/or in the UK. The British Council could broker these relations and facilitate learning visits. In such a way, each hub would choose an appropriate match for their own needs. For example a good ‘match’ for APW could be creative real estate developers U+I, or London’s Coal Drops Yard, whereas Hin Bus Depot might be well suited to the mixed-use, arts-first model of somewhere like Birmingham Open Media; Arus may wish to partner with a ‘MakerEd’-centric member of the UK’s FabLab network such as Knowle West Media Centre.

A co-design/delivery project (similar to the British Council’s recent ‘Developing Inclusive Creative Economies Programme’) would work well – organisations could learn from international (UK) contemporaries through action-oriented collaboration, knowledge sharing, and creative cross-fertilisation.

4.8 Repositioning the creative industries, nationally

Malaysia’s creative industries – of which its creative hubs ecosystem is a part – are developing at a breakneck pace. The most recent figures from the 2019 UN Conference on Trade and Development report that the value of the global market for creative goods doubled from \$208 billion to \$509 billion between 2002 and 2015. In 2020, Malaysia is one of the top 10 performing developing economies worldwide, and a key contributor to the global creative economy.

To date, exciting new initiatives have been announced with regards Malaysia's ambition to become a digital content hub, with news that Sony Interactive Entertainment Worldwide Studios will establish its first Southeast Asia studio in the country, expected to open in 2020.

Communications and Multimedia Minister Gobind Singh Deo says the government is in the process of listening to views from all parties involved in the arts industry. He has stated that *'there is a need for overall reforms.'*

Given the current strength of Malaysia's creative industries there is now a unique opportunity to 'open up the floor' to small to medium-sized enterprises, including creative hubs.

Creative hubs we have spoken to recommend that:

- Arts Education becomes a key part of the curriculum. With a current focus on future skills (AI, VR, gaming) it is critical that students and teachers also learn about creativity and design thinking, skills which are cross-transferable from the traditional arts.
- National funding schemes are developed - for specific or broad artforms - which are run regularly, with clear guidelines and routes of progression (small scale, medium scale, and so on). A focus on grassroots, new pilot schemes, and training may also be relevant here. Other requests include tax reform, and a review of visas for skilled artists - especially to allow more cross-fertilisation of ideas across the SEA region.
- Enlarging space for artistic expression by addressing censorship mechanisms and laws that limit freedom of expression.

The above three recommendations are adapted from ReformARTsi, a coalition of arts companies, arts practitioners, and academics campaigning for specific reforms and policy changes for the performing arts. Members include hubs spoken to for this report (Five Arts, Rimbun Dahan, Arts-ED). However, it is worth mentioning that the majority – if not all – of the hubs surveyed have independently expressed that they would benefit from one or more of these action points.

4.9 Quantifying the impact of Creative Hubs

We recommend an ongoing collaboration between funders and hubs to build the best possible set of evaluation metrics – those which maximise learning outcomes for all involved. There is a need, in Malaysia but also globally, to move evaluation from 'necessary evil' to 'toolkit essential' for hub owners, as a route to better understanding their core business – how they are achieving their goals, evidencing and communicating their impact/relevance to those which matter most, and charting a route to sustainability.

The British Council is in a unique position to explore this, in collaboration with hubs. Potential to build and innovate on current best practices, e.g. Social ROI, within a country-specific hubs context.

5 Hub profiles

5.1 Arts-ED

Arts-ED is a non-profit organisation that provides innovative community-based arts, culture, and heritage education in rural and urban communities. They use creative educational approaches that encourage learning around real issues. Their mission is to:

- Utilise arts and culture for community development and social transformation.
- Create platforms for intergenerational cultural interaction and transmission.
- Develop the critical, creative and aesthetic capacity of young people, cultural workers and educators.

Community consultation, cultural mapping, and participatory research are key themes. The outcomes of which ‘crystallise in the form of cultural events and culture-related educational materials.’

Annually, they engage with around 1800 school students and 800 educators and creative practitioners, all supported by Arts-ED’s creative arts and education team, volunteers and co-collaborators. Since its formation in 2000, Arts-ED has worked with over 16,000 young people, and also with communities in the urban historical city of George Town, the agricultural prefecture of Balik Pulau, and an urban public housing area in Sungai Pinang.

Arts-ED works collaboratively with local institutions, arts educators, artists, and cultural activists to promote education for cultural conservation and revitalisation, particularly in marginalised urban areas. Their innovative approach has been emulated by individuals and organisations in Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

Address: 48, Lorong Toh Aka, 10100 George Town, Pulau Pinang

Website: www.arts-ed.my/

Facebook: @artsedpenang

Instagram: @artsedpenang

YouTube: ArtsED Penang

5.2 Arus

Arus is a social enterprise 'working towards making learning relevant again through the maker approach.' Their goal is to inspire students to become lifelong learners and continuously explore and pursue their passion, creativity and innovation.

Housed in a shop-lot in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, (with an offshoot in Kuala Lumpur) Arus holds regular evening and weekend for students aged 15 to 17. They teach skills such as coding, design thinking, robotics, data analytics, and 3D modelling 'to encourage a maker mindset.'

Their audience consists mainly of underprivileged and/or high needs children. Bukit Mertajam has a high concentration of low performing state schools, with high levels of drop-out. Arus was set up to combat this.

They run around 15 programmes a year in-house, which range from short drop-in sessions, to week-long camps, and year-long structured study. They also provide free online course content via their 'Arus Maker Academy' programme.

Students build both physical and digital solutions to real life problems 'by applying important interdisciplinary concepts.' Arus say they 'push students to be responsible active citizens' through the work they create, and to 'think innovatively on how we can all make the world a better place.'

Address: 86, Jalan Perniagaan, Pusat Perniagaan Alma, 14000 Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang and Selangor Digital Creative Centre, E-28-1, City Park, i-City, Jalan Multimedia 7/AG, Seksyen 7, 40000, Shah Alam, Selangor (Kuala Lumpur)

Website: www.arusacademy.org.my

Facebook: @arusmalaysia and @makerstudiomalaysia

Twitter: @ArusAcademy

Instagram: @arusacademy and @arus.makerstudio

YouTube: Arus Academy

5.3 Hin Bus Depot

Hin Bus Depot is a creative community hub based in George Town. Begun as a space run by independent artists in a derelict bus depot, Hin has since ‘evolved into a project run with the belief that there should be no limit to the expression of art—and that each person, no matter their profession, is an art lover and collector at heart.’

It is now a vibrant creative hub that houses a gallery, artist studios, events spaces, a library, yoga studios, start-ups, and several food & beverage and retail outlets - as well as hosts a weekly pop-up market that supports small community businesses. It proudly ‘supports and nurtures emerging artists by providing a channel for their creativity.’ In all, Hin Bus Depot is home to 19 different businesses, some in restored former shophouses on the site.

Hin Bus Depot is managed by ‘a small but passionate creative collective’, which curates the content of the 60,000 square foot space - from art exhibitions, parties, music gigs, theatre productions, and festivals, to fashion events, brand launches, street art ‘and a whole lot more.’

Address: 31A, Jalan Gurdwara, 10300 George Town, Pulau Pinang

Website: www.hinbusdepot.com

Facebook: @hinbusdepot

Twitter: @HinBusDepot

Instagram: @hinbusdepot

5.4 Obscura Festival of Photograph

Obscura Festival of Photography is Malaysia's premiere photography festival, 'centred around the narrative photography approach through the photographic medium.' The annual Obscura Festival of Photography - which is part of the major international George Town Festival - is a platform for photographers to share their stories, messages, and ideas with each other, and the public, 'in the spirit of conviviality and collaboration.'

Through photography exhibitions and public engagement via artist and curator talks, Obscura aims to bring 'awareness to a number of contemporary issues happening worldwide in the hopes of fostering a mature, thoughtful and critical photographic community - who will form the catalyst in creating a similarly robust society.'

Obscura Festival of Photography partners with various organisations and agencies such as Goethe-Institut, The Japan Foundation, and the US Embassy to bring together leading photographers and editors from around the world to give presentations, conduct masterclasses, and curate exhibitions.

Address: Penang and Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.obscurafestival.com

Facebook: @obscurafestival

Instagram: @obscurafestival

5.5 Penang Art District

Penang Art District (PAD) is an initiative mooted by the state government to catalyse the economic growth of the creative industry in Penang. PAD is envisioned to become the creative hub of Penang's contemporary arts and culture. When constructed, this creative hub will be home to a collection of community art spaces and commercial retail spaces, with the intention to create a sustainable business model for the creative sector.

With PAD, 'the value of Penang's arts and culture will be enhanced by engaging artists, craftsmen, educators and the community at large through the activation of creative spaces, and interactive art-related programmes.'

PAD will also be an incubation centre for aspiring and emerging artists looking for support and opportunities to expand their creative career. It will also act as a creative network that unifies the dispersed arts scene in Penang. It will also be 'a hip and urban creative hub that connects the existing arts spaces to a greater audience.'

'PAD is an initiative by Penang for the people of Penang. It will be a recognisable icon in Penang as the destination for both locals and visitors to explore the arts in the midst of Penang's rich cultural and heritage backdrop.'

Address: 14A & 16A The Whiteaways Arcade (1st Floor) Beach St., Georgetown, 10300
George Town, Penang

Website: www.penangartdistrict.com

Facebook: @penangartdistrict

Instagram: @penangartdistrict

5.6 Projek Rabak

Projek Rabak is an art collective of musicians, writers, poets, painters, filmmakers, theatre activists, and mime artists.

It is a 'super-connector' organisation, heavily embedded in Ipoh's creative scene. In recent years it has shifted beyond physical spaces, and is now a peripatetic gun for hire - curating festivals, organising events, and providing consultancy. It has strong creative links to Jakarta, where it retains its sole physical space (also a collective) - Kedutaan Ipoh, or in English, 'The Embassy of Ipoh'.

Projek Rabak's founders have spawned multiple Ipoh-based projects, including PeaceBeUponYou Store - a self-improvement cafe for the 'cultivation of good qualities in one's character and attempt to change the environment in a positive way'. Future plans include the creation of an arts village, a new physical hub, and potentially a school in 2020.

Address: 24, Jalan Lee Kwee Foh, Taman Canning, 31400 Ipoh

Facebook: @projekrabak

Instagram: @projekrabak

Twitter: @projekrabak

5.7 A Place Where (APW)

Founded in 1952, Art Printing Works was a printers' based on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Now a creative hub - and renamed A Place Where - it is 'a place where community comes together'. The site includes six restaurants, a co-working space, and a series of multi-size event spaces. The print facility is still running today.

From the 60s to the 80s, APW was one of the most prolific printers in Kuala Lumpur. In 2013, 'an idea was conceived to repurpose under-utilised spaces within the printing factory, converting the factory into an inspiring creative space.' The entire site has been reimagined to create 'an urban campus for the community, bringing together individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds through events, workshops, and programmes.'

Address: 29, Jalan Riong, Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.apw.my

Facebook: @apwbangsar

Instagram: @apwbangsar

Twitter: @apwbangsar

5.8 Five Arts Centre

Five Arts Centre is an arts collective that examines artistic, social, cultural, political issues of contemporary Malaysia by way of performances, exhibitions, creative seminars, publications, networking exchanges and research workshops.

It is well-known for cutting edge performances in theatre, dance, music and young people's theatre, and incorporates aspects of the visual and digital arts as well. The collective has performed and presented its work in Southeast Asia, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, India, Egypt, Australia, Canada, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Finland, UAE and the United Kingdom.

For over three decades, Five Arts Centre has been at the forefront of creating experimental, interdisciplinary and intercultural work, providing platforms for the next generation of arts practitioners. Contemporary social, political and cultural issues impinging on Malaysian life are precipitated by way of performances, exhibitions, creative seminars and research workshops.

Address: 27, Lorong Datuk Sulaiman 7, Taman Tun Dr Ismail, 60000 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.fiveartscentre.org

Facebook: @FiveArtsCentre

Twitter: @FiveArts

YouTube: Five Arts Centre

5.9 New Naratif

New Naratif is a movement for democracy, freedom of information, and freedom of expression in Southeast Asia. They aim to ‘make Southeast Asians proud of the region, the shared culture, and shared history.’ New Naratif ‘fight for the dignity and freedom of the Southeast Asian people by building a community of people across the region to imagine and articulate a better Southeast Asia.’

Their goal is to empower Southeast Asians by giving them the information and tools to be fully engaged and participatory citizens.

New Naratif ‘is proud to be an organisation which prizes diversity.’ Staff are majority female, and come from a wide range of ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. They are all Southeast Asian (or permanently resident in Southeast Asia), intimately connected with their local communities, and passionate about telling important, meaningful, and relevant stories about our home region.

They are supported by a network of over 150 contributors across Southeast Asia. Their relationship with contributors ‘goes beyond just the publication of content. They are a valuable source of information, advice, and also function as eyes and ears on the ground to help identify important issues which they can address.’

Website: www.newnaratif.com

Facebook: @newnaratif

Instagram: @newnaratif

Twitter: @NewNaratif

5.10 Perbadanan Kota Buku

Perbadanan Kota Buku (PKB) was inspired in line with the ambitions of the National Book Policy that recommends an establishment of a 'Book City' in Malaysia. Kota Buku describes itself as 'a one-stop centre to gather readers, writers and publishers and to help them engage with each other in various book-related activities.'

A semi-governmental organisation, PKB works closely with the Ministry of Education to 'not only raise awareness about digital reading, but also with industry players and content creators (writers) about new markets, new media and the potential of Malaysian content for international markets.'

It is also a training centre, and facilitates networking events for people in the industry, and related fields. Their specific areas of focus being 'future books and the digital economy', with training provided on e-book production, visual literacy skills, copyright trade, and new markets. They are currently putting an incubation programme in place to 'help groom local content creators and prepare them for international markets and new media.'

Address: D3-04-01 & D3-06-01, Centre Court, Tamarind Square, Persiaran Multimedia, Cyber 10, 63000 Cyberjaya, Selangor

Website: www.kotabuku.my

Facebook: @KotaBukuKL

Instagram: @kota_buku

5.11 Rimbun Dahan

Rimbun Dahan is a privately owned and run arts centre in a 14-acre Southeast Asian garden. It features buildings designed by Hijias Kasturi, as well as two early 20th century traditional Malay houses from Perak and Penang. There are also multiple artist studios, a dance studio, an artist lounge and library, and an underground art gallery.

Rimbun Dahan offers residencies for visual artists, dancers, choreographers, writers, arts managers, curators and researchers - as well as educational opportunities for students of architecture, ecology and botany. It holds an annual dance weekend, Dancing in Place, which comprises site-specific dance works, and is the annual host of the Southeast Asian Choreolab which supports and enables emerging Southeast Asian contemporary dance choreographers.

Rimbun Dahan's focus is supporting artists from within the Southeast Asian region, especially local Malaysian artists, while still providing space for international artists who are interested in engaging with Southeast Asian and Malaysian culture and art. Established in 1994, the program has hosted more than 100 individuals, who have 'benefited from the unique atmosphere of Rimbun Dahan to build their own artistic practice'.

Address: Km. 27 Jalan Kuang, 48050 Kuang, Selangor

Website: www.rimbundahan.org

Facebook: @rimbundahan

Instagram: @rimbundahan

5.12 REXKL

REXKL, formerly 'the iconic Rex Cinema', aims to give the surrounding community a new lease of life by repurposing the once disused building as a space for events, theatre, exhibitions, performances, screenings, library facilities, workshops, and dining. REXKL is 'focused on giving the old, beloved building another chance at a future rather than tearing it down and starting anew.' It is a community-led, cultural space, and describes itself as a 'socially-conscious' creative and cultural hub.

REXKL is home to Air Asia Foundation's first social enterprise hub 'Destination: GOOD,' Asli Barber (mentioned above), a social enterprise that trains blind masseuses, a sustainable fashion boutique, second-hand book store, and a Sunday market which acts as a test-bed for nascent local businesses.

Address: 80, Jalan Sultan, City Centre, 50000 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan
Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.rexkl.com

Facebook: @hellorexkl

Instagram: @hellorexkl

5.13 Zhongshan Building

The Zhongshan Building is a rejuvenation project with a mixture of tenants - including designers, bespoke tailors, artists, archivists, artisans, and lawyers. The building is host to many businesses - including bookstores, a cafe, bakery, tailors, and record shop. Housed in a series of restored 1950s shop lots, Zhongshan is anchored by a gallery space, run by OUR ArtProjects, whose focus is on 'identifying important practices in Malaysian art as well as producing compelling and engaging exhibitions.'

Address: 80 - 84, Jalan Rotan, Off Jalan Kampung Attap, 50460 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.ourartprojects.com

Facebook: @thezhongshanbuilding

Instagram: @thezhongshanbuilding

5.14 Asylum Art Club

Asylum was established in 2016 by members of CrackoArtGroup (founded 2010) and Tamu-Tamu Collective to 'give Kota Kinabalu city centre a space to continue the legacy of CAG', and 'promote the love of arts in the hearts of the community'.

Located on the top floor of a bustling shopping centre, Asylum offers gallery space and hotdesking for artists and residencies, including tourists.

Address: 227, Level 2, West Wing, Wisma Sabah, Jalan Tun Fuad Stephens, 88000
Kota Kinabalu

Facebook: @asylumkk

Instagram: @theasylumkk

5.15 Bentarakata

Bentarakata is an independent creative collective of writers, artists, bakers, creators, and makers of sorts working together to inspire Sabahans to ‘experience and practice a lifestyle of compassion for a sustainable future.’

They celebrate the inclusion of marginalised communities through exhibitions, festivals, workshops and artists’ residencies, and are ‘dedicated to supporting and initiating grassroots projects through the transformative power of literature and art for social change.’ Their vibrant and diverse community is made up of ‘many young people in the city who believe in the same values.’

Their studio is deaf-friendly and LGBTQ+ affirming, and encourages young people to practice a sustainable lifestyle, and artistically express themselves without fear of discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.

They have organised and co-hosted/facilitated workshops in Jakarta (Indonesia), Bangkok (Thailand), Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) as well as local alternative learning centres in Sabah.

Facebook: @Bentarakata

Instagram: @bentarakata

Twitter: @Bentarakata

5.16 Kota-K

Kota-K is a shared studio space, run by architectural practices (Arkitrek and Phyllisophycreatives), and [world-renowned] artist Yee I-Lann.

It was formed in 2017, in response to people 'needing a space for people to talk freely and safely' with a focus on art, crafts, and art history. Kota-K's aim is to build a community of cross-disciplinary makers and thinkers through workshops, performances and talks. To that end, they run regular public activities, workshops, and drop-in events - and also operate a small public arts library.

Address: No 8, Jalan Serih, Pekan Tanjung Aru, 88100 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Website: www.kota-k.com

Facebook: @kotak8sireh

Twitter: @Kotak8Sireh

Instagram: @kotak8sireh

5.17 Borneo Laboratory

Borneo Laboratory is a social enterprise ‘innovating upon Borneo Aesthetics.’ Their work covers ‘Four Pillars’: Design and Make, Food, Documentation, and the Performing Arts.

Borneo Laboratory emerged out of an online platform - Borneo Art Collective, whose mission was to ‘establish, express, and evolve the Bornean narrative from the bottom up.’ Their movement has been inspired by the idea of ‘Berjalai’- con-versing with the world, which is also a deep-rooted cultural ideal in the Borneo landscape.

Since 2016, they have held a number of regional workshop projects that have involved collaborators from France, Germany, the UK, Italy, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. To date, their work has encompassed publications, documentation, crafts, curation, and architectural design.

Address: 30a, Jalan Rubber, 93400 Kuching, Sarawak

Website: www.borneoartcollective.org

Facebook: @borneoartcollective

Instagram: @borneoartcollective

YouTube: Borneo B

5.18 HAUS KCH

HAUS KCH is a creative community hub that provides spaces for local creatives to nurture their art form and foster inter-community collaboration. The first hub of its kind in Kuching, it brings together a wide spectrum of artistic disciplines, with the aim of developing ‘a healthy community of creatives that are actively involved in the socio-economic development of the state.’

HAUS stands for Harmonise, Accelerate, Unite, Sustain. They seek to ‘Harmonise the aspirations of those with a greater vision for the local community; Accelerate the progress of local talents through collaboration; Unite individuals from different backgrounds; and take steps to ensure that they Sustain their efforts over time.’

Address: Lot 4758, Section 64, City Square Phase 2, Jalan Pending,
Pending Heights 1, 93450 Kuching, Sarawak

Website: www.hauskch.com

Facebook: @hauskch

Instagram: @hauskch

Twitter: @hauskch

6 Directory

Penang

Arts-ED

Programme: Community-based arts and education

Address: 48 Lorong Toh Aka, 10100 George Town, Pulau Pinang

Website: www.arts-ed.my

Facebook: @artsedpenang

Instagram: @artsedpenang

YouTube: ArtsED Penang

Arus

Programme: Social enterprise providing educational learning programmes

Address: 86 Jalan Perniagaan, Pusat Perniagaan Alma, 14000 Bukit Mertajam, Pulau Pinang and E-28-1, City Park, i-City, Jalan Multimedia 7/AG, Seksyen 7, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor

Website: www.arusacademy.org.my

Facebook: @arusmalaysia and @makerstudiomalaysia

Twitter: @ArusAcademy

Instagram: @arusacademy and @arus.makerstudio

YouTube: Arus Academy

Hin Bus Depot

Programme: Creative community hub

Address: 31A Jalan Gurdwara, 10300 George Town, Pulau Pinang

Website: www.hinbusdepot.com

Facebook: @hinbusdepot

Twitter: @HinBusDepot

Instagram: @hinbusdepot

Obscura Festival of Photography

Programme: Photography festivals and exhibitions

Website: www.obscurafestival.com

Facebook: @obscurafestival

Instagram: @obscurafestival

Penang Art District

Programme: Government initiative promoting the growth of creative industry in Penang

Address: 14A & 16A The Whiteaways Arcade, 1st Floor, Beach St, Georgetown, 10300
George Town, Penang

Website: www.penangartdistrict.com

Facebook: @penangartdistrict

Instagram: @penangartdistrict

Ipoh

Projek Rabak

Programme: Art collective with gallery space

Address: 24 Jalan Lee Kwee Foh, Taman Canning, 31400 Ipoh

Facebook: @projekrabak

Instagram: @projekrabak

Twitter: @projekrabak

Kuala Lumpur

APW - A Place Where

Programme: Community based creative hub

Address: 29 Jalan Riong, Bangsar, 59100 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.apw.my

Facebook: @apwbangsar

Instagram: @apwbangsar

Twitter: @apwbangsar

Five Arts Centre

Programme: Arts collective

Address: 27 Lorong Datuk Sulaiman 7, Taman Tun Dr Ismail, 60000 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.fiveartscentre.org

Facebook: @FiveArtsCentre

Twitter: @FiveArts

YouTube: Five Arts Centre

New Naratif

Programme: Movement for democracy, freedom of information, and freedom of expression

Website: www.newnaratif.com

Facebook: @newnaratif

Instagram: @newnaratif

Twitter: @NewNaratif

Perbadanan Kota Buku

Programme: Training centre and educational space for learning

Address: D3-04-01 & D3-06-01, Centre Court, Tamarind Square, Persiaran Multimedia, Cyber 10, 63000 Cyberjaya, Selangor

Website: www.kotabuku.my

Facebook: @KotaBukuKL

Instagram: @kota_buku

Rimbun Dahan

Programme: Privately run arts centre and residency

Address: Km.27 Jalan Kuang, 48050 Kuang, Selangor

Website: www.rimbundahan.org

Facebook: @rimbundahan

Instagram: @rimbundahan

REXKL

Programme: Creative and culture hub for arts, music, performance, food and beverage

Address: 80 Jalan Sultan, City Centre, 50000 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.rexkl.com

Facebook: @hellorexkl

Instagram: @hellorexkl

Zhongshan Building

Programme: Art consultancy and gallery space

Address: 80 - 84 Jalan Rotan, Off Jalan Kampung Attap, 50460 Kuala Lumpur

Website: www.ourartprojects.com

Facebook: @thezhongshanbuilding

Instagram: @thezhongshanbuilding

Sabah

Asylum Art Club

Programme: Arts centre and gallery space

Address: 227, Level 2, West Wing, Wisma Sabah, Jalan Tun Fuad Stephens, 88000
Kota Kinabalu

Facebook: @asylumkk

Instagram: @theasylumkk

Bentarakata

Programme: Creative collective of writers, artists and creators

Facebook: @Bentarakata

Instagram: @bentarakata

Twitter: @Bentarakata

Kota-K

Programme: Arts and crafts studio

Address: 8 Jalan Serih, Pekan Tanjung Aru, 88100 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

Website: www.kota-k.com

Facebook: @kotak8sireh

Twitter: @Kotak8Sireh

Instagram: @kotak8sireh

Sarawak

Borneo Laboratory

Programme: Social enterprise focusing on innovation workshops

Address: 30a Jalan Rubber, 93400 Kuching, Sarawak

Website: www.borneoartcollective.org

Facebook: @borneoartcollective

Instagram: @borneoartcollective

YouTube: Borneo B

HAUS KCH

Programme: Creative community hub

Address: Lot 4758, Section 64, City Square Phase 2, Jalan Pending, Pending Heights 1, 93450 Kuching, Sarawak

Website: www.hauskch.com

Facebook: @hauskch

Instagram: @hauskch

Twitter: @hauskch

About the author

Rachael Turner is CEO of grassroots innovation organisation MadLab, based in Manchester, UK. Its primary areas of focus are science and technology; arts and culture. MadLab supports a diverse range of communities and activities – from digital manufacturing to public experimentation with new and emerging technologies.

madlab.org.uk

About the British Council

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We work with over 100 countries in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Last year we reached over 80 million people directly and 791 million people overall including online, broadcasts and publications. We make a positive contribution to the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. Founded in 1934 we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body. We receive a 15 per cent core funding grant from the UK government.

For more information, please visit www.britishcouncil.org

About Universiti Malaya

Universiti Malaya (UM) is a public research university located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The participation of Universiti Malaya through the Cultural Centre in the Hubs for Good programme between British Council and Yayasan Sime Darby fits into our role as generators of knowledge and technology. UM believes in the importance of education with creative disciplines and also the value of knowledge and experience within the creative sectors. As a research institution, the new knowledge provided through our scholarly endeavour can be a catalyst to change paradigms, to aid society in its development and in meeting new challenges as they come along especially in the area of Creative Economy.

About Yayasan Sime Darby

Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD) was established in 1982 and is the philanthropic arm of Sime Darby Plantation Berhad, Sime Darby Property Berhad and Sime Darby Berhad. With a vision to lead and make a sustainable impact and difference in the lives of others, YSD's objectives are supported by its five pillars: Education; Environment; Community & Health; Sports; Arts & Culture.