

Case Study 5: Example of community-based arts work to empower young people

CHOW KIT KITA – A Programme of Empowerment for Inner-City Youth

This case study was produced through an interview with Fahmi Reza and from resources provided by Kota Kita and posted in their Facebook group page and the Chow Kit Kita website. All pictures are taken from Kota Kita's online resources and reproduced with permission, unless stated otherwise.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The project “*Chow Kit Kita*” (“Our Chow Kit”) was started in 2010 by Fahmi Reza and Liew Pik-Svonn, who are the partners behind the project – artist-facilitator and project manager respectively — who also work under the organisational name of *Kota Kita* (“Our City”). *Chow Kit Kita* is a community mapping project conducted with and for the children of the urban communities of Chow Kit and neighbouring Kampung Baru, to instil pride in their neighbourhood and change public perception of this area of Kuala Lumpur, notorious for prostitution, gang activity and drugs. This case study provides an overview of the project, how they worked with the children, and the project development over its three years, touching on some of the challenges the administrators faced over time and the question of what next.

BACKGROUND: Chow Kit and its social activists

Chow Kit is an area in Kuala Lumpur city which derives its name from Jalan Chow Kit (Street), named after the 19th century wealthy Chinese businessman, tin miner and justice of the peace, as well as owner of gambling and opium dens, Loke Chow Kit. Loke was also a patron to labourers, and historically, the area of Chow Kit has been the residential district and leisure quarters of early migrant communities.

Though now infamous as the red light district of Kuala Lumpur, the Chow Kit neighbourhood has very much retained its historical function in relation to housing itinerant migrant groups.

The prostitution and drug abuse that is a reality in Chow Kit, however, has led to the presence of several NGOs offering aid and outreach services to the at-risk children of this community.

Helping the communities of Chow Kit

Various NGOs have focused efforts in Chow Kit on health (HIV) awareness programmes and care for the children of sex workers, such as the Pink Triangle, Yayasan Salam Malaysia and Yayasan Chow Kit. In 2008, Liew Pik-Svonn, an independent young entrepreneur, working as a volunteer tutor with children in the Chow Kit area met with Fahmi Reza, a young activist-artist who was invited to run a workshop for local children cared for by the non-profit organisation, Rumah Nur-Salam, run by the Yayasan Salam Malaysia.

Two years later, Fahmi and Pik-Svonn returned to initiate and run a programme for a community centre founded by the Yayasan Salam Malaysia, KL KrashPad, which was set up to act as a safe haven for at-risk youth to play and study, and keep them off the streets (ref. <http://yck.org.my/what-we-do/yck-centres/>).

They named the project ‘*Chow Kit Kita*’, and in the project Pik-Svonn assumes a project management role, while Fahmi takes on the role of creative designer, artist and facilitator.



Chow Kit festival poster posted around Chow Kit city streets, 2010



Pik-Svonn and Fahmi at left, together with Liew Kung Yu at end right, and the kids of Phase 1, outside the Pakistani Mosque in Chow Kit.

They developed the programme design together and invited other collaborators to lend specific skills as and when needed. Neither Pik-Svonn nor Fahmi have formal training in either social work, education, or art, but Fahmi gained experience working on community projects such as Five Arts Centre's Taman Medan project (2002-2005), and through workshops on community arts work run by practitioners such as Liew Kung Yu and Janet Pillai.

Fahmi is also known for works of political activism and protest, such as his 2007 documentary "Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka" and accompanying blog, and 2012's Occupy Dataran movement of which he was a leading member.

CHOW KIT KITA: community mapping by and for youth

Developing *Chow Kit Kita* and launching Phase 1

The children that frequent the community centre are predominantly ethnic Malay (mostly of Malaysian decent and some of Indonesian descent), and they include children that reside in the Chow Kit area as well as in the nearby urban village of Kampung Baru. There isn't a strict demarcation of where the boundaries of one neighbourhood ends and the other begins, and as the children share the same local school they are therefore identified as part of the Chow Kit community.

It must be made clear that none of the children that have taken part in the *Chow Kit Kita* programme were either "street kids" or the children of sex workers, but Fahmi and Pik-Svonn were told by the children that they encountered a stigma in school because of where they lived and were regularly subjected to taunts and name-calling. This knowledge helped to crystallise one of the project goals, that is, changing public perception of the Chow Kit community.

Fahmi and Pik-Svonn began with a small group of just 10 children, who were selected from the community centre through an "auditioning" process. This entailed filling out forms that required them to describe why they were interested in the programme, and for the programme administrators to gauge their commitment.

Fahmi and Pik-Svonn designed the programme as a mapping project that would take place in phases. The idea of a mapping project was inspired by a community-based project carried out in Penang by artist Liew Kung Yu and the Arts-ED organisation in Penang. As it was still early days, the first theme selected for mapping, "ethnic and religious diversity of Chow Kit", was assigned by the administrators, although they were keen that children should be free to select what to map in order to foster ownership of the project by its participants.

Each phase was about 6 months long, with about 3-4 months for research and another two months for planning and preparation for the culminating festival (*Pesta Chow Kit Kita*). For Phase 1, the festival was held in December 2010. The children were presented with a large range of options of art forms or creative mediums they might like to work with, and from this list the administrators selected seven that were manageable and within their resources and access to skills:

- Photography
- Video
- T-shirt printing
- Research
- Mural painting
- Acting
- Drawing

The workshops were planned as 3-hour sessions every weekend (Saturday/Sunday) over 2-3 months. Lunches were provided and the activities were conducted both inside the centre as well as outside in the Chow Kit neighbourhood.

The outputs produced and showcased in the culminating festival were created based on the pre-decided theme and agreed upon through a brainstorming process. The participants then divided themselves into teams based on the creative forms that interested them the most. This was followed by the production phase where the outputs were developed using the knowledge gained through research activities conducted by the participants and from creative workshops with facilitators. This forms the basic structure for each phase of the *Chow Kit Kita* project.



Left: Fahmi Reza leading Phase 1 children through an exercise in the city.
Right: Happy participants with their silk screened t-shirts.



Running on goodwill and volunteer skills

The *Chow Kit Kita* project initially began operating on a completely volunteer-run basis and with no funding. The KL Krash Pad centre was the physical space in which they ran activities and from where they recruited participants, but the Foundation did not provide any form of financial aid to the project. About halfway through Phase 1, however, Fahmi and Pik-Svonn received a small grant from the National Art Gallery under a programme of educational outreach.

Pik-Svonn and Fahmi recruited friends to act as volunteer workshop facilitators and tapped into the local Chow Kit community for various forms of in-kind support – e.g. paint from paint shops, meals provided from leftover lunchtime buffets from local hotels. They were also able to secure other forms of small support such as having project leaflets sponsored by a printing company, and the canopies for their sidewalk festival sponsored by the KL municipal council, Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL).



Throughout the three years and each phase, *Chow Kit Kita* made continuous use of volunteer assistance. This poster call for volunteers is from 2013.

Each workshop facilitator was given the flexibility to design their own modules with the requirement that the workshops be participatory and experiential, and “nothing like school”. Prior to the running of the workshops, though, the guest facilitator would trial their plan with Pik-Svonn and Fahmi, who monitored the content and structure and gave them feedback accordingly. Feedback was also given to facilitators at the end of their workshops, based on comments from the participants.



Participants in a photography workshop.



Fahmi leading participants through a design workshop in Phase 3.

Phase 1 successes

Phase 1 and its focus on the multiculturalism of Chow Kit is remarkable in how it enabled the children of one community with little experience of and interest in cultures other than their own, to step outside of their own small spheres of existence and engage with aspects of other communities and beliefs, deepening their awareness of and respect for other cultures and diversity. The project had the children entering the houses of worship of the other ethnic and religious communities of Chow Kit such as the Gurdwara Tatt Khalsa Sikh Temple (the largest in Southeast Asia), the Pakistani mosque, and small Chinese temples and halls – a feat worth highlighting as it is, unfortunately, a less than common occurrence in Malaysia with its simmering issues related to ethnic divides and religious mistrust.



Participants outside a Chinese hall.



Preparing to enter the gurdwara with heads covered according to custom.

Phases 2 and 3: greater confidence and new challenges

In the second and third phases of the project, the children were given greater freedom to select their topics of focus. The structure of the programme remained the same: cultural mapping – art & creative workshops – festival & outputs.

The chosen theme for Phase 2 was the food diversity of Chow Kit, with 15 teenagers spending four months to get to know the almost 300 eateries in Chow Kit and identifying the foods most popular with teenagers. The festival in June 2011 culminated with the production of food maps, exhibitions, posters and other printed materials highlighting 15 dishes, their ingredients and stories, and best places to eat it.

Phase 3's result was a mapping of the "bundle" shops of Chow Kit. "Bundle" is the colloquial term for second-hand clothes, derived from the way they are shipped to stores, tightly packed in bundles. Increasingly popular as the vintage concept trends amongst urban youth, bundle shops also appeal to young people with limited purchasing power.

As was established in Phase 1, Phases 2 and 3 both featured about 3-4 months of workshops and a month or two of preparation leading up to each *Pesta* (festival).

More workshops were added to the programme and this time the number of participants was increased to 15. New facilitators were needed to deliver workshops, and Fahmi and Pik-Svonn found that training needed to be conducted to help some of the new facilitators in their work. With Phase 1 they had relied on the help from their friends, most of whom had already done some form of similar work before. Now as the *Chow Kit Kita* project grew, they found they needed more skill sets and needed to expand their reach of facilitators to match their growing ambition.



Facilitator training workshop of 'graduates' of Phase 1 and other keen young people, held at the Kelab Sultan Sulaiman.

At the time of the project's third phase, the relationship between Kota Kita and KL Krash Pad came to an abrupt end. For reasons not really known, the Foundation managers withdrew their support of the *Chow Kit Kita* programme, removing what had been the project's homebase and workshop venue.

Fahmi and Pik-Svonn were, however, able to find an alternative venue to run the programmes: the Kelab Sultan Sulaiman in Kampung Baru, a Selangor state-government owned and run recreational club that was hired out Kota Kita at a discounted rate. Although functional as a workshop venue, Fahmi explained that the location and its image was not what they quite what they needed, especially when it came to sustaining the relationship with the children and in recruiting future participants. The KL Krashpad had been a place where young people gathered, a space in which the children themselves had more ownership. The Kelab Sultan Sulaiman, on the other hand, is a space for adults, with government aesthetics and rules, and it is not surprising that the Kota Kita founders find it less than suitable.



Images of street displays during the Chow Kit festivals. Left: origins of street names display, 2010. Right: Photography exhibition on shop shutters, 2011.

Jubilant festivals – Empowered young participants

Challenges notwithstanding, Phase 3 was executed smoothly and the *Pesta* ran with success.

Although Fahmi and Pik-Svonn did not utilise specific measuring mechanisms with their project, the outputs of each phase of the project and the three *Pesta Chow Kits* are well documented and available online on the *Chow Kit Kita* website as well as FB page. These outputs include but are not limited to brochures and maps for each theme (printed and downloadable online), street photography exhibitions, displays on the origins of Chow Kit area street names (2010), short documentary videos, music videos (2011), merchandise such as tee-shirts and tote bags, and skits and performances.

During Phase 2, they also launched an online shop (<http://shop.chowkitkita.com/>) for their merchandise, which is overseen by Pik-Svonn.

[A short video showing clips of the 2011 festival can be viewed here: <http://www.chowkitkita.com/> as well as on the *Chow Kit Kita* Facebook page.]



A young *Chow Kit Kita* participant

Through the process of researching and exploring their neighbourhoods, the children developed an understanding and appreciation for their surroundings, and a renewed sense of self through the positive engagements with adults and people in their community. They also developed soft skills which could ultimately be of benefit to them in the classroom and beyond. The participatory nature of the workshops and the hands-on product making cultivated skills such as teamworking and critical thinking, and channeled their creativity towards tangible outcomes. The children themselves modeled the tee-shirts and bags they made, and these have all become part of the marketing of their products. The products they made have been either distributed or displayed in the neighbourhood (brochures, maps), or sold online and during the festivals. By participating in *Chow Kit Kita*, the children are able to realise their self-worth and are equipped with new skills by which to express themselves, assert their collective identity as a community, and cultivate local pride.



L-R: Detail from 2010 brochure of places of worship in Chow Kit; Popular foods brochure from 2011; Chow Kit kids “modelling” tote bags.

Impact beyond the workshop participants

Fahmi and Pik-Svonn have also been contributing to developing youth beyond the immediate 15 participants, as they began to undertake facilitator training and the participants in turn run workshops and activities for other children. In these later phases of the project, Fahmi reports that the original participants began to conduct workshops for their friends and other children who were unable to be in the programme themselves. This not only shows the children acknowledging and extending the privilege that they have received to others less fortunate, but is also a demonstration of their increase in confidence and becoming enabled to take on such roles.

In addition to the *Chow Kit Kita* festivals being a vivid demonstration of the project's achievements, with children displaying increased confidence – from acting as emcees during the staged events to other forms of public speaking and engagement through the programme activities – the festivals engage with a public audience. The festivals are mostly attended by the friends and family of the children, but as they are held on the main Chow Kit street, they are also open to any passer-by as well as many interested visitors who became aware of the programme and its activities through social media and word-of-mouth. The festivals, therefore, also act as a placemaking activity that has wider impact on the neighbourhood of Chow Kit and its inhabitants.



A youth participant leading visitors on a tour through Chow Kit (image from Malaysiakini).

CONCLUSION: Attaining Goals and the Question of Continuity

Chow Kit Kita and the work of Fahmi and Pik-Svonn have been reported in local newspapers, both print and online, the articles extolling the virtues of the programme. The response from the teenage participants has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic; the response of Chow Kit residents and business owners supportive, and the response from the public appreciative and keen.

Despite all these considerable positive results, however, Fahmi and Pik-Svonn have not secured a longer term plan for *Chow Kit Kita*, or for the company they set up to run these programmes, called *Kota Kita*. When talking about the project, Fahmi expresses an uncertainty about both project and company's future. There is a sense of dissatisfaction and frustration in the way the project concluded its 3-year run. The achievements they have made through *Chow Kit Kita*, however, should in no way be undermined by these challenges which are not uncommon to project work.

Although not the main focus of this case study, we look at these challenges again, in conclusion, as we consider the achievement of the original project goals and how a project might be considered a success with a logical conclusion.

The main challenges encountered are reiterated here:

- Venue and recruitment: The loss of a space that was a logistical and conceptual match with the project objectives, as well as a space that was both conducive to the activities with children, as well as a known gathering point for the neighbourhood children.
- Achieving a multicultural mix of participants: Despite planned outreach efforts after Phase 1 to specifically target the ethnic Chinese community (this is described in their project diary on their website [here](#)) the project did not achieve the ethnic mix of participants it had hoped for. While it did not prevent the project from running, it did mean the project fell short of one its intended objectives.
- Human resources: A recurring problem of finding and training reliable and skilled workshop facilitators.

- Funding: Although able to draw on volunteer help and receive minimum funding, the quest for funding is a constant and energy-draining one and one upon which the question of project continuity is dependent.

There is real cultural currency in what *Kota Kita* are doing through projects like *Chow Kit Kita*, whether for the young participants that directly benefit from the confidence-building programmes and exposure to new skills and knowledge; or from the participants that engage with the outputs produced through programming that specifically and creatively brings about multicultural and multi-faith understanding and interaction between communities of different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds.

We have to ask whether such projects do, in fact, need to be sustainable, what that means, and when an appropriate conclusion to a project should be. Three years is generally a healthy commitment and enough to allow for evaluation in terms of impact and lessons learned. Taken in this light, *Chow Kit Kita* may be deemed a success in terms of the empowerment of its youth participants and effecting change in public perception. It may perhaps be ideal for such community-based programmes to continue on an indefinite basis and continuously provide a service to the local community. To do so, however, would entail a different type of project structure with proper consideration given to the long term human resource requirements and a need for greater stakeholder engagement.



Chow Kit Kita
kids and
facilitators
during 2013's
Pesta Chow Kit.