

Chapter 7

Community Arts and Urban Heritage during the COVID-19 Lockdown: the case of Urban Sketching

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Introduction

Urban sketching is a community-based creative practice that encourages drawing practice on location in cities, towns, and villages to capture the genius loci or the spirit of the distinctive visual, anthropological, and sentient expressions of a place.

The new term is necessarily related to the definition of a global and inclusive community arts as this drawing practice is open to the entire community and not necessarily exclusive to professional artists of any kind. Either organically, through groups of friends in occasional gatherings, or associatively, through registered non-profit organisations affiliated, as regional chapters, to a global organisation named Urban Sketchers (USk), urban sketching practitioners form a global and regional art-based community that strongly contributes to promoting social engagement, community dialogues, and the interaction between professional artists and people who would not otherwise engage in arts activities (Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3).

In its aesthetics and practice, urban sketching is informed by previous forms of travel journaling, urban landscape, topographical art, and the early 19th-century *en plein air* movement initiated by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes. While travelling journals, urban landscape and topographical art are mainly concentrated around the principle of documentation of the distinctive elements of a location, from its structural surroundings to the various identitarian aspects of its community, the *en plein air* movement, driven by the growing democratisation of the arts through a divorce

with the academies, aimed to enable forms of social interaction and community engagement by organising groups for *plein air sessions*, first within a community of artists, and more recently as a broader and inclusive community arts-based activity.



Figure 1. Urban sketching session at Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam on September 2020 (Courtesy of Creative Space Gallery)

Figure 2. Urban sketching session at Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam on 20 September 2020 (Courtesy of Creative Space Gallery)



Figure 3. Group photo after a sketching session at Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam on September 2020. (Courtesy of Creative Space Gallery)

Aesthetically, urban sketching is an inclusive artistic movement as it is open to all stylistic approaches, techniques, and media used in representation, and does not discriminate between drawing skills since its purpose is exclusively drawing on location, by observation to tell the story of the places we live and we travel to, as stated in the USk manifesto. The manifesto also highlights the community engagement inherent to urban sketching through their inclusiveness to all in a local community and the collectiveness in sharing experiences and supporting each other (Campanario 2012). As the founder of USk states: “sketching (...) becomes social when you share your drawings online and meet other people to draw together” (Campanario 2012, 18).

Urban sketching practice has been growing significantly since the early 2000s. Social media networks such as Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and Instagram are digital platforms for social engagement within the local and the global community of urban sketchers. Social media networks are used by official regional chapters of the USk in more than 62 countries and 315 cities worldwide to disseminate information about physical sketch walks, art educational activities, and sharing online the results of these local activities. As Hari Shankar wrote in the USk report of 2019, the Urban Sketchers movement has a focus on community building in order “to teach on-location drawing skills to as many people as possible all over the world. We make our instruction accessible both through large global events and smaller local workshops” (“Urban Sketchers Annual Report 2019” 2020, 16).

The public and local community urban sketching activities were severely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, curfews, quarantines, sanitary regulations and other similar restrictions banning physical gatherings and circulation in public space. The COVID-19 lockdowns started in January 2020 in Wuhan. By April of that year, about half of the world population was under lockdown and stay-at-home orders after the World Health Organisation (2020) declared that the virus reached the severity of a pandemic.

On the one hand, the lockdowns harshly limited the social interaction and community engagement on location and public space, but, on the other hand, social media allowed a certain creative resilience through the development of new forms of community sketching. Additionally, online sketching activities organised by formal sketching groups such as USk and USk chapters worldwide, and social interactions prompted by individual sketching influencers, became very important. These forms

of social media community arts engagement were able to reach a wider audience who were searching for a pastime or struggling with isolation, stress disorders, anxiety, sleep disorders, and looking for ways to keep a sense of normalcy and stress relief (Mackolil and Mackolil 2020). In March 2020, the World Health Organisation published a series of considerations about mental health and psychological issues emerging during the COVID-19 outbreak (World Health Organisation 2020a). The document specifically refers to social media engagement and creative activities, mainly drawing, as positive ways to ensure social communication and express emotions in times of distress.

In this chapter, we analyse the emergence of new modalities of community arts through the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom. We also consider the emergence of COVID-19 and the lockdown condition as a collective subject matter globally shared among the online sketching community, arguing that hashtags became a sort of meeting point or public square during the lockdown and that online sketching and other online art-based activities had a positive impact on minimising the psychological distress caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns (Mucci et al 2020).

Community Arts and Urban Heritage: Capturing the “Spirit of Place” Through Urban Sketching

With the gradual democratisation of culture and the arts throughout the 20th century, institutions have been changing their role from authoritative custodians of the arts and culture to mediators between the arts and the communities. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the emergence of community arts and the growing importance of art education outside of the established system enabled social and racial inclusion, established a foundation for social and economic empowerment of local communities and minorities and paved the way for vibrantly creative urban settings leading to a sustainable creative industry (Murphy 1975). Community arts initiatives became tangible and intangible carriers of urban heritage and essential to the empowerment of minorities, social inclusion, gender equity (Zorach 2019; Ngo et al 2017; Graves 2005; Zuidervaart 2000; Hicks 1990; Murphy 1975). Whether led by local cultural institutions or non-institutionalised community groups, these initiatives presented an escape from the control of the Establishment and the perpetuation of social stereotypes and economic stratification.

When analysing the emergence of community arts in London during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Wetherell observes the rise of a working-class alternative that emphasised artistic practice as a “community-wide solidarity or individual self-expression” (2013, 238). While community-wide solidarity is primarily concentrated in the consciousness of a local and shared urban identity and heritage, individual self-expression merges with self-development (therapy/social welfare) and pleasurable experience creating a path towards self-confidence, recreation and self-discovery (Wetherell, 2013). In either of these contexts, artistic practice is necessarily driven by social and self-development, rather than by an individualist creative process, aesthetics and form-creating efforts (Zuidervaat 2000). As Wetherell explained, “community arts operate[d] through an almost therapeutic consciousness-raising which celebrates the creative process itself over the finished product” (2013, 237).

One of the critical aspects of community arts is the content. The idea of democratisation of the arts and culture, or better said, of the popularisation of the arts and culture, may give the impression that the objective of community arts is solely to enable forms of accessibility to middle-class culture and high art. Although that is an important aspect that institutionalised community art programmes run by educational departments in museums, theatres, and cultural centres need to tackle, the soul of community arts resides in empowering creative expressions of the community culture itself, which is often spearheaded by community-based non-profit organisations, associative groups or non-institutionalised initiatives. Community culture is a shared urban heritage that not only negotiates but also reflects, affirms, strengthens, and voices local identity. Community culture is flourishing from the concept of urban heritage, which in its turn harbours a series of notions that must be understood through its local context, particularly its local demographic setting, natural landscape, built environment, as well as the history and the intangible stories that are inherent to the spirit of place. The uniqueness of the population and its social practices, along with its heritage structures and urban setting, are forms of community cultural objectivation and can be transmitted through meaningful artistic practices (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Indian Heritage Centre, Paul Wang, the Virtual Culture Fest in 2020. (Courtesy of Paul Wang)

When the arts intersect with the elements of community culture and identity, a sense of local distinctiveness emerges not only as a unifying element within the community but also as a form of community culture representation that stands resiliently against the homogenising characteristics of the processes of globalisation (Evans et al 2011; Lin, 2011). Recent studies demonstrate that globalisation and localisation are not necessarily alternatives to one another but rather coexist and are inextricably connected (Logan et al 2016; Karlström 2010; Logan 2002;). The dynamics between the two result in a valorisation and pride of local identity and the projection of regional identities in a global context.

The uniqueness of urban identity is intensely expressed through the perception and valorisation of the built environment, as architectural heritage is not only a historical landmark a place but also a form of objectivation of social practices, cultural traditions, beliefs, worldviews and other expressions of intangible heritage that are practised by local communities. The community experience of a place is generally the weakest element in safeguarding intangible terms in urban heritage as the conventional approaches tend to exclusively recognise the value of historic built heritage. Visual artists are particularly relevant professional and social groups in urban spaces. They act as mediators of local discourse and often present perspectives

and interpretations of collective memory related to the community space. Contemporary artistic practice is a carrier of collective memories, particularly when its artistic discourse expresses values of cultural, religious, ethnic and social identity (Lopes, 2021). This process happens not only through the visualisation of the urban landscape and the significance of the place but also through the representation of intangible expressions, social practices, and the sentient expressions that result from the interactions of the communities in the urban space. Consequently, contemporary artistic practice is frequently an integrative and innovative communication model to enhance community knowledge, comprehension, and appreciation of cultural heritage (Buszek 2011; Garcia-Lopez and Mazuecos 2011).

As mentioned above, urban sketching is a contemporary artistic practice that highly relates with the notions of community arts and urban heritage in its expanded field: Urban Sketching integrates the representation of the built environment, presents a narrative of its historical heritage, often captures elements of intangible heritage concerning social practices, and frames community identity (Lin 2011; Logan 2002). Because urban sketching is a participative and inclusive artistic practice that engages experienced sketchers and professional artists with the community through workshops, sketching walks and other educational activities, it contributes to a sense of cultural ownership and pride. Additionally, through shared stories and experiences, sketching in a group on location enhances the knowledge about and broadens the sense of collective memory and belonging. These ephemeral experiences of the urban space are also captured through visual and written forms when text descriptions accompany the sketches. Ultimately, we argue that urban sketching can work as a crowdsourcing repository for a community's collective memory by providing an all-inclusive approach to the safeguarding of tangible and intangible heritage.

I want to further discuss this through some case studies and my own experience as an urban sketcher who lived as an expatriate in Brunei Darussalam and was introduced to urban sketching in March 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown.

A well-known urban sketcher from Singapore, Paul Wang, is an art educator with a background in interior design and theatre production. His creative work is generally informed in urban development stories and the diversity of Singaporean urban and human heritage. The principles of conflict, collaboration and harmonious coexistence are thoroughly expressed through his sharp linework and vivid splashes of colour. The seemingly chaotic but organised composition (of the urban space)

along a defined boundary suggests chromatic diversity (of Singaporean cultural identities). Paul's work captures not only his observations of the surrounding urban environment but also several other cultural elements such as the ambience of traditional locations such as markets, Kopitiam (typical coffee shop among the Malay and Chinese communities), hawker centres (Singaporean food courts), as well as the traditional foods that are part of the Singaporean food culture and the people who gather in these places for ordinary social and daily-life activities. This integration of perception and percipience is noticeable in Paul's sketches in the North Bridge Hawker Centre (Figure 5) and the Tanglin Halt Food Centre (Figure 6).



Figure 5. North Bridge Rd Market, Paul Wang.
(Courtesy of Paul Wang)



Figure 6. Tanglin Halt Hawker Centre, Paul Wang.
(Courtesy of Paul Wang)

The documentation of tangible and intangible heritage is noticeable not only in the visual representation of the scene through observation but also through the caption of the photographed sketches shared on Instagram. The captions read as follows:

North Bridge Hawker Centre

Celebrating and sketching hawker culture was what we did last weekend.

One of Singapore's most-loved institutions was been given a timely boost, with the country's hawker culture being added to the Unesco list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity last December.

Hawker centres are very much part of my growing up experience. Many of you growing up in Southeast Asia will find this a familiar sight too. We go there to get our daily breakfast, lunch and even dinners.

In the early days, hawkers will move their mobile food carts to open spaces or by the roadsides to do their businesses. Now they have a permanent location with a roof over their heads.

I hope through my sketch I can show you how multi-racial we are. On the left, you have the Indian owned stall selling Teh Tarik, aka pulled tea. The drink seller will pour and toss the tea back and forth to aerate the tea. Next door, we have a Chinese couple selling their famous fish head soup and noodles. These are just 2 out of the many stalls at the North Bridge road food centre. They always draw a crowd. I hope you are hungry for some delicious local Singapore food!

[#sketch #sketching #draw #drawing#watercolor #watercolour #sketchbook#danielsmith #danielsmithwatercolors#artoftheday #artwork#exploresingapore #hawkerfood#hawkercentre #hawkerculture#singapore #urbansketchers#urbansketching](#)

[Posted on 8 March 2021]

https://www.instagram.com/p/CMJVNfbHxwV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Tanglin Halt Food Centre

My finished sketch from yesterday's visit to Tanglin Halt food centre. So fun to observe and sketch an unfamiliar neighbourhood. A very charming estate built in the 60s. This sketch is about a popular wanton noodle stall on the left and a drink stall on the right in the food centre. Hopefully, you can get a feel of the market and whiff of the delicious char kway teow (local fried noodle).

#sketch #sketching #draw #drawing #watercolour #watercolor #urbansketching #urbansketchers #exploresingapore #tanglinhalt #tanglinhaltfoodcentre #artoftheday #artwork #danielsmithwatercolors #danielsmith #hawkerculture. [Posted on March 28 2021]

https://www.instagram.com/p/CM8899fHqMl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

In both cases, the sketches are intended to frame Singaporean identity, not only through the representation of the spatial environment of Hawker Centres and the food stalls but also through the uniqueness of its food culture and social practices associated with it. Paul's comments highlight his perception of Singaporean "multi-racial" identity. The caption also explains the food traditions that can be experienced in the Hawker Centres, sparking the interest of those who are not familiar with Singaporean culture and promoting a sense of cultural pride in the local community, and its shared collective identity.

Occasionally, on location urban sketching practices and the conversation and social interactions that they entail have a pollinating effect on community engagement.

The pollinating effect of urban sketching is the ability of individual or group on location sketching to generate the desire in members of the community to begin drawing. One of the most common effects of sketching on location is the curiosity of commuters who stop for a while to observe the sketching session. This usually prompts conversation around the sketching skills or anything related to the subject that is being sketched. Urban sketching groups have been growing significantly globally, particularly in large cities, due to the public visibility of the sketching sessions. Unlike many other educational art activities which take place in enclosed spaces like studios, urban sketching activities typically involve reasonably large groups of 30 to 50 people and are easily visible in public places such as public squares, crossroads,

and public parks (Figure 7). Often, commuters become interested in urban sketching and start joining urban sketching activities as they understand that urban sketching does not require any sketching skills and is not limited to any particular artistic techniques but is, rather, the simple practice of sketching in a group and that sharing experiences is not only an excellent method to develop creative skills but also to socialise within the community.



Figure 7. Urban sketching session at Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam on 20 September 2020. (Courtesy of Creative Space Gallery)

The pollinating effect is expanded even more through the regular use of social media by urban sketchers. Social media, particularly Instagram (for its specific photo and video sharing feature), have been widely used by urban sketchers to publicise sketching sessions on location and share the sketches made during these sketching sessions. Instagram posts often include location hashtags and are shown on users' feeds based on georeferencing associated with location coordinates in latitude and longitude. This exponentially increases the visibility and the impact of urban sketching in the community arts and, consequently, also promotes the appreciation of local cultural heritage and collective identity.

Another aspect of community engagement prompted by urban sketching activities is the conversations and social interactions between the sketchers and the local community. As previously mentioned, commuters, shopkeepers, and other members of the community living or working in the location where sketching sessions take

place usually interact with the sketchers (Figure 8). Empathy is formed on a mutual sense of appreciation and recognised value of the location or setting, whether for its the historical value of a building or street or its heritage. During sketching sessions, urban sketchers are often offered water, a stool, or a chair to sit more comfortably, and frequently engage in friendly conversations and share stories about the location or other things related to the location, thereby contributing to revealing the spirit of the place. During a sketching session with my family and two friends, while we were sketching an old groceries shop in Downtown Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital city of Brunei Darussalam, the shop owner, an old lady in her 70s approached us to check what we were doing (Figures 9 and 10). She was surprised to find that we were sketching her shop. She kindly started talking about when she opened the shop in 1972 and described how that location was very commercially and socially vibrant, as it was the business and cultural centre of the town. She mentioned other shops that were once there, the first cinema halls that opened nearby, the goods that used to be sold and some of the social and cultural traditions that were practised at the time and how they changed over the last decades.



Figure 8. Urban sketching session at Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam on 20 September 2020.

(Courtesy of Creative Space Gallery)



Figures 9 and 10. Groceries Shop.
(Image by Rui Oliveira Lopes)

When posting the sketch on social media, urban sketchers often include captions mentioning intangible elements associated with the practice experience, such as stories, and the knowledge that was sourced from the community. Interestingly, this form of the archaeology of knowledge through sketching and the documentation of heritage is transmitted to the community through the sharing in social media. These are everyday stories and experiences shared by urban sketchers all around the world.

A 48-year-old grocery shop in Bandar, somewhere between Jalan Roberts and Jalan Pretty. Great sketching morning with @osman.816, @zakariabinomar and my lovely family. After a few minutes of sketching, the shop owner came to check on what we were doing. Knowing the stories of places from the people is one of my favourite things about urban sketching.

#uskbrunei #usk #urbansketchers #sketching
 #sketchingheritage #sketch #architecture #archsketch
 #archsketcher #sketcharchitecture #sketch_arq
 #sketch_architecture #inkandwatercolor #inkandwash
 #sketchfirstthinklater #loosesketch #watercolor #global_
 sketchers. [posted on December 13, 2020]

https://www.instagram.com/p/ClvAw5dBa6F/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

Captions are not necessarily limited to social media, but they are also an integral component of urban sketching, typically found in explanatory drawings. Urban sketchers often include annotations and other graphics to enhance and bring more life to the sketch by emphasising the experience and the knowledge obtained while sketching. In this sense, urban sketching can be perceived as a form of inquiry and transmission of knowledge and often cultural heritage linked to a place and or urban social and cultural practices.

Sketching During the Lockdown: Between Local and Global Communities

In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, the community experience of place and its inherent social practices in public spaces were seriously compromised.

Most community arts and education programmes were temporarily suspended due to the lockdown, curfews and other restrictions banning physical gatherings and circulation in public space.

The regular urban sketching activities organised by informal groups and registered organisations such as the Urban Sketchers movement shifted entirely to online platforms and social media. This unprecedented global event introduced significant changes in the community arts and the urban sketchers' community.

In the face of lockdown and isolation, many people initiated, resumed, or kept practising creative activities as a form of self-expression, stress management, self-development, fighting boredom, and staying socially connected while keeping physical distance. Social media became a meaningful tool to cope with loneliness, anxiety and the other mental health issues resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown (Cauberghe et al 2021; Mackolil and Mackolil 2020; Mucci et al 2020).

Aphrodite Bouikidis, a researcher on Urban Studies, explains how the pandemic drove her to resume sketching, and mainly urban sketching, as a form of nostalgic expressions of her times in Greece, where she lived before moving to British Columbia, Canada, to enrol in a Masters in Urban Studies. Bouikidis stated that the nostalgic emotions of a pre-pandemic social life motivated her to relive those moments through sketching the places and locations associated with those memories. On several occasions, Bouikidis mentioned how social media became influential in resuming sketching activities. She noted that she felt nostalgic with the posts of places in Greece by her friends and, after reacquiring an interest in sketching those places, she discovered the USk community online. The idea of sharing the sketches online gave her a sense of belonging to a global community.

Sketching from photos is not in line with these principles, but I am too nostalgic about my previous adventures and missed sketching opportunities to care too much right now. With more sunny days, I'll get out and sketch my current city on location and try to share online. Either way, it is a great break from the screen time that dominates many of our lives these days, and I hope to make it a regular practice that I keep. Most importantly: you don't have to be an artist or 'good' at drawing. Just spend some time with a pen/pencil and sketchbook during your adventures or everyday life, and draw what you see in a streetscape, architecture, a moment in a café or the library. Here I go. (Bouikidis 2020).

On the one hand, the limitations imposed by physical distance, social media became a sort of a digital public square, a common ground for social interaction and a way to experience social relationships and activities in the urban space. On the other hand, the documentary component of urban sketching activities in the way that drawing presents a visual narrative of daily activities and storytelling became an exciting way to document the lockdown.

Several sketchers opted to keep socially engaged online through virtual urban sketching sessions with google maps and street view. These digital tools offered the sense of being in a location and probably the closest experience to drawing on location. Experienced urban sketchers began offering online courses and donation-based sessions on Zoom or other video conference platforms that attempted to mimic typical urban sketching sessions on location within a local community.

Through social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, local community groups of urban sketchers made efforts to keep socially engaged in sketching activities, initiating a series of activities online. Sketching challenges became popular among these local sketching communities and participation rapidly expanded to a global community. The official chapter of the USk community in Portugal (USkP) initiated a series of online workshops open to everyone globally entitled *Quarentena Desenhada* (Sketched Quarantine). The workshop took place from 16 to March 22 2020, and throughout seven days, participants were guided through sketching possibilities related to the reality of lockdown. The couch, home cooking, the TV news, tabletop games, books and bookshelves, breakfast, and the window view became a popular subject in sketching, as a new urban collective identity shared by the local and global community. The use of hashtags #quarentenadesenhada #uskathome #dtiys (draw this in your style) and others used in specific challenges became a virtual place for sharing experiences and a form of simulacrum of the physical place and the physical forms of socialisation.

The founder of the USk, Gabriel Campanario, published an opinion article in the Seattle Times newspaper about the sketchers community in Northern Italy, who began sketching the window views from home and sharing the artworks online using the hashtag #uskathome (short for urban sketchers at home). On March 20, 2020, when Campanario published his opinion article, around 1,200 drawings were tagged on Instagram (Campanario 2020). As of May 10, 2021, the hashtag counts with 60,279 posts. The global movement is now a living testimony of the pandemic effect on social activities and daily life, where toilet paper rolls, computers with zoom

sessions going on, backyards, indoor plants, and other ordinary things or events became the “new” landmarks and the sketchers of them became an integral symbol of collective pandemic heritage and shared identity.

The online sketching activities vary significantly from sessions open to the global community of sketchers and those interested in joining these sessions from the comfort of their couch, focuses workshops by professional artists and experienced sketchers, to smaller sketching sessions limited to the local community sketchers which are typically focused on sketching the urban setting in their specific location to express a sense of normalcy and connection to their collective locality.

The USk community, as a global movement, has been contributing significantly to the popularity of and engagement with community arts, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as April 2020, the USk organisation started a web series called USk Talks broadcasted live on YouTube with the purpose to inspire and connect the community of urban sketchers and everyone interested in urban sketching. The series, hosted by Robsketcherman from Hong Kong, began with discussions about sketching during the pandemic and how sketchers adapted to a new sketching routine and then continued discussions related to other sketching topics. The first season had an average of 350 viewers watching live and participating in the sessions with questions. The web series, available on YouTube, became a meaningful educational resource for the growth and development of community arts on a local and global scale.

Conclusion

Community arts has been evolving in the last decades as a form of social empowerment and popularisation of the arts, promoting a significant social change in the perception and appreciation of the arts. I use the word popularisation instead of democratisation, as the latter suggests the idea that the arts still require a body of representatives to mediate or manage the involvement of the public in the arts. Popularisation of the arts implies the direct empowerment of the people in the artistic production and mediation from the community to the community. It also assumes that elements of collective identity are crucial in community arts as it intends to communicate ideas and expressions that are locally meaningful and representative of the community. These elements at the crossroads of community arts and urban heritage are visibly expressed in public space, either physically at the public square or virtually in social media, through the emulation and a form of replacement of the local space.

Urban sketching is, in its essence, an artistic practice that depends on community engagement and participation to communicate heritage within the local community but also internationally. Urban sketching is a form of community arts that shows vital signs of social resilience with a positive impact on ageing and mental health and a powerful way to document and disseminate knowledge related to cultural heritage, thereby strengthening the sense of belonging to a community.

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