



**Service Learning in History and Cultural Learning in Red
Square Area, Melaka, Malaysia**

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Abstract: *The Rumah Merah Melaka heritage tourist area has an important historical value, but the information received by tourists about its historical value is still limited, so the understanding gained by tourists is not optimal. This community service activity aims to increase the historical literacy of tourists and the involvement of local business actors in cultural preservation through the provision of educational media and mentoring with participatory methods oriented to the needs of the target community. The implementation stages include observation to identify the information needs of tourists and the role of local communities, the preparation of historical educational media according to the socio-cultural context, the implementation of direct education to tourists, and the assistance of local business actors as independent distributors of cultural information. The results show an increase in tourists' interest in the historical information provided, changes in tourist behavior in paying attention to cultural values, and the active participation of local business actors in the delivery of historical information. This program is expected to contribute to improving the quality of tourism experiences, strengthening the capacity of local communities, and supporting the sustainability of heritage preservation through collaboration between the community, local business actors, and visitors.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Melaka is one of the most well-known heritage tourism destinations in Southeast Asia and serves as an important historical center in the development of the Malacca Strait region. As a strategic port city, Melaka became an international trade route and a stopover point for merchants from various countries, such as China, India, Arabia, and Europe (Bonet, 2013). Its strategic position made Melaka a contested territory among colonial powers, ranging from the Portuguese and the Dutch to the British (Hu et al., 2024). The influence of colonialism can still be observed today through the presence of government buildings, old churches, museums, and an urban layout that continues to preserve European architectural characteristics.

One of the most iconic structures representing the legacy of Dutch colonialism is the Red House (The Red House or Stadthuys). Constructed in 1650 by the Dutch colonial administration, the building served as the administrative center of government as well as the official residence of the governor and colonial officers. The Red House was originally painted white, but it was later repainted red by the British colonial administration when they assumed

control of Melaka during the period of 1824–1957 (Amir et al., 2015). The red color has been preserved to this day and has become the primary visual identity of the area. Its location at the very center of the city makes the Red House a focal point of tourist activities and one of the most frequently visited landmarks by both domestic and international tourists.

The designation of Melaka as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 has ensured that the Red House and its surrounding area are protected as a world heritage site, prohibiting any alterations or replacement with modern structures (Wan Shamsuddin et al., 2024). This status encourages both the government and the community to preserve the authenticity of the colonial architecture, the social functions, and the historical value of the buildings. In addition, the presence of museums, old churches, and pedestrian-only areas on certain days demonstrates how this heritage district has been adapted into a public space without diminishing its historical significance.

Emphasizes that heritage tourism not only plays a role in cultural preservation but also generates tangible economic impacts through increased tourist arrivals and the emergence of informal-sector commercial activities (Said et al., 2017). This is in line with (Chek et al., 2024) and (Othman, 2010) which states that the presence of heritage destinations in Melaka has the capacity to increase the income of local communities (Othman, 2010), stimulate the MSME sector, and enhance tourist visit retention (Chek et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, modernization and development pressures pose a threat to the sustainability of historical building preservation. (Azlan & Bagul, 2010) notes that the development of tourism and modernization may give rise to risks of excessive commercialization that threaten the authenticity of cultural sites (Azlan & Bagul, 2010). Another challenge arises from the need to adapt modern tourism facilities to the limited space of heritage buildings, whose authenticity must be preserved.

Based on the explanations above, this article proposes the implementation of *Service Learning in History and Cultural Learning in the Red Square Area, Melaka, Malaysia*. This program aims to enhance students' understanding of the history of the Red House in Melaka, Malaysia. In addition, this community engagement activity provides several benefits, including strengthening empirical data related to heritage tourism, expanding networks with local tourism actors and MSMEs, and enriching relevant teaching materials for academic activities. The program is carried out through collaboration among students, lecturers, and tour guides using the Service Learning Malaysia–University for Society (SULAM) approach. This approach is expected not only to strengthen business capacity but also to foster cultural awareness and social responsibility among students. Thus, the program serves as a concrete step in realizing

the synergy between education, empowerment, and the preservation of Malaysia's tourism heritage areas.

2. METHOD

This service learning activity involved 36 students and 2 supervising lecturers from STIE Pembangunan Tanjungpinang. The program was conducted at the Red House, Melaka, Malaysia, on 7 November 2025, using a participatory approach. The participatory approach is an approach that actively involves the community in every stage—from planning and implementation to program evaluation—thereby increasing their awareness and engagement in the activity (Satriadi, 2025).

Adapun fase-fase program ini dijalankan melalui beberapa langkah penting sebagai berikut:

1. Initial Planning

This stage began with a meeting between the students and the resource persons from the Red House, Melaka, to identify the benefits and objectives of the community service activities to be conducted. Intensive discussions were carried out to ensure that the program could be adjusted to the actual conditions in the Red House area. In addition, an initial observation was conducted to assess the current condition of the Red House area, which serves as a tourist attraction for visitors in Melaka, Malaysia.

2. Field Learning Activities

The students conducted direct observations in the Red House area, including examining the building structure, the characteristics of Dutch colonial architecture, the level of conservation, and tourist interactions with the public space. The students also documented activity patterns, visitor flow, crowded points, and the use of space by the community. These activities aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of the site's historical value, physical conditions, and the preservation challenges it faces.

3. Student Resource Person Interaction

At this stage, the students engaged directly with the resource persons to obtain information about the management of the historical site. They learned how to handle tourist flows and address challenges such as limited space, maintenance of old buildings, and the need for visitor education. This interaction helped the students understand operational dynamics and the efforts made to maintain the sustainability of the Red House heritage area. The activity was designed to provide practical learning experiences.

4. Evaluation and Reflection

The final stage involved gathering feedback on the site's condition, visitor experience,

and the effectiveness of the Red House's management. The students then reflected on their field findings, particularly regarding the condition of the Red House Heritage area in Melaka. This evaluation served as the basis for future recommendations to improve program quality and support local businesses.

These stages ensured the active and continuous involvement of all parties, thereby optimizing students' educational outcomes and their understanding of the historical significance of the Red House heritage area in Melaka, Malaysia.

3. RESULT



Figure 1. The Red House Building, Melaka, Malaysia.

Based on the images above, several key findings were identified that illustrate the architectural characteristics, historical background, and functional role of the area as a heritage tourism destination.

The Red House of Melaka, or Dutch Square, is an iconic area of Dutch colonial heritage centered around the Stadthuys building, which formerly functioned as the city hall and the office of the Dutch governor. Constructed between 1641 and 1656, the building was originally painted white before being repainted red in the 1910s, giving it the distinctive appearance it is known for today. Within the same area stands the Malacca Clock Tower, built in 1886 by Tan

Jiak Kim in honor of his father. The structure was initially white but was later painted red during the British colonial period to achieve visual harmony with the surrounding buildings. (Ali & Abdullah, 2019). Based on the images above, several key findings were identified that illustrate the architectural characteristics, historical background, and functional role of the area as a heritage tourism destination. The Red House of Melaka, or Dutch Square, is an iconic Dutch colonial complex centered around the Stadthuys building, which formerly served as the city hall and the office of the Dutch governor. Constructed between 1641 and 1656, the building was originally painted white before being repainted red in the 1910s, resulting in the distinctive appearance it retains today. Within the same area stands the Malacca Clock Tower, built in 1886 by Tan Jiak Kim in honor of his father; it was initially white but later painted red during the British colonial period to visually harmonize with the surrounding structures. Currently, the Stadthuys functions as the Melaka Museum of History and Ethnography, housing various artifacts, colonial documents, traditional clothing, and ethnographic collections that represent the multicultural communities of Melaka, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, Portuguese, and the Peranakan community. The Red House area has thus become not only a historical center but also a symbol of UNESCO world cultural heritage, showcasing the acculturation of European and local cultures and making it one of the most significant and highly “Instagrammable” tourist destinations in Malaysia.

History and Physical Characteristics of the Building

The Service Learning program revealed that the Red House (The Red House/Stadthuys) is a Dutch colonial heritage structure built around 1650. During the colonial period, the building functioned as the administrative center and the residence of the Dutch governor along with council officials responsible for managing the governance of Melaka. According to the resource persons, the building was designed in 17th-century European architectural style, characterized by thick walls, large doors and windows, and a solid structural framework. Interestingly, the resource persons emphasized that the building’s original color was not red, but white, consistent with administrative buildings of the Dutch colonial era.

The change to the red color occurred only after the British took over Melaka from 1824 to 1957. The British repainted the entire building red to standardize its appearance with other administrative structures under their control. To this day, the red color has been preserved as the visual identity of the Red House area, making it highly recognizable to visitors. This was reinforced through the Service Learning observations, which noted that the main building complex—including the stairs, doors, and surrounding fences—utilizes the same shade of red, creating a strong and iconic visual impression.

Status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

The Service Learning program identified that in 1988, Melaka was officially designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site under international law. This status was achieved after obtaining UNESCO approval for the structures, and even the original form and materials remain unchanged.



8, Melaka was officially placed the Red House area. Resource persons explained that the area had been replaced or replaced with new structures. They provided guidelines to ensure that the original form and materials remain unchanged.

The function of the buildings was subsequently shifted toward tourism and historical exhibition, allowing both locals and international tourists to better understand the colonial history of Melaka.

The Area's Function as a Tourist Destination

Observations showed that the Red House complex functions not only as a museum but also as a public space and tourism hub. Within the area, there is an old church over 200 years old that remains active to this day. Religious activities are still held, especially on Sundays, and the church has become one of the most frequently photographed attractions by visitors.

In addition, the resource persons explained that the area is accessible 24 hours a day, as it is located in an open public space. However, from Friday to Sunday, the access roads leading to the Red House are closed to vehicles. This policy aims to create a pedestrian-friendly heritage zone, allowing tourists to walk comfortably and enjoy the historical atmosphere without traffic disturbances. Observations indicated that the area becomes particularly crowded on weekends, especially from late afternoon to evening.

Around the complex, numerous street vendors and souvenir sellers operate along the pedestrian pathways. The products sold vary widely, ranging from local foods and handicrafts to Melaka-themed merchandise, thereby generating economic activity for the local community.

Supporting Tourism Facilities and Riverfront Activities

The Service Learning program also identified a small waterfall and a river that flows near the Red House area. The river holds historical significance because, during the Dutch period, it served as a transportation route and commercial passage, connecting the administrative district with the harbor and open seas. Although the river is no longer used for trade, it has become a tourist attraction, enhanced with pedestrian walkways and designated photo spots. According to the resource persons, the small waterfall in the area was constructed during the British period as part of the celebration of Queen Victoria's birthday.

Figure 2. The street vendor zone within the heritage area.

The visit to the Red House provided participants with a direct understanding of the history of the building, which was constructed during the Dutch colonial period around the 17th century as an administrative center and the residence of the governor. Through the Service Learning program, participants learned that the building was originally painted white before the British changed it to red, a color that has since become the main visual identity of the area. The surroundings of the Red House also offer a vivid illustration of a heritage complex, featuring a more-than-200-year-old church, a colonial-era clock tower, pedestrian pathways, a riverside area, and rows of street vendors and MSMEs that make the location a hub of tourism activity.

Today, the Red House has been transformed into a historical museum and a vibrant cultural tourism site frequently visited by tourists. This transformation demonstrates how colonial buildings can evolve into public educational spaces while simultaneously serving as sources of economic activity for the local community. Participants gained valuable insights from this visit, including an understanding of Melaka's colonial history, the government's efforts to preserve heritage buildings under UNESCO regulations, and the development of economic activities such as MSMEs, souvenir stalls, and tourism services around the area. This activity fostered the awareness that heritage is not merely a relic of the past but a cultural and economic asset that must be maintained through a balanced approach between conservation and commercialization.

4. DISCUSSION

The service-learning experience at the Red House of Melaka illustrates its strategic position as a heritage tourism destination that successfully preserves historical value while simultaneously driving the local economy. As a former Dutch colonial building that later underwent functional adaptation during the British period, the Red House represents not only architectural heritage but also the historical identity of Melaka. This aligns with the view that heritage preservation must integrate historical significance, social function, and economic sustainability, ensuring that cultural sites are not regarded as static relics but as living spaces that continuously interact with the surrounding community. Through this visit, participants

gained an understanding that the management of the Red House involves structured conservation efforts, well-directed tourism promotion, and the empowerment of local micro-enterprises (UMKM), all of which contribute to the economic growth of the area (Burley & Worden, 2003) that the preservation of heritage areas serves as a foundation for cultural identity and as a historical symbol of a nation.

The designation of this area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 reinforces the legitimacy of cultural preservation and strengthens the governance mechanisms to ensure that the authenticity of its architecture and historical value is maintained (Amir et al., 2015). This status prevents the buildings and their surrounding environment from being transformed into modern structures, making conservation efforts a primary priority. In this context, (Teo et al., 2014) this supports the assertion that tourists are motivated to visit Melaka not merely to observe physical structures, but to experience the historical ambiance and the sense of the past embodied within the area (Teo et al., 2014).



Figure 3. Discussion on the History of the Red House (Rumah Merah), Melaka, Malaysia.

The Service Learning in the Red Square Area in Melaka, Malaysia illustrates that tourist activities, which were previously limited to museum visits and heritage tours, but have expanded into a broader center of social and economic interaction. Visitors spend their time taking photos, visiting the still-active old church, walking through the pedestrian-friendly area, and purchasing local products from street vendors. These findings are consistent with (Said et al., 2017) which states that heritage tourism has the potential to enhance local economic activity through the presence of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), local trading, and tourism-related services (Hassan et al., 2014).

The Red House has become a central focal point for tourist movement in Melaka due to its strategic location in the city center. Findings from the service-learning program indicate that tourist density increases significantly on weekends, particularly when road access is closed to motorized vehicles and the area is converted into a pedestrian zone. This condition provides

wider space for street vendors to offer local foods, souvenirs, and services such as photography and decorative trishaw transportation. The presence of these informal economic activities demonstrates that the Red House serves as a daily economic hub for the local community.

(Chek et al., 2024) and (Othman, 2010) states that tourism in Melaka stimulates an increase in local incomes through trade activities and enhanced tourist retention. Visitors who purchase souvenirs and try local culinary products contribute directly to strengthening the micro-economy in the area. Even according to (Amir et al., 2015), the tourism sector in Melaka's heritage area plays a significant role in sustaining the regional economy and generates a multiplier effect on other sectors such as hospitality and transportation (Amir et al., 2015).

This service learning activity generated significant impacts for both participants and organizers. For the students, the program served as a practice-based learning experience that broadened their understanding of the historical value, colonial architecture, and cultural identity of Melaka as a designated world heritage city. Through direct field observations, participants gained deeper insights into the importance of preserving cultural heritage amid modernization, while also strengthening their analytical, communication, and observational skills, as well as their awareness of conservation issues.

In addition, the activity enhanced students' understanding of how heritage tourism functions as a driver of the local economy. Interaction with street vendors, MSMEs, and tourism service providers allowed students to observe the relationship between tourism activities, economic circulation, and the challenges posed by commercialisation. They were able to witness firsthand how local communities utilize economic opportunities while still acknowledging the historical significance of the area.

For the organizers, this activity provided benefits in the form of enriched empirical data on the dynamics of heritage tourism, expanded networks with local tourism and MSME actors, and additional relevant learning materials for academic purposes. Findings from the field also deepened the organizers' understanding of conservation challenges, particularly regarding commercial pressures and the need to maintain architectural authenticity under UNESCO regulations.

Overall, the program demonstrates that the management of heritage areas must maintain a balance between conservation and economic interests. The Melaka authorities have implemented adaptive measures such as weekend pedestrianization and strict limitations on physical alterations to heritage buildings. Nevertheless, long-term sustainability requires more comprehensive policies to ensure that historical values and cultural identity are not diminished by short-term commercial priorities. Through an educational and participatory approach, this

service learning activity successfully enriched the academic and practical experience of both participants and organizers while supporting efforts to preserve cultural heritage.

5. CONCLUSION

The Red House Heritage Area is one of the most prominent historical icons from the Dutch colonial period, characterized by significant architectural and historical value. Originally built in 1650 and painted white, the building later turned red during British administration. Today, the area has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (2008), which means the buildings may not be modified and must be preserved for cultural purposes such as museums, churches, and heritage tourism activities.

The Red House functions not only as a historical attraction but also as a center of social and economic interaction for the local community. Daily tourism activities, coupled with the implementation of a weekend car-free zone, make the area vibrant and highly attractive to visitors. This generates positive economic impacts for local residents, as reflected in the increasing number of street vendors, trishaw (beca) service providers, and the growing transactions at souvenir shops. Thus, the heritage area serves a dual function: preserving historical value while simultaneously supporting the local economy.

The Red House stands as an important historical and architectural symbol representing the colonial legacy of both the Dutch and British administrations, reflecting the historical development of Melaka. The UNESCO designation in 2008 strengthens the legitimacy of cultural preservation, ensuring that the buildings retain their original structure and function. Beyond its role as a historical site, the Red House also serves as a hub of social and economic activity. The presence of local traders, MSMEs, trishaw services, and souvenir shops highlights the significant economic benefits generated for surrounding communities. However, service learning activities also identified conservation challenges, particularly the risk of excessive commercialization that may reduce the authenticity and historical value of the heritage site.

Despite these findings, the service learning program also encountered several limitations. The scope of observation was limited to the Red House area, without comparison to other heritage sites in Melaka that may share similar dynamics. The data collected was mainly observational, which restricts the ability to present quantitative evidence of economic impact. Additionally, the short duration of the program means that the observations may not fully represent tourism and economic conditions throughout the year. The study also did not deeply assess policy and regulatory frameworks implemented by local authorities or UNESCO, indicating the need for further research to understand the effectiveness of heritage management

more comprehensively.

The findings also highlight the need to address the challenge of commercialization, which may threaten the authenticity of the heritage area. Therefore, the management of the Red House must uphold a balance between cultural conservation and economic utilization. Collaboration among government authorities, local businesses, and site managers is essential to ensure that the Red House remains a sustainable, authentic, and community-beneficial cultural tourism destination.

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