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City as Brand: A Review of Reimagine the City Advertising Design Final-Year Project Exhibition

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Abstract

This paper reviews *Reimagine the City*, a final-year project showcase of the Bachelor of Multimedia (Hons) in Advertising Design, Faculty of Creative Multimedia. Grounded in Malaysia's multicultural heritage and diverse state identities, the project challenged students to develop 360° advertising campaigns for selected city councils, thereby demonstrating advertising as a tool for city branding. Conducted across two semesters, the project advanced from research and strategic planning to brand direction, production, and multi-platform execution. The review identifies three key findings. First, integrating cultural identity into campaign strategies enabled students to expand city branding beyond conventional tourism promotion, foregrounding narratives of diversity and heritage. Second, the staged pedagogical framework was effective in cultivating both analytical and creative competencies, with students demonstrating growth in strategy, storytelling, and execution. Third, the project evidenced the

potential of advertising education to contribute meaningfully to civic discourse, linking creative practice with questions of urban identity. Overall, these findings suggest that *Reimagine the City* constitutes a model for embedding real-world challenges within creative curricula, underscoring how advertising design can foster critical inquiry, cultural sensitivity, and professional readiness. Ultimately, the showcase demonstrates how student-led projects can propose innovative approaches to city promotion and identity in Malaysia.

Keywords City branding; Cultural storytelling; Urban identity; Advertising design; 360° campaigns; Student-led projects.

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Introduction

Reimagine the City is a final-year project exhibition by Bachelor of Multimedia in Advertising Design students from the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University, presented as part of the UNLOCK 2025 showcase. The phrase “Reimagine the City” carries both symbolic and practical significance. To reimagine is to look beyond the surface of the familiar and envision alternative possibilities for how a city can be experienced, narrated and represented. In the context of creative process, it reflects a process of reinterpreting cultural heritage, architecture, lifestyle, and identity into a new form of storytelling.

For this exhibition, the “city” symbolises more than a geographical space. It embodies collective memory, cultural diversity, and the aspirations of its people. By reimagining the city, students engaged critically with themes of belonging, representation, and promotion, demonstrating how advertising design can serve not only commercial purpose, but also contribute to cultural storytelling and civic identity. This resonates with Anholt’s [1] view of city branding as a multidimensional construct that integrates culture, heritage, and identity.

The concept of city as a brand has long been explored through creative exhibitions and projects. In 2018, the Urbanscapes Creative Arts Festival in Kuala Lumpur adopted the theme #REIMAGINEKL, transforming Kuala Lumpur into a city-wide creative canvas via art, music, and participatory culture. Over three weekends, heritage sites and public spaces were animated with installations, performances, and accessible programming that encouraged the public to reengage with the city’s physical and cultural fabric [2][3]. The festival director described the initiative as an opportunity to “reimagine, reconnect with, and reclaim the city” [4]. By embedding creative interventions in everyday urban environments, #REIMAGINEKL functioned not just as an arts festival, but as a form of urban storytelling and cultural branding, inviting citizens to view Kuala Lumpur through renewed imaginative and communal lenses.

Another precedent of reimagining city project is AI Art Curation: Re-imagining the City of Helsinki. As part of the 2023 Helsinki Art Biennial titled *New Directions May Emerge*, this project redefined curatorial practice through artificial intelligence. Using the Helsinki Art Museum’s collection as its foundation, the project employed CLIP-guided models to map artworks onto fictional geolocations within the city, generating synthetic 360° panoramas that merged machine learning, urban imagery, and cultural heritage [5]. Presented as an interactive web interface, the project invited audiences to navigate an AI-generated version of Helsinki, thus reframing how the city’s identity and memory might be experienced through computational creativity [6].

Other notable precedents in city branding include Milton Glaser’s iconic “I ♥NY” campaign, which has become a global benchmark for the use of simple yet powerful design in place promotion [7]. The branding strategy of the Paris Convention and Visitors Bureau similarly demonstrates how consistent visual identity and storytelling can strengthen a city’s international appeal [8]. Calgary’s “Blue Sky City” initiative reflects efforts to reposition the city through values of openness and opportunity [9], while Porto’s redesign and rebranding project illustrates how heritage and modernity can be integrated into a cohesive urban narrative [10].

The purpose of the review includes:

1. To critically reflect on the significance of the exhibition.
2. To evaluate the pedagogical impact.
3. To explore the intersection of education, creativity and civic engagement.

Exhibition Overview

The exhibition *Reimagine the City* was conceived around the central theme of urban identity and cultural narratives, with a focus on presenting advertising as a medium for rethinking and representing Malaysian cities. The curatorial direction encouraged students to explore the symbolic and functional dimensions of “reimagination”, not only as an act of redesigning urban promotion, but also as a critical reflection on heritage, diversity, and modernity. Each campaign was developed with the city council as the imagined client, thereby grounding the projects in real-world contexts while allowing creative reinterpretations.

The showcase was structured to highlight both the process and the outcome of the student work. From situation analysis reports and strategic planning to the final execution of campaign visuals, the curation emphasised the progression of ideas from research-based inquiry to creative resolution. The choice of a 360-degree campaign model accentuated the educational emphasis on multi-platform storytelling, while the inclusion of different mediums, such as audio-visuals, UI/UX interfaces, experiential brand activations, out-of-home advertisements, social media content, and supporting collaterals, allowed audiences to experience how advertising can function as city branding. In its curatorial framing, *Reimagine the City* positioned student projects as more than academic exercises. They were presented as speculative proposals for how cities could articulate their identities in ways that are culturally resonant, globally competitive, and socially engaging.

Project Overview

The project spanned 32 weeks, with activities distributed across two semesters. In semester 1, students began by producing a situation analysis report (SAR) in groups, which informed the subsequent

development of individual problem statements, solutions, big ideas, advertising messages, and campaign objectives. They then devised campaign names and taglines, supported by precedent studies and design references, before refining their direction in consultation with teaching staff. This process culminated in the creation of a master brand direction encompassing masthead typography, colour scheme, key visual elements, and copywriting, ultimately consolidated into a key visual.

In Semester 2, students advanced their approved campaign directions by constructing a detailed production plan through 16-week Gantt charts, mapping out pre-production, production, and post-production phases. They proposed one main activation supported by four complementary channels, with regular check-ins scheduled to ensure consistent progress. External panels were invited at the final stage to provide feedback on the completed projects. Students concluded by presenting their campaigns on printed boards, synthesising their strategic thinking, design process, and creative execution.

Highlighted Projects

One exemplary work, *Flow into New Chow Kit* (Figure 1 and 2) reimagines the district through a multi-platform campaign that frames it as Kuala Lumpur's emerging centre of creativity and culture. This project addresses lingering negative perceptions of the district as outdated and unsafe, despite its recent cultural and social revitalisation. By leveraging digital platforms and immersive on-ground experiences, the campaign highlights Chow Kit's Street art, cafes, food, and cultural vibrancy. With visuals designed in bold, modern aesthetics that align with Gen Z sensibilities, the project successfully reintroduces Chow Kit as an engaging destination for younger urban audiences.

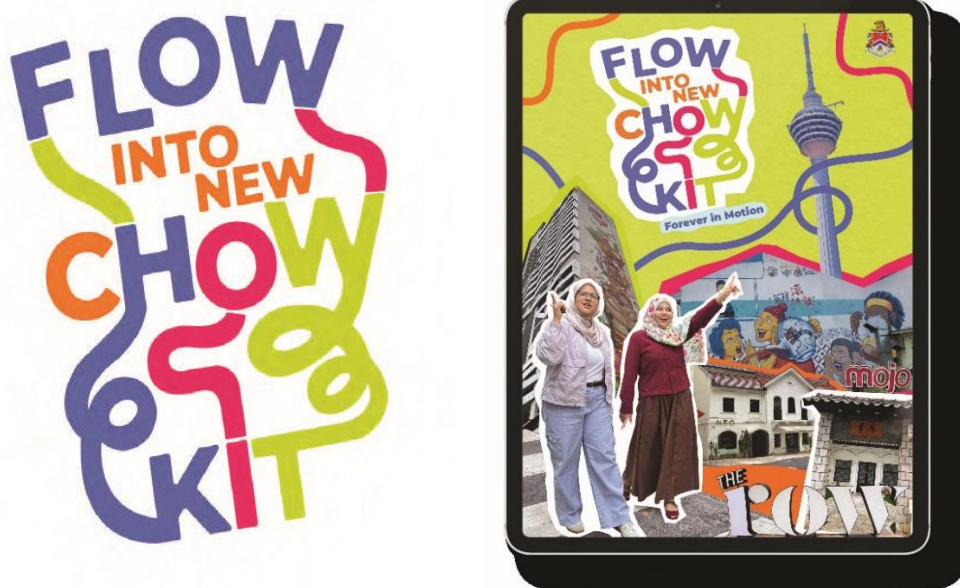


Figure 1. Masthead and Key Visual of the Campaign



Figure 2. Experiential Brand Activation and Out-of-Home Advertisement

Another campaign that focuses on Chow Kit is *Chow Lu, Ke Chow Kit* (Figure 3 and 4). Although the district benefits from easy access to public transportation, it continues to suffer from low visitor foot traffic due to limited promotion of its attractions. The campaign addresses this challenge by highlighting Chow Kit's convenience and authentic urban experiences, inviting people to rediscover the area without the hassle of traffic. Visually, the campaign adopts a playful and youthful look, featuring mascots styled as urban Gen Z characters in a cartoonish aesthetic. These are paired with vibrant colours and dynamic graphic elements, creating an energetic and approachable identity that resonates with younger audiences while promoting Chow Kit's unique culture, food, and lifestyle.



Figure 3. Masthead, Mascots and Key Visual of the Campaign

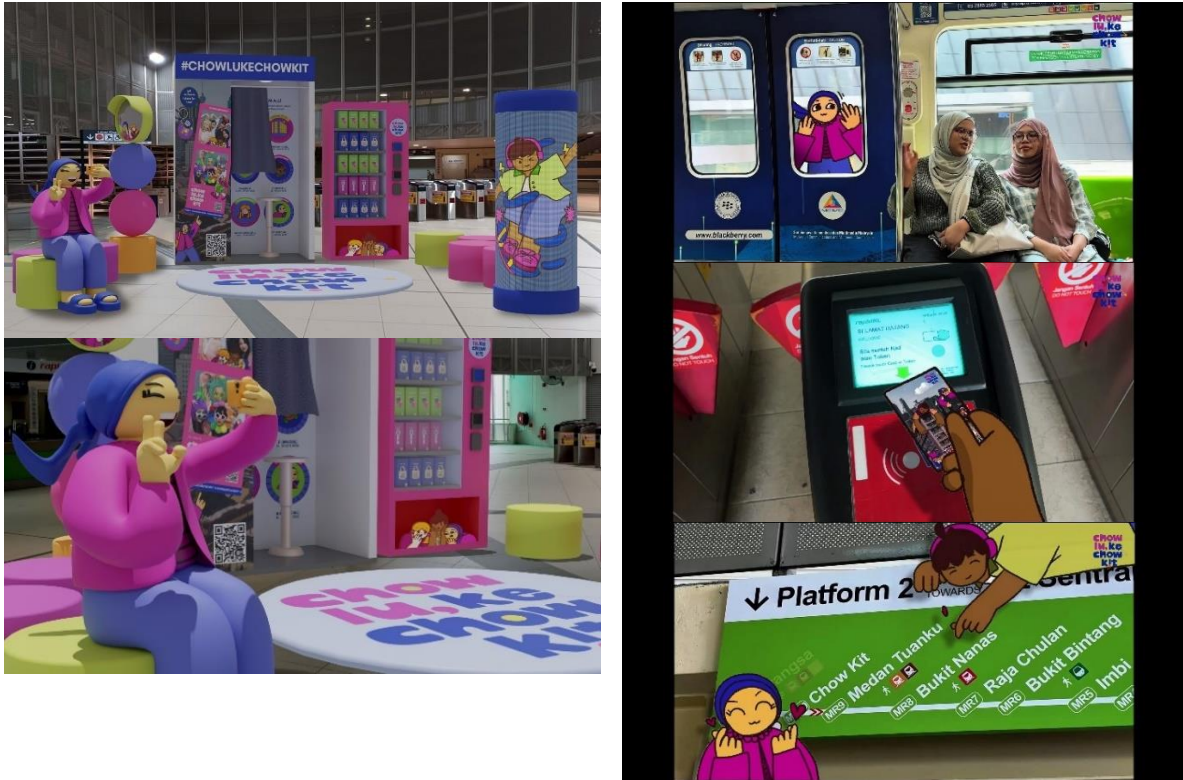


Figure 4. Experiential Brand Activation and Screenshots of Video Advertisement

Playlist Aloq Staq (Figure 5 and 6) reimagines Alor Setar as a sensory escape from the pressures of urban living. It presents the city as a place to slow down, reconnect with oneself, and embrace life at a gentler pace. Centred on the metaphor of a “playlist”, the campaign invites visitors to experience Alor Setar’s rhythm through its sights and sounds. Visually, the campaign combines warm and cool colours with simplified symbols, creating a modern and approachable aesthetic that complements the concept of relaxation and immersion. By framing the city as a journey of relaxation and cultural immersion, it highlights Alor Setar’s potential as both a tranquil retreat and a vibrant destination.



Figure 5. Masthead, Key Visual of the Campaign and Experiential Brand Activation



Figure 6. Website Interface

The *Hojiak Sekali* (Figure 7 and 8) campaign reimagines Melaka's culinary heritage for younger generations. While the city's rich food traditions risk being overshadowed by modern dining trends, this campaign reignites through cultural storytelling, interactive experiences, and playful use of Baba Nyonya slang. Centred on the idea of "Hojiak Sekali" (truly delicious), it introduces Melaka's culinary scene through a Nyonya-inspired lens, showcasing the stories behind iconic dishes. The visuals employ geometric shapes and simplified icons inspired by Baba Nyonya cultural motifs, paired with a complementary palette of pink and blue to convey freshness while maintaining cultural resonance. By evoking both nostalgia and discovery, the campaign celebrates Melaka's unique flavours while inspiring new audiences to connect with its cultural legacy.



Figure 7. Masthead, Mascots and Key Visual of the Campaign



Figure 8. Experiential Brand Activation and Supporting Collaterals

Impact and Relevance

Critical Reflection on the Exhibition

The exhibition underlines advertising design as a medium that goes beyond persuasion, contributing to the wider discourse of cultural storytelling and city branding. Campaigns such as *Flow into New Chow Kit*, *Playlist Aloq Staq* and *Hojiak Sekali* reveal how design can reframe public perceptions of urban spaces, heritage, and identity. The use of vibrant, modern aesthetics in *Flow into New Chow Kit* communicates a youthful and energetic vision of the district. The warm-cool palette and simplified symbols of *Playlist Aloq Staq* capture a calming yet contemporary rhythm. The geometric motifs and complementary pink and blue tones of *Hojiak Sekali* retrieved from Baba Nyonya culture to bridge heritage and modernity. Collectively, these visual strategies demonstrate advertising design's capacity to shape cultural narratives and reposition cities as dynamic, inclusive, and engaging destinations.

Pedagogical Impact

The exhibition functioned as a pedagogical platform that bridged classroom learning with real-world practice. Students were required not only to conduct research and craft narratives, but also to translate them into compelling visual executions that aligned with cultural contexts. For example, the cartoonish Gen Z mascots of Chow Lu, Ke Chow Kit reflect an understanding of youth-oriented design, while the playful reinterpretation of heritage in *Hojiak Sekali* shows sensitivity to cultural storytelling. Such design decisions illustrate how students moved beyond theoretical knowledge into applied creativity, strengthening both their critical thinking and professional readiness. By engaging with real-world challenges of city branding, students honed their ability to balance concept, aesthetics, and audience needs, skills essential for careers in advertising and design.

Education, Creativity, and Civic Engagement

At the same time, the projects highlight the intersection between education, creativity, and civic engagement. The campaigns invited students to consider how visual language, whether vibrant colours, cultural motifs, or simplified icons, can act as a bridge between communities and their urban environments. By reimagining cities like Alor Setar, Melaka, and Kuala Lumpur through creative design, students positioned themselves as cultural participants who contributed to ongoing narratives of place-making and identity. In this way, the showcase illustrates how student-led projects can extend beyond academic outcomes to foster civic-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and critical reflection on urban life. It affirms that practice-based design pedagogy not only prepares students for professional industries but also cultivates their role as active contributors to cultural storytelling and community engagement.

Contribution to Academic, Industry and Societal Discourse

The exhibition contributes to multiple discourse by positioning advertising design as a tool for cultural mediation and urban storytelling. Academically, it demonstrates the value of practice-based learning, where students integrate research, creativity, and critical reflection to produce contextually relevant campaigns. For the industry, the projects showcase how emerging designers can respond to the evolving demands of branding, particularly the shift towards authenticity, cultural resonance, and audience engagement. At a societal level, the campaigns address issues of urban identity, heritage preservation, and community participation, highlighting how creative interventions can bridge generational divides and inspire renewed appreciation of place. The multi-layered contribution positions the exhibition not merely as a student exercise, but as an active dialogue between education, industry practices, and societal needs.

Conclusion

The *Reimagine the City* showcase demonstrates the value of advertising design as a medium that bridges creativity, education, and civic discourse. More than a display of final-year projects, the exhibition acts as a platform that showcases how design can reinterpret urban narratives, making cities legible through cultural storytelling and visual strategies. It also foregrounds the role of young designers as active contributors to conversations on city identity, heritage, and community engagement. By merging pedagogical objectives with real-world challenges, the showcase not only nurtures professional readiness among students, but also illustrates the evolving scope of creative multimedia practice, where advertising design extends beyond commercial contexts, to embrace cultural and societal impact. Ultimately, the exhibition highlights the relevance of advertising design in shaping meaningful urban experiences while offering a glimpse into the future of creative education and practice.

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Authors’ Bio

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Rubinden Kumar is a graphic design lead who specialises in branding, print, and digital design. He brings several years of industry experience from both in-house roles and creative agencies in Australia and Malaysia. Graduated with a Bachelor's (Hons) of Multimedia in Advertising Design in 2011 at Multimedia University, Malaysia and completed his Master of Communication Design at RMIT University, Melbourne. Rubinden has collaborated with major brands, including RMIT University, Telstra Australia, and Astro Malaysia. Rubinden is known for his viral Visit Malaysia 2020 logo redesign and as a contributing artist for Harper's Bazaar Malaysia. After spending seven years in Melbourne, he returned to Malaysia driven by a desire to share his passion for graphic design with the next generation of creatives. He is currently a lecturer at Multimedia University under the Advertising Design department.

Ellyna Hashim has over twenty-five years of experience in Advertising and Branding Communication in the industry. Trained as an art director, her portfolios spanned across broadcast advertising and promotions that included television commercials, radio and corporate videos, branding strategies for corporate communications, event and promotions, editorials, brand identity, and packaging designs. Marketing and Brand Development became second nature to her. The evolution and practices of branding communications, network media, and digital platforms, now become the focus of her research. Ellyna was the programme coordinator for the Multimedia Advertising Design Degree Programme from 2017 to 2021 as well as holding the appointment of Deputy Dean of Students Experience and Alumni from 2021 to 2023 and the recipient of the 2019 MMU Excellence in Teaching Award. She is also a practicing artist with national art groups, with exhibitions from 2008 to 2020.

Muhammad Syahmi Abd Aziz is an Assistant Lecturer at the Faculty of Creative Multimedia, Multimedia University (MMU) Cyberjaya, with a strong focus on video production and multimedia content development. Since 2017, he has been actively involved in creating e-learning materials ranging from live-action shoots to motion and vector graphics for clients such as Telekom Malaysia. He regularly conducts training sessions on video production, covering the full spectrum from shooting techniques to software editing, for a wide range of clients including government bodies, MAMPU, YADIM, and Telekom Malaysia. In addition to corporate work, he also produces montage and promotional videos for events. At FCM, his teaching is centred around video-related subjects, combining creative practice with technical know-how to equip students with industry-relevant skills.