

SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCAL INVOLVEMENT IN CONTINUING LOCAL ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

The paper focuses on how exclusive versus inclusive government-led development processes lead to different outcomes in relation to architectural and design identity. Using Kota Iskandar, Iskandar Puteri, Johor as a case study, the research summarized here indicates that imported identity is not readily accepted, due to the negative environmental implications of the uncritical foreign copy. Conversely, a more inclusive design and planning process tends to result in a design that is more consistent with local identity, and—not coincidentally—more environmentally sustainable.

Introduction

The ongoing trend toward the adoption of a set of universal values—globalization, as it has recently come to be called—is leading to the homogenization of cities around the globe. In cities as diverse as New York, Chicago, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, the promotion of a universal modern aesthetic, underpinned by shared technologies, are turning cities into homogenized monocultures that alienate local populations from their historical roots and local tradition. (Mumford, 1965/75; Jacobs, 1961; Blake, 1977; Wolfe, 1981).

The crisis of the modern and the post-modern—and the mounting criticism of those approaches—has sparked efforts to restore a sense of continuity and rootedness in architecture (Jencks, 1977; Rossi, 1978; Curtis, 1982; Pallasmaa, 1988). Capturing local values through form and design is especially critical in the context of rapidly developing and post-colonial cities, where local identity comes under pressure from a variety of forces: East-West competition, traditional and modern tastes, postmodern exploitation, and nation building (Said, 1991; Al-Sayyad, 1992; Özkan, 1985, Curtiss, 1985/6; Colquhoun, 1997). The entire Asian region, still undergoing the post-colonial experience of cultural transformation, is under particular pressure (Lim, 2001).

Malaysia—the focus of this paper—is intensely immersed in a discourse focused on continuing identity. More than four centuries of colonial history broke the continuity of the region's identity (Md Ali,

1983; Sheppard, 1989), some of the consequences of which can be heard in the postmodern architectural discourse (Mursib, 2008). The remarkably rapid transformation from traditional to global culture has allowed little time to reflect and strategize on sustaining local values (Dunster, 1984). Simply stated, Malaysia—today at the crossroads between the modern and the traditional—needs to protect its identity from being swept away by globalization (Arbi, 1989; Sheppard, 1989).

The nation's quest to define and protect local identity was formalized by the 1971 National Cultural Policy (NPC) (Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport, 1971), which identified Malaysia's cultural identity as being based on Islam and its indigenous communities. A decade later, the "Towards National Identity" seminar focused on the natural growth of the indigenous and the key role of the local.

In the 1980s, the quest for identity culminated in reactive nationalism, and triggered the Malay Revival in Malaysian public architecture (Mohd Rasdi, 2001; Ismail, 2003). The effort to secure Malay identity in highly visible and contested spaces has resulted in an increase in government-led developments that emphasize an Islamic-Malay identity, which tends to align Malaysia with the Middle East (King, 2004; Vale, 1992/2008; Ismail, 2008; Haja Bava Mohidin, 2015). But importing foreign forms again impedes the embrace and continuity of local values (Dunster, 1984; Mohd Rasdi, 1999, 2001b).

That effort, and that struggle, remain active today. Despite significant support from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture program (Campbell, 1998), the Architect Regional Council Asia (ARCASIA) and the Architect Society of Malaysia (PAM), sustaining local values is an ongoing challenge.

The traditions of local architecture

This paper identifies "local" architecture and design as that being found in indigenous Malaysian structures. Traditional Malaysian architecture, we can assert, has several defining features:

- *Raised houses*: Houses are raised on stilts for safety and practicality. This provides protection from wild animals and from the unwanted gazes of passers-by; it also affords a form of natural barrier against flooding. Raising the house keeps the house cooler because all surfaces, including the floor, are well-ventilated. The space beneath the house is shaded and cool, making it an excellent space for afternoon resting, multipurpose storage, and for rearing chickens.
- *Roof*:
 - *Raised*: Roofs are raised to allow for cross-ventilation, needed to cool the home in the tropical climate.
 - *Pitched*: Roofs are pitched at sharp angles to allow for rapid water runoff during heavy rainfall.
 - *Broad overhangs*: Overhangs shade tall openings and the timber walls from direct exposure to heavy rainfalls and sun. Extended overhangs also help

prevent rainwater from eroding the foundations of the house.

- *Meeting spaces:* The “anjung” is an entry foyer that protrudes outward in a welcoming gesture. It is enclosed by balustrades, and gradually rises to the main floor level through a series of two staircases. It is designed for celebrating guests. The anjung also functions as a casual resting place, where familiar passers-by may stop in for a friendly visit. Adjacent to the anjung is the “serambi”:, a semi-public space used to accommodate guests. The degree of openness of the serambi varies, ranging from walls with tall windows to a simple verandah space. The anjung and the serambi are particularly important in their facilitation of neighborly and communal interaction. The “rumah ibu”—the main inner house—is reserved for family members.
- *Breathing walls:* The walls are of light construction and are well ventilated, by means of tall windows; louvered, latticed, or pierced panels; and framed timber planks. Openings on the upper wall segment and throughout the internal walls provide permanent ventilation to cool the house at all times of day.
- *Tall windows:* As noted, the traditional house is equipped with a series of tall, floor-to-beam windows that maximize cross ventilation. Again, louvers, ventilated panels and pierced balustrade ensure maximum permeability, and windows can be opened outward fully.
- *Ornamentation:* Ornamentation in Malay houses often takes the form of woodcarvings in floral, geometrical, and calligraphy motifs, consistent with the traditional values and culture. Floral motifs are inspired in plants significant for their medicinal, scent, and aesthetic values; geometrical motifs are abstractions of floral or cosmological motifs, while calligraphy motifs incorporate Islamic values (Zulkifli?, 2000; Kamaruddin & Said, 2008). The forms these woodcarvings take include two-dimensional and three-dimensional panels, as well as sculptures. The two-dimensional direct piercing facilitates ventilation and daylighting to interior space (Abd Majid & Denan, 2015), and is typically found on wall ventilation panels/screens, timber balustrades, fence enclosures; partitions, gable ends, and fascia boards. The three-dimensional embossed-relief piercing presents a higher degree of complexity and intricacy suitable for an owner with higher social status; they tend to serve as embellishments around doorways. The sculptural ornament may be incorporated in visually and structurally important elements such as columns and kingposts (Kamaruddin & Said, 2008).

After independence, public and national buildings combined modern expressionism with elements reflecting local values (e.g., the Parliament building and the National Mosque). In the 1980s, the goal of fostering Malay identity in highly visible spaces led to an increase in government-led developments that emphasized Malay Revival. Later, though, as noted above, the government became preoccupied with aligning Malaysia with the Middle East; the resulting importation of foreign identity led to projects like the new federal administrative center Putrajaya (King, 2004; Vale, 1992/2008; Ismail, 2008; Haja Bava Mohidin, 2015).

Certainly, this underscores the dangers inherent in having a chauvinistic government or a large corporation serve as the primary patron of architecture—especially when that patron has no awareness of local values, and no particular vision regarding civilization (Khalid). Contributing to the problem are those architects who do not embrace the concept of social responsibility, and focus mainly (even exclusively) on commercial manipulation. Such “architects without architecture” are inclined to cave in when clients propose (for example) exotic ideas about revivalism.

To summarize the arguments made above: such a preoccupation with image-making at the expense of local values is neither practical nor sustainable (Marhalim et. al, 2015; Tahir et al). Instead, the focus should be on the cultivation of an indigenous ethos based on local specificity, to help build the soul and identity of the nation (Chong Keat, 1983).

A case study: Kota Iskandar

Let’s continue our exploration of local and non-local values through an illustrative case study: the Johor State New Administrative Centre, Kota Iskandar, in Iskandar Puteri, Johor, Malaysia (Johansen & Chandler, 2015).

The father of modern Johor, Sultan Abu Bakar, helped develop the Johor constitution and also managed to avoid British residency. Together with Chinese immigrants, the Johor economy became focused on the production of gambier, pepper, and later, rubber and oil palm. Today, Johor is known as a region that enjoys a strong “muafakat” (consensus). It consciously explores and reinforces its identity through a series of government-led efforts. Kota Iskandar (KI) is one such effort (Cahaya Jauhar, 2009).

The Johor State New Administrative Center is a uniquely illuminating example, in part because it comprises two interpretations of local identity that were reached through different levels of engagement with the local community. The central axis of the complex—which includes the State Legislative Assembly Building, the State Secretariat office, and the main plaza—reflects a Moorish Andalusian identity. The state office complexes on the sides, by contrast, reflect a more traditional Johor identity, as defined above.

The author conducted field visits to KI between September and December of 2015, and analyzed the Urban Design and Architectural Concept Design Final Report (UEM Land, 2004) and *The Making of Kota Iskandar* (2009). I also conducted 11 semi-structured interviews involving state leader representatives (1), the developer team (5), the master planner (1), and various building consultants (4). My assessment of the degree of acceptance of the two identities is based on 19 interviews comprising local authorities (3), professionals and similar experts (4+4+2), a historian (4), and village heads (2); and was analyzed using a semiotic method.

The project was materialized as a “marriage of convenience” between the state and UEM Land, a prominent development firm from Kuala Lumpur. The KI site was proposed by UEM Land in 2000—a point at which the government was seeking an economic catalyst for Iskandar Puteri, which had been negatively affected by a property market slowdown between 1997 and 1999. The idea of a state physical presence was important as a symbol of the state’s commitment to Iskandar Puteri—thus the decision to relocate the State Administrative Office from Johor Bahru to Iskandar Puteri in 2003. A property-development entity, Cahaya Jauhar Sdn Bhd, was created in June 2004 to design, build, and manage the site. Working within a tight budget and timeframe, Cahaya Jauhar made rapid progress, with ground being broken in 2004 and construction completed in 2008.

The team adopted a top-down design process, with clear directives coming from a steering committee that consisted of state Exco and key government departments, and was chaired by the Chief Minister. The decision-making regarding questions of identity remained in the hands of the state, through its Board of Exco representation. Two advisors looked after state’s identity interest throughout the design process.

That priority, however, was interpreted in various ways. UEM Land—known nationally as the “big boy” in land development—interpreted it to mean “100 percent Malaysian consultants.” Accordingly, UEM Land brought their master planning team from Kuala Lumpur to convince the state government that their proposal for KI was the most appropriate solution. That pattern, once set, was difficult to break. UEM Land exclusively dominated the selection of outside consultants, based on two criteria: good project references, and a prior track record of working together successfully. The master planner, for example, was Rekarancang Sdn Bhd, a Kuala Lumpur-based firm established since 1977. Rekarancang and the rest of master planning team were appointed in 2003 by Renong (later restructured into UEM Land), even before the signing of the project agreement.

Similarly, the contract for the design of the more significant central part of the project went to the Kuala Lumpur-based architectural firm of Kumpulan Senireka Sdn Bhd. Certainly, that firm had an impressive record of projects at the national level, such as the Kuala Lumpur Tower, the Putra Mosque, and the Sultan Mizan Mosque of Putrajaya. But one result of this track record was that, again, the local

consultants were easily sidelined by the non-local. Table 1 summarizes the domination of the local by the non-local in the master planning process.

ROLE	CONSULTANT	LOCAL/NON-LOCAL
Land Developer	UEM Land Bhd	NON-LOCAL
Developer	Cahaya Jauhar SB	NON-LOCAL & LOCAL
PMC	Kinta Samudera SB	NON-LOCAL
Master planner	Rekarancang SB	NON-LOCAL
Architect	Kumpulan Senireka	NON-LOCAL
Landscape	SB	NON-LOCAL
Environment	Punt Garden SB	NON-LOCAL
Traffic	ERE Consulting	NON-LOCAL
QS	Group Perunding Trafik Klasik JB Bergabung Sdn Bhd	LOCAL

Table 1. Domination of the local by the non-local in KI master planning

What accounts for this domination? We can point to several factors. The high-profile project was under pressure to be delivered successfully—i.e., on budget—as the state was unlikely able to increase its financial commitment to the initiative. It was a turnkey project, managed on a fast track to make sure that design would be optimized to fit the available budget and schedule. No design competition—not even a public forum—was held, as any such step would have had budget and schedule implications. In short, public engagement was seen as a long process, which conceivably could have brought the project to a standstill.

Clearly, the team believed in *stakeholder* engagement, but not *public* engagement. For example, they sponsored two stakeholder workshops, one involving the Johor Heritage Foundation and the other focused on the tourism industry. The heritage workshop—organized by the Johor Heritage Foundation—brought together mainly historians from various institutions in Malaysia. The tourism workshop focused on tourist-oriented branding: an effort that led to the “Johor Living Legacy” tagline that was broadly adopted. Neither effort involved either the local public or design professionals. A “user requirement survey” required by the state departments did relatively little to right this balance. Table 2 summarizes the minimal involvement of local experts in the design phase of the project.

Implementation	Type of Local Engagement
✓	
✓	
✓	user requirement survey
✓	workshop for branding
✗	workshop on history
✗	Local professional engagement
✗	Community/citizen engagement
✗	design competition
✗	public forum

Table 2: Local Involvement in the KI design process

But this relatively minimal local influence could not be sustained indefinitely. The local identity objectives set by the steering committee—as clearly specified in the Urban Design and Architectural Concept & Design Guidelines (2004)—were to showcase the natural, historical, and cultural heritage of Johor; to reinforce the image of Johor as a modern, progressive State; and to make KI the “jewel in the crown” of Iskandar Puteri. The project further aimed to be people- and environmentally friendly, through humanistic, tropical and campus-like planning, while adopting lessons from Putrajaya.ⁱ

Defining Johor cultural heritage was seen as the responsibility of the region’s top leaders, who did not always see eye to eye. The Johor Chief Minister, for example—who was publicly committed to preserving local identity through cultural heritage—envisioned an identity that would be defined in part by Johor’s traditional architecture. For his part, the Sultan of Johor argued that a complex modeled after the old administrative building in Bukit Timbalan—an Anglo-Indian building with traces of various origins of Islamic styles, designed by British consultants in 1942—would represent continuity of the Johor State administrative identity.

The team found itself in dilemma as it sought to use these very different reference points to define the “architecture of Johor.” Some members sought to pursue what they saw as an authentic Malay identity.ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, an internal meeting with the state government had confirmed that the Bukit Timbalan building represented “identifiably unique Johor” qualities.ⁱⁱⁱ To gain some detachment from the possible colonial stigma of “Anglo Indian,” the design team and several state government officials made a study tour to the acknowledged centerpiece of 14th-century Moorish Andalusian heritage: the Alhambra Palace, in Granada, Spain.

The result was a substantially revised master plan, which attempted to strike a balance between two substantially different “Johor identities.”^{iv} The first was a Moorish Andalusian “borrowed identity,” for the main central axis. As noted above, that axis consists of the State Legislative Assembly Building, the State Secretariat office, and a plaza.

The second was a more traditional local Johor traditional architecture identity, to be used for the state office complexes at the side clusters. See Figure 2 for a representation of the relationship between the two identities.



Figure 2. KI site plan showing two “identities”

As noted, the contracts to design the Moorish Andalusian projects were exclusively awarded to a non-local architectural firm, Kumpulan Senireka, which had been represented on the master planning team, and which had an impressive track record in designing prominent public buildings for Malaysia. But again: as the project was managed for the optimization of budget and schedule, local engagement was not part of the process, and local feedback was never incorporated. The Moorish Andalusian identity emerged from a process that was top down and exclusive.

In the case of the Johor traditional identity, by contrast, the process was more inclusive and locally engaging, given that the Chief Minister asked for local involvement. For the first time, local consultants were considered, shortlisted, and interviewed. The selection criteria included project references and cost of services, with the low bidder being preferred. HL Reka Sdn Bhd—a small local architectural firm—submitted bids that were twice rejected for the lack of a suitable track record and references. But questions about the lack of local-firm involvement, and the continued domination of the project by the “big boys,” continued to be raised.

Ultimately, after setting up a joint venture with another local architectural firm—A Bahtiar Arkitek—HL Reka won the commission. The new team took the initiative to engage expertise in architectural heritage from the Centre of Malay Built Environment Studies, KALAM, at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. This affiliation opened up the process to an understanding of the value of local traditional architecture, and built in a “translative” design approach to mediate between the traditional and the modern while avoiding pastiche forms. Table 3 contrasts the two processes just described.

MOORISH ANDALUSIAN IDENTITY	JOHOR TRADITIONAL IDENTITY
X Non local consultant	✓ Local consultant
X Local professional	✓ Local joint venture partner
	✓ Local heritage expert engagement

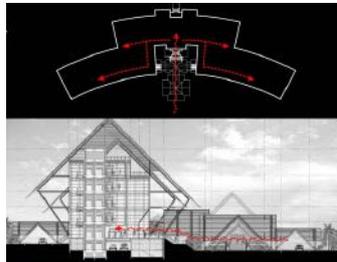
engagement X Local heritage expert engagement X Local study X Competition X Public engagement	✓ Local study X Competition X Public engagement
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Table 3. Extent of engagement in the design of the two KI identities

The benefits accruing from local involvement did not end with the KI project. The studies from KALAM shed a new light on ways to continue fostering Johor identity. They helped translate Johor indigenous social and environmental values into contemporary functions and spaces, ensuring that Johor would be perceived as a progressive region with a modern outlook. They suggested ways to use abstraction that could avoid ethnocentric denotation, and drew on craft traditions for detailing the facility. And finally, local wisdom about tectonic design was fully incorporated. See Table 4 for a summary of these larger design attributes.

Local design Values	MOORISH ANDALUSIAN	JOHOR TRADITIONAL
Form-place	Copy of foreign forms. Replication of architectural elements. Replication of Spanish courtyard. Replication of Alhambra courtyard garden. Replication of Alhambra arches and columns. Replication of Andalusian garden, water fountain, and plants. Use of axial planning to project formality Use of grand building scale to project image of authority and strong government. Employs Western plaza at huge scale. Introduction of landmark tower that recalls Bukit Timbalan	Re-invention of traditional house form into contemporary building. Continuation of local design values.

	to mark the entry foyer.	
Available material and construction technology	Adopt cheaper and faster post and beam concrete construction. Use of concrete, plaster and moulding to emulate Moorish-Andalusian elements.	Innovative structural method was intended, but the designers resorted to concrete post and beam construction due to a limited budget and time constraints. Use of contemporary materials (steel, glass, and concrete) while preserving artistry of construction. Converging “A” frame steel columns use contemporary detailing and craftsmanship.
Ornamentation consistent with cultural and practical values	Copy of Moorish Andalusian ornamentation makes pseudo-Moorish architecture. Copy of columns and capitals (muqarness stalactite), relief capital decoration. Copy of arches and porticos. Implementation of pepper, gambier, and pineapple motifs on 2D and 3D ornament application.	Not dependent on surface ornamentation. Tectonic of construction and materiality are regarded as authentic expression. New modern idiom of horizontal strips is introduced as shading device on the walls and roof. Gable-end ornamentation is abstracted into sand-blasted glass abstract pattern at glass gable end panel to frame a new experience.
Meeting spaces	Elaborate processional entry ritual creates hierarchy and distances gap between government and the people. Gradual climb of circulation creates intimidating experiences to the commoners. Symmetrical courtyard flanked by ramps and steps; followed by curved staircases that	A-frame porches make friendly and welcoming entryways at the ground level. Split-level verandahs create spaces for greeting and meetings in relax and casual environment. Common lobby frames views of innovative traditional (roof articulation, verandah, attic deck). Continuous view of traditional forms from roof top.

	<p>embrace waterfall and indoor garden. Double-layer skylight above is luxurious but rarely accessed by the people. Assembly meetings are held over huge oval skylight symbolizing guidance from above. Main assembly hall is grand and elegant but usage is limited.</p>	<p>Vertical and horizontal circulation. Attic deck on the roof top level provides more gathering spaces.</p>
<p>Environmentally sustainable (provision of tropical spaces, sustainable design strategy)</p>		
<p>Raised floor</p>	<p>Raised floor with car park underneath. Raised VIP drop off under tower landmark. Processional entryway in elaborate series of steps and ramps, arches and colonnaded, to the grand atrium hallways.</p>	<p>Raised floor with car park underneath. Open porches at ground level and verandahs are gradually raised to the level of common lobby, creating a friendly human scale. The raised floor maximizes cross ventilation that cools entryways, verandahs, and floors underneath.</p>
<p>Pitch roof and overhang</p>	<p>Hip roofs on flat slab are not expressed and hidden behind roof parapet. Roof overhang is absent throughout the building, thereby exposing wall arches and windows to direct sun and rain. Huge skylights are too hot for Johor's equatorial climate, requiring costly</p>	<p>Pitched roofs are expressed as significant features. Roof articulation also frames visual experience, being broken down into smaller segments to control scale and picturesque. Roofs layered and overlapped to balance between rain prevention, ventilation, daylight provision and aesthetics. Layered roofs release</p>

	<p>technology to reduce heat gain. Import of skylight expertise to calculate sun path and to reduce heat gain.</p>	<p>excessive hot air and provide comfortable cooler space. Extended overhangs shade glass walls from directly exposed to sun. Extended overhangs protect building from heavy rainfalls and help shed rainfalls away. Roofs cross directions and create volume spaces underneath.</p>
Breathable walls and tall windows	<p>Main assembly hall and Jauhar atrium are well shaded by surrounding arch loggias. Exposed sides of the loggia are screened, designed as slanted latticed lines to avoid bird droppings and to shed rainwater. Other parts of buildings in complex are enclosed by Moorish-Andalusian elements in a grand scale. Wall surfaces, tall arches and glass openings are exposed to heat, sunlight, and rain, increasing cooling load and maintenance.</p>	<p>Most public part of the building is the most breathable, with no wall, and with an extended roof line reaching almost to the ground, providing shade and channeling breezes into populated areas. Office spaces adopt a modern wall construction, as offices require air-conditioning. The building has continuous glass well shaded by extended overhangs and a layer of horizontal timber strips. Some areas use transition spaces reminiscent of selangs and pelantars.</p>
Intimate with surrounding	<p>Complex is organized on strict axis and forces symmetrical layout. Preoccupation with Moorish-Andalusian typology of garden space results in uncomfortable environment, especially evident in the State Secretariate Building, where a garden form originally intended for a</p>	<p>Challenges include building footprint and massing that are pre-determined as a set of blocks that concave inward, but intimacy with nature is achieved both at upper or lower levels. Intimacy with the surrounding is best experienced at entry porch and serambi porch at center of curved building, where roof reaches down and frames landscape</p>

	<p>Mediterranean climate is transplanted to hot humid equatorial climate. Courtyards are subjected to heat-radiating surfaces. Excessive pavement and Mediterranean plant form result in absence of shade. Pavement reflects heat and glare that even tricking water no longer cools.</p> <p>Vast open plaza—designed for ceremonial purposes—lacks any shade, making it a sun-baked plaza that is at times unbearable.</p>	<p>court, which is covered with stone pebbles. Landscape is tastefully selected to the concept.</p>
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Table 4: Comparison of design attributes in the two KI identities

Conclusion

If architecture—especially large-scale design and construction—is to reflect the culture and values of the population, the planning process must move from exclusive to inclusive. This is vital for cultural and environmental sustainability in developing cities today.

What does this mean, in practical terms? It means Including local consultants and local experts to tap into intrinsic attitudes and approaches in incorporating local values. It means practicing a transparent and open-bid process to promote competitiveness, and to prevent design complacency. Above all, it means fostering local citizen involvement to build a sense of commitment and attachment.

Comparing the two identity processes in the Kota Iskandar project demonstrates the importance of local values and local involvement in continuing local identity. The imported Moorish Andalusian identity presented a replicative copy of Islamic elements, in what was essentially a romantic reference to great Islamic civilizations of the past. Meanwhile, the quest for a Johor traditional identity at Kota Iskandar underscored the value of continuity and local “ownership.” The challenge then became one of *reinterpreting* local identity to pave the way to cultural and environmental sustainability today.

Notes

ⁱ Urban Design and Architectural Concept & Design Guidelines (2004)

ⁱⁱ Interview with historian, Johor Heritage Foundation, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with CEO of project developer, 2015

^{iv} interview with Kumpulan Senireka architect, July, 2004