

Classification of Malaysian Architecture Revisited

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to portray the classification of Malaysian architecture according to the trends and changes along with the advancement of the economy, technology and growth of architecture schools in Malaysia. The faces of Malaysian architecture are very much influenced by graduates in architecture returning from overseas and the establishment of the Malaysian Institute of Architects. Malaysia is blessed with natural beauty and resources that enable it to be independent. The hot-wet equatorial climate of Malaysia and its high humidity together with the abundance of timber and other cheap building materials enable builders and architects alike to experiment with the built forms. The traditional and vernacular architecture that has been crystallized in the colonial style by the pioneer British architects who designed the government quarters and other government buildings in Malaysia revealed the attention towards the climatic factors and the style that later developed into modern and post-modern style that appear in the residential design of the Malaysian landscape today. This paper employs an exploratory technique from earlier writings and longitudinal historical evidences of Malaysian architecture, visual surveys from the digital media and verbal comments from the practising Architects interviewed. The finding shows that the Malaysian Architecture can be classified according to era, style and contemporary trends influenced by the changes in the world.

Keywords: classification, Malaysian architecture

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a young nation, grew up from an agricultural economy in the sixties after the independence in 1957, becomes a fast-growing economy and is heading towards becoming an industrial nation in 2030 (Khor& Lalchand, 2014). The thirteen states and three federal territories that make up the nation are contributing an overview of broad perspectives of its built forms and landscapes. Throughout history, Malaysia with its strategic location along the sea trade route of Malacca Straits has allowed temptations for invasions and controlled by superpowers ranging from the ancient Portuguese (1511) conquest of Malacca by the Dutch (1641), British (1867), Japanese (WWII) and Chinese [since 1990 (Spratly Islands)] tainted the glaze of the cultural surface of the indigenous people and the cultural landscape.

Developments in urban and rural areas have employed the strategic approach practised by the Malaysian government which reflects the development system according to the Five-Year Development Plan since 1958. The Five-Year Development Plan of Malaysia has focused on housing as an integral part of the overall socio-economic development of the country. Malaysia turned to the conventional approach in housing based on a Western model has not only alleviated the housing problems but also sculpted an image of development and modern living. Consequently, the focus of development is more towards economic viability and beautification. Big cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru, Ipoh and Kuching are geared towards the program of 'beautification'

and the integration between the natural and man-made environment flourished. The basic approach to these developments is through the 'areal development' concept which stresses the selection of areas for the maximum return given limited resources. Since housing programme is an integral part of the overall socio-economic development of the country, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government is keen to play a role corresponding to the theme of each development plan tabled in the Parliament. The cabinet has intended to shape the objective and theme of the development plan as an integral part of a comprehensive plan for future development. Consequently, each of the development plan superseded the previous one and has targeted the housing problem with the new breed of buildings appeared in the new development. Thus, housing development stimulates the property market and contributes to the gross domestic product. The facets of architecture with a showcase of different styles according to trends became the new landscape of Malaysia.



Figure 1. The Malay House as a source of reference for local architects.

(Source: Lim Jee Yuan, 1987)

2. Methods

This paper employs an exploratory technique from earlier writings and longitudinal historical evidences of Malaysian architecture, visual surveys from the digital media and verbal comments from the practising Architects interviewed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Traditional Architecture

Since the beginning of architectural discipline rooted at the higher institutions in Malaysia, the issues on traditional architecture have been raised by a few scholars with the joy of searching for Malaysian identity. After the Seminar on Malaysian Identity held at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in 1981, the interest on traditional architecture seems to be a new frontier to the young architects of that decade. Few writings on Malay Houses dominated the local newspaper and a book on the Malay Houses by Lim Jee Yuan (1987) made the search more valid. This spirit lives on and it has some implications to the Malaysian architecture in the long run. The built forms of the indigenous people, such as the Malays and the Dayaks have a big influence on the continuity of identity seeking agenda. The traditional Malay house of various typologies from different states exemplified by the roof style, the distribution of space and the material usage became the interest of research by local scholars (Hidayat, 2011). The timber pillars raised from the

ground with slit timber board, long timber louvred windows and hipped roof show the respect of the climatic conditions and the arrangement of the internal space conforms to the Malay culture and tenets of Islam (Figure 1.0). The most prominent one is the Minangkabau of Negeri Sembilan that one time was the signature of Malaysian identity and suddenly disappeared as time goes by. Some public buildings in the region at least have been furnished with this image in the landscape such as The Bank Bumiputra at Jalan Ampang, PWTC Building and a few other examples. Almost in every state of Malaysia, the image of the Malay house tends to appear (Figure 2.0). On the other hand, it is not free from the critics where it symbolizes the presence of the Malays in urban areas.



Figure 2. In search of identity reflected in the built form that resembles traditional architecture.
(Source: www.muziumnegara.gov.my)



Figure 3. The colonial built form left by the British during their reign.
(Source: <https://www.hmetro.com.my>)



Figure 4. Regional architecture became a common sight for resorts development.
(Source: www.berjayahotel.com)

3.2. Colonial Architecture

The coming of the invaders from foreign land one way or another will leave a mark on the place where they have conquered. The Spanish in Latin America, the Dutch in Indonesia, the British in Nigeria to name a few, have built significant buildings for their administrative purpose and as symbols of conquest in the colonized countries. The local climate and the indigenous built form were not ignored and respected to accommodate in the design of the new colonial building in its locality. The building typology is of the typical fort for defence, warehouse for collecting local products such as minerals, spices or even live animals to be taken to their homeland and churches (Figure 3.0). These built forms were constructed from bricks and metal roofs (some are flat roof) and stucco plastered wall made it lasts for decades. The Fort Cornwallis in Penang, Fort Margherita in Kuching and A'Formosa Fort (Portuguese defence ground is partially intact) in Malacca still standing until today. The Sultan Abdul Samad Building and Malaysian Railway Station in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh and in many small towns show the rich English architecture of the colonial era. The Indian Moghul influence copied by the British for the Sultan Abdul Samad building is a strong example.



Figure 5. Post' *Merdeka*' modern architecture buildings

(Source: <https://www.parlimen.gov.my>)

3.3. Modern Architecture

The modern movement encompasses a span of styles and era with the epitome of Louis Sullivan of 'form should follow function' (Curtis 2013). A young nation that has just gained independence wished to show to the world that this is what we are. The Modern Movement in architecture did not stop in the west. The inspiration of modernism continues in developing countries with the belief that futuristic schemes provide the proper model for their new architecture (Abel, 1985). The modern architecture can be summarised as a simplistic and asymmetrical configuration, free from ornaments, slick and harmonized geometric form which are always functional, constructed most effectively from industrial building materials such as glass, steel and reinforced concrete. The new urbanized country like Malaysia accepts modern architecture without question for its rectangular or square form fit the high cost of land in big cities like Kuala Lumpur. The new buildings that come into play are the Stadium Negara, Stadium Merdeka and few government buildings with an influence of Corbusier with sun shading egg crates as a resemblance of his modern building (Figure 5.0). The General Hospital Building in Kuala Lumpur, Public Works Department building and the Parliament House are good examples of the Malaysian modern architecture. Not forgetting a renowned Malaysian architect, Hijjas Kasturi (Naziri, Hakeem

Abas, Samsuddin, and Aziz, 2020) who came up with a combined metaphor of traditional contraptions using modern materials in his design for high-rise buildings which dominated the big cities of Malaysia and admired by young architects. Maybank Tower, Tabung Haji Tower, Citibank Tower, TM Tower, Putrajaya Convention Centre and a few more slick buildings that became the contributing built form in the Malaysian city skyline produced by Hijjas.

3.4. *Regional Architecture*

Each region in Malaysia has its own built form portrayed through its traditional residential design. The spirit of 'in search of Malaysian identity' attempts to summarise in one image that it is another Malaysian architecture by combining all elements available in traditional Architecture. The call for regional architecture came about through Mimar Architectural Magazine in the eighties. Hassan-Uddin Khan wrote few articles surveying architecture in the tropical regions portraying regional context. Few names appeared such as Charles Correa, Jimmy Lim and Hisham Al Bakri.

The spirit of regional architecture came up after the council and citizen alike were fed up with glass façade which caused glare, reflections and bare glass wall facade. Perhaps to copy the traditional Malay house might be too conspicuous, thus, the architects attempt to blend the hip roof with the new building materials in a new context. The hip and gable roof are back in style with the addition of post-modern concrete façade with concrete hood and glass aluminium windows. In most cases, the resort and housing development adopt the regional style extensively (Figure 4.0). The colour of the roof is always light brown and blend with the region in a remote setting. The detached unit of the chalet connected by a pathway seems to blend with the landscape. The Club Mediterranean, Andaman Langkawi and Cherating seem to be the earliest images of Regional architecture.



Figure 6. Post Modern Building in Malaysia

3.5. *Post Modern Architecture*

Post-modern Architecture goes beyond reality and multivalence as addressed by Jencks (1977). The post-modern reflects the pluralistic language applied in imagery form. The architects of a young nation like Malaysia also produced buildings which indicate various aesthetic elements in a semantic way. With the rapid air travel in the early eighties and the availability of mass media through printed materials, Malaysian architects were exposed to the trend of architecture around the world. It reaches Malaysia

within a day or so. With the return of the graduates from the West, they were excited to show their marks according to the present trends. The keystone arches embellished with neo-classical order, squared pierced windows and high pediments resemble the Greek Revival architecture of Americans in the early century was introduced by architects in the Malaysian landscapes (Figure 6.0). Residential and public buildings alike were furnished with a peculiar facade. Today, social media is just at the fingertips and architectural examples on 'Pinterest' are too excessive to comprehend. Thus, the product is becoming more chaotic with the Modern, Post-Modern, Minimalist and Regional Architecture combined. All these new images became the new Malaysian architecture especially in the residential development and embarked with foreign names.



Figure 7. Pseudo-Nouveau Façade for Residential in Malaysia

3.6. *Nouveau/ Pseudo-Nouveau Architecture*

The changes around the world and the trend of architecture that meet the taste of the client and the driving power of the developer to sell their properties also change the mind-set of the Architect to go with the trend. The developer always associated their product with modernization, where modernization is always aligned with westernization. The name of the housing estates no longer carries the name of local identity. The name such as Queensbay, Summermall, Paragon for shopping malls while Eastbank, Westbank, Queens Residence to name a few are chosen to match the new image of residential architecture. The blend of minimalist and regional architecture, or the post-modern with regional architecture has also produced a pseudo-Nouveau style which does not only appear in Malaysian landscape but elsewhere in South-East Asia (Figure 7.0). The gable roof with concrete pantile and strips of horizontal elements of the façade and the simple framed aluminium window became the new attraction to the buyers.

Malaysians have the most alluring approach to own a house. The intervention of the government in housing sectors gives benefit to the developers and investors. Apart from the low-interest rate, long paying duration up to 25 years (depending on the age of the buyer) is very attractive to young married couples. Today, both parents are typically working and the security and safety of the home are always wearisome. The developer introduced the gated and guarded community in some housing areas that led to the sectoral division of the population. These group of people are isolated from the rest of the community. The housing areas are fenced with a high wall which has never been practised in Malaysia. The houses are mostly ordinary terraced or linked houses with minimal façade. With the architect's ingenuity through the combination of regional, modern and all sort of styles combined gives an opportunity to the developer to sell the unit up to

650,000 Ringgit or higher in Penang, Kuala Lumpur or other big cities. It has been argued that the price of the houses is unaffordable, but developers always publicize and consider it to be affordable despite the aggregate monthly income of Malaysians has not changed since the last twenty years.

3.7. *Green Architecture*

In recent years, the sustainability concept has become the common interest of numerous disciplines. It is aligned with the issue of climate change, depleting resources and to promote sustainability and environmental awareness among architects, planners, engineers and developers. The building is accredited according to a system called Green Building Index (GBI) aligned with positive environmental strategies. The reason for this popularity is to perform sustainable development. In 2013 there are 389 registered Green Building Projects in Malaysia (Sun Daily- Asia Green Building 2015-2017). The Concept of Green Architecture, also known as 'sustainable architecture' or 'green building', is the theory, science and style of buildings designed and constructed in accordance with environmentally friendly principles. Green architecture strives to minimize the number of resources consumed in the building's construction, use and operation, and curtailing the harm done to the environment through the emission, pollution and waste of its components. The Malaysian Architects are also excited with the new label of design. Few names appeared in Malaysia such as Ken Yeang, Elina Jamil and Tan Loke Mun (Awang & Meor M Fared, 2020)

3.8. *Result and Discussion: Malaysian Built Form*

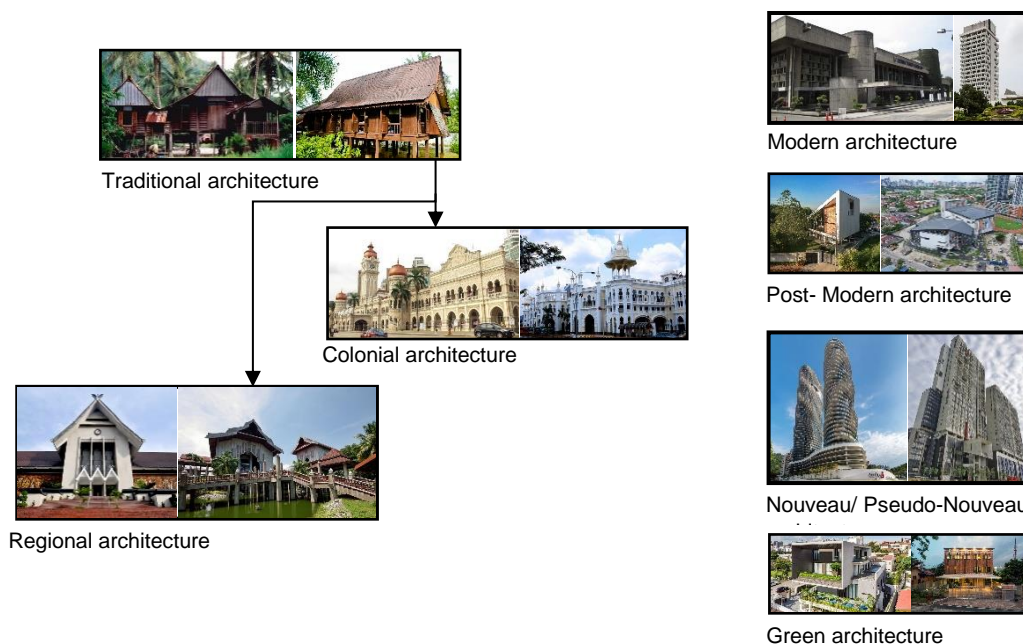


Figure 8. Summary of Malaysian built form.

Malaysia is at the juncture of West and East alongside with a high level of people's world views and fast acceptance in whatever changes either in trend, food or even lifestyle one way will change the way they see things. The lifestyle and daily activities are not far different from that of the West although the culture and traditions prohibit certain acts. The trend and style in Malaysian architecture are said to be healthy as claimed by some architects where it denotes the progress of the nation as well as the momentum of

economic prosperity at present. Architecture and built form are largely influenced by the technology, exposure, trend, world views of the people. The quest for Malaysian identity in architecture slowly fades away especially with the returning graduates who are anxious to try their new design skill of western ideology jointly with the local graduates were not interested in traditional architecture.

The new trend in design slowly emerged in Malaysian architecture while the traditional architecture is not conspicuous. The usage of local materials or high craftsmanship skills were neither propagated. This has a significant impressions on the classification of architecture in Malaysia that has changed architectural identity of Malaysia significantly. The beginning of the Western influence slowly appear from mid-eighties with lean-to roof and glass louvres and Palladian window. In fact, the development of mass housing can be a significant way to promote the identity of Malaysian architecture, however, it is not practiced. The usage of industrialised building materials and technology also played a major role for the impact of new design in producing a new architecture of Malaysia.

The practicing architects are more concerned on the needs of the clients and not the agenda of the nation. As mentioned earlier that the image and identity that will shape the Malaysian architecture will not evidently found in the future. Providentially, the regional architecture taken the sector of tourism development, which tend to balance between the clash of style and design language. However, the movement only focuses on the image of the external architectural style that has less impact on environmental and socio factors. Although, the designers appear to imitate the design principles of traditional architecture with current building materials and technology, however, the Modern Architecture brought by local architects who graduated abroad are more predominant. To them, this is the opportunity to express the fast pace of change in the world through modern architecture. Evidently, the strong influence of International Style in the eighties has given a new direction in forming architectural image to the new nation. In the end, the image of Malaysian architecture cannot be determined precisely due to influences from various angles applied by architects in the building design. Solemnly, when it comes to design a building we ignore the definite design principles instead we apply the design without considering the climatic factors and the context of the site, similarly to that of International Style, it can be located anywhere in the world.

Now, the architects are alerted by the challenge of *Green Architecture*. Some claimed that the building to fulfil GBI is more expensive to build and commented that - we are forgetting the principles of design concerning orientation, environmental control, building materials, cost-effectiveness and the like. It is noticed that with the existence of Green Architecture issues, jolted the Malaysian architecture again. The concern on achieving the rating became a major direction instead of style. With the aids of new designs software together with the Green Building Index guidelines, it makes the designer becoming more cautious of the energy usage in the building instead of looking at the aspect of the basic principles of design and the identity itself. Undeniably, the Malaysian architecture is following the current global trends and not focusing on the image of identity. As a result, the style of Malaysian architecture will be haphazard with a tapestry of style that will be another samples from all styles available in the world. The style of Malaysian architecture cannot be summarised into a simple narrative (Figure 8).

4. Conclusion

The effect of globalization and internationalization coupled with digital technology may prove the image of future Malaysian architecture that is based on all these factors.

As a young nation, the development of infrastructure and info-structure will change the facets of its physical landscape. The form of architecture is not restricted based on a certain guideline if it is not against the building by-laws or the city council requirements. The housing development to cater for the growing population and the pace of urbanization will certainly push the multivalence of architecture in Malaysia. The lifestyle, the taste, the politics, the post era of globalization will also change the mindset of the future generation of Malaysia. Furthermore, there is a growing number of higher institutions offering architecture programmes with its own niche area, the graduates will explore the design with the latest software available and that will change the style and direction of Malaysian architecture. The skyline of Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Johor Bahru, Penang and Kuching will be no different from that of new developing countries either in Asia, Africa or Middle-East. More and more iconic buildings will appear in this far-flung region, where in the past, Chicago, New York and London were the only locations for skyscrapers. The iconic buildings now became a must-visit tourist object such as the Petronas Towers and Kuala Lumpur Tower. These interests encourage the architects to explore further and experimenting with the latest software to produce more coherent design requested by the client.

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