Hybrid Aesthetics Classification in Malay Neo-Classicality Reinventing Identity Through Aristocratic Structures

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Research Highlights

South East Asian architecture identity in urban centres has been generally focused on either timber vernacular identity or large masonry building. The local agenda is increasingly crucial amidst the importance of tourism and city-branding which necessitate the enculturation of urbanism within an overall resistance to extensive globalisation. Traditional public typologies such as palaces and mosques in Asia hold the promise of resources that can add place-branding and identity to towns and cities, while at the same time a high resource for new forms and patterns. Through an extensive morphological and evolutionary mapping of such typologies, the aim is to develop a classification that can define stylistic categories and aesthetic predispositions, such that these classifications can be used to manage, market and enhance such historical narrative of towns and contribute to identity-making in the urban-scape. Throughout the Asian region, particularly in nations previously under Colonisation, there is a common resource of public typologies which have not been identified in terms of early stylistic changes and nuances that would contribute towards heightening of Asia's common heritage and increasing awareness of such hybrid forms. These, if classified and defined, can consolidate towards the continuing agendas of identity-making in cities; including the management of preservation and conservation actions and policies. Many of these structures have been neglected as they are either seen as vernacular or part of a Colonial narrative and imprint. Many
of these individual heritage preservation efforts has been the initiative of their local sites and communities. The present privileging of national agendas and interest over regional collective action is not in the interest of awareness and action. In the past, national barriers have actually amplified the problem and reduced the potential of asserting the global and regional significance of such structures.

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**Research Objectives**

The research intends to develop a framework of identification within which these structures are seen, valued and managed as one continuum, or continuous resource; by developing a set of common parameters that can be used as parties to assess and guide identification of vernacular styles. This system can evolve into a taxonomy across South East Asian regions; including the Malay Nusantara. The taxonomy would be governed by a set of rules derived from formal morphologies and vocabulary of the vernacular and its modern derivations. This represents a third source of aesthetics that is termed as the ‘hybrid’ which have not been fully researched; but which will be fully studied and characterised including typologies found in the traditional public realm on the eve of Colonialist full administrative control. For example, palatial elevations of the vernacular constitute facades that retained local identities and vocabulary yet ‘modernised’ during the early Colonial era. These constitute late Classical legacies of the region’s local architecture amidst the legacies of ‘implanted’ Colonial forms of rising urban centres in the late precolonial era.

This body of ‘classical-vernacular’ stylistic resources of architectural aesthetics can be argued as constituting Malay expression that has responded to modern forces of the era, without compromising the local vernacular expressions and local essences. The research argues that this binary - characteristic constitutes an important aesthetic trope and category, and was a dominant aesthetic amidst increasingly assertive identity of Colonial urban cape amidst tumultuous changes, during a time which the urban landscape and local historical expressions began to wane due to colonial cultural pressures. This third pathway and resource constitute a hybrid category that can be further analysed and broken down into specific vocabulary and elements. They include elements in which modern materials such as masonry have been slowly absorbed across time into the local forms and structures, without jeopardizing the essential formal identity of these forms. In order to define, discuss and delineate this third strand and its consequent sub-strands; it is imperative that a compilation of such cases is analysed to extract aesthetic form, compositional strategies and codification, including the synthesis of elements and influences from early modernity and from traditions of the vernacular.

**Methodology**

The rich variation of Malay architectural genius and style are observed, some appeared to be diverse, yet some traits were being categorised, grouped and further summarised and discussed. As mentioned before, the word ‘influences’ were used to show the adaptations of ‘outside or non-local elements’ being transmuted or assimilated into local things/ culture. The mapping of
the Malay palaces and aristocrat’s buildings in the Malay world helped to categorise the regions into a group for regional characterisations. In analysing this essence, the methods of (Clark, Roger H and Pause, 2012) which were published in his book entitled ‘Precedents in Architecture’ are adapted. This method was through communicating the ongoing analysis of the case studies to their formative ideas in the form of basic diagrams. These diagrams of abstractions which intended to convey the essential characteristics and relationships of the building facade or form which focus on specific physical attributes. The diagrams help to categorise the key elements which lead to the comparative analysis of the case studies which shows the similarities and differences of the key principles. The research is not exhaustive; instead, examples are designed to illustrate the nuances of the idea and theory. The analysis of the building frontal façades and forms derived from the consequence of multiple interpretations, dominant patterns and formative features of the buildings by extracting the similar styles/ character of each case studies. These will include the building’s style, type, proportion, scale and design principles. All the 30 case studies were grouped based on the observed traits in the following elements, the regional, yet the universal character of the Malay palaces.

Results

The paper traces the cases that demonstrate such hybrid aesthetics of large architectural structures across the Malay Nusantara sites and region to unearth not only elements of language, but underlying principles of façade composition. These include proportion and rhythm of columns, the proportion of roof to lower levels, and the degree of ornamentation. Based on the principle of tectonic expression, as advocated by Semper several decades ago in 1958; and Kenneth Frampton, in the 1990s, these structures and constructional expression were consolidated as an alternative armature of regional design. These recall principles of expressive construction, including porticos, proportions columns, joints, column proportion, rhythm, recesses, projections, layering and controlled ornamentation; which characterise the region and thus become the centre of a forgotten narrative. The research suggests several fundamental characteristics that can be used to constitutional principles of the vernacular of place; or ‘Malayness’ or Malay acculturation in urbanscapes can be identified from these external elements, which can constitute an evolvement linking the past heritage of Asian, including the localised forms, including the Islamic, Hindu Buddhist and Neo-Classical elements. Due to the diverse nature of South East Asia, these had uncultured onto the region’s local forms through a long process of syncretism and acculturation. The research thus derives a classification of ‘hybrid’ aesthetics from the case studies that range from palaces, aristocratic mansions, the “rumah panggung” of Medan, Sumatera, to the aristocratic palaces of Kedah and mansions of Perak’s Kuala Kangsar; the disappearing hybrid palatial-heritage extensions of Kuala Selangor, the hybrid yet contentious mosque language of syncretic Melaka, the surviving hybrid palatial ruins of Riau- Lingga, to the compact palaces of Java and Maluku.

Findings

The research differentiates the forms of local aesthetics as a series of increasingly timber-masonry combinations, starting with the full timber elevated tectonics characteristic of legacies of the Sultanates of Pagaruyong, Langkasuka and Sulawesi, which are argued as the early
‘classical’, to the ‘hybrid’ architectural forms of masonry-timber which is argued as the ‘late classical’ to neo-classical styles of vernacular hybrid aesthetics. Localised universal rules based on these classifications are formulated while specific ornamental strategies related to ethnic variation can then be applied to these facades to constitute resources for urbanscape identity and expression in Southeast Asia. In aesthetic terms, the classifications are based on how the language combines ‘heavy’ masonry elements and ‘light’ timber elements and translate these into, amongst others the tectonic expressions of ‘base-and-column’ and body-and- base. These cases, which embody early modernity of Classical forms in vernacular Asia; had absorbed masonry elements such as moulding and pedestals in terms stylisations yet have not compromised the essential Asian connection and identity, in terms of proportion, overall form and ornamentation. The research intends to evolve these into universal rules such as key typological expressions, including amongst others, categories such as central masonry ‘peristyle’ aesthetic, ground base masonry aesthetic and a half and full columnar aesthetics, which undergo variations and can be observed and found throughout localities in Asia.

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