

# **THE ICONIC REPRESENTATION OF ICONIC MOSQUE: CASE STUDY OF MASJID ZAHIR, ALOR SETAR, KEDAH**

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## **Abstract**

*Great mosques have always contributed towards the establishment of Islamic city through the past centuries. The religious practices of Islamic teachings towards nationhood, exemplify this perspective and the idea of mosque has received functional acclaimed as not only religious platform, but also as community development. However, such attention to issues of form, function and aesthetics, are tested and addressed as crucial questions about the Muslim public engagement with mosque. This research suggests that the existence of historic state mosque as 'iconic monumental structure' is regarded as symbolic through the continuity of Islamic nationhood performance in the community. Empirically, this paper investigates the representation of the urban city dwellers preference towards the continuation of mosque as nationhood integration and comparing with the adjacent iconic building; Balai Besar. The research was done to relate the building to the backgrounds of the cultural and societal context of the days before (specifically during the era of the Sultanate and Colonialism) and after independence. This colonial mosque is a building of architectural excellence and unexceptional historical value to the state because of the major roles it played as a venue for historical events and as an architectural symbol that reflected the Islamic rulings of Kedah's royalty. Although this current research managed to document information on the situation and architectural aspects of the building, this alone is not enough to depict all information needed for preventing the mosque from dilapidation. Future generations must keep on inspecting every aspects of the building to ensure that the required data for restoration and maintenance work is not lost, along with the movement of the country towards globalization and modernization.*

**Keywords:** *Nationhood, Symbolic, Iconic Monumental Structure, Aesthetics, Historic Mosque*

### **1.0 Introduction**

This research is focus on providing a framework for connecting religious building and community. Though the research model is based on actual research experiences, its real value will become apparent after having it applied in concrete projects. It is believed that this research model is a very useful tool in analyzing real situations,

from economic policy issues to strategic management. Thus, it will improved public engagement with local authority decision making on future project proposals.

## **2.0 Background of Research**

The historical heritage has emerged as an essential consideration in modern city development, and it also provides a lasting memory within local inhabitant's lives. It has been as part of human, urban and social history for centuries (Cattan, 2003). Regardless, mosque is one of the historic buildings that significantly part of the common heritage of Islamic city and Muslim community. The iconic representation of historic mosque has contributed towards Islamic heritage tourism in what has been termed 'urban place identity'.

This research began with the meaning of historical building and historic great mosques as an urban centre development. Seemingly, these buildings have influences in forming the nation and integrated with the idea of nationhood. In a study done in Balai Besar, Alor Setar found that this heritage monument is vastly important by both local inhabitants and visitors (Syukri, 2008). Thus, identity and nationhood not only provide a sense of historical settlement, but also provides the city with a local and global identity.

Inevitably, in the current ever-changing world, city is facing transformation through new changes in the city development, as to deal with the today's contemporary design. As to look into cultural heritage in this modern society, it is very crucial to encourage the societies to value their heritage at the grass-roots level through education to young people that enable them to treasure and safeguard the national heritage (Cattan, 2003). Therefore, the empirical research for this study surveys an understanding of public perception of the city's heritage building, to determine their personal feelings, particularly with regards to the role they believe the building plays in the city.

In the context of place identity, a better account of the importance of culture lies in the notion (Kennedy and Danks, 2001). The context of place identity defines by the public respond to the quality of forms and spaces towards a historical building. Thus, can be determining by theoretical study on the cultural setting as the basic information in which establish the architectural form. Therefore, this research is

believed that can provide an insight into how people react to, and explore, the sense of place in the historical building as an iconic representation.

### **3.0 Aim and Objectives**

This research aims to identify the iconic representation of historic great mosque as the meaning of Islamic urban centres development as not only religious platform, but also as community development. In order to achieve the research aim, three objectives are listed down as follows:

- a) To provide information on the buildings that has become significant to the cultural potentials of the historic heritage city, with respect to the historical continuation;
- b) To identify how and why public users, particularly the city dwellers and visitors, react accordingly to appreciate the quality of forms and spaces surround them; and
- c) To identify the sense nationhood developed based on the culture of royal society, adapted through heritage buildings.

### **4.0 Methodology**

This research adopted two types of approaches; 1) case study, and 2) content analysis. The approaches are conducted by stages to ensure that the relevant data is explored and identified to answers the research questions and objectives. The case study is carried out during the field study conducted through measured drawing which involves observations, in-formal interview and taking photographs. Through observation, the components of iconic heritage mosque were recorded in a log book. To establish a documentary record of the existing condition of Masjid Zahir, photographs of the whole site was taken. In-formal interviews were conducted to have additional information of the previous landuse and usage of the site studied. The respondent was pick at random and was interview their past experience and memory towards the site.

A critical content analysis is further conducted by reviewing one of the references regarding to the users perception on the iconic buildings. The selected reference is a study on users perception of Iconic building of BalaiBesar, AlorSetar, as

the closest character that portray the heritage and cultural value of Muslim society of AlorSetar.

The analysis data prepared through the site inventory and measured drawing and content analyses technique. A site survey conducted as to identify the real-life situation of a site (Hy, Feig and Regoli (1983). This approach of onsite data collection involved the inventory process and photography. The main purpose of site inventory is to collect the basic information on the present condition of Masjid Zahir. The inventory was conducted to identify the basic architectural information of this mosque. As to support and strengthen the data, measured drawing is conducted.

The empirical research for this study began with the distribution of a questionnaire survey to citizens of, and visitors to, the city of AlorSetar in Malaysia. The questionnaire concentrates on determining public feeling about the significance of the heritage building in the historic city of AlorSetar in four parts that look at: the sense of place identity; the meaning of nationhood; the overall connection between place identity and cultural heritage; and the preservation of heritage buildings.

## **5.0 Findings and Discussion**

The findings wrap-ups two variables; architectural and iconic of the building, and users perception and responds to the quality of form and place identity.

### **5.1 Findings on Iconic Variables of Masjid Zahir**

It is without a doubt that the case studies of the three mosques and Masjid Zahir were designed using the influences of Moorish and Moghul architecture. The use of these types of style of architecture may not necessarily be inappropriate to the Malaysian contexts, but more of a trend introduce to Malaysia by the British. The physical forms of Masjid Zahir was design based on Moorish and Moghul architectures, using same grandeur scale, extensive use of masonry construction, and most likely employed the same construction method. These facts may all be due to the fact these mosque were built during the same era- an era when the British colonies were influencing one another due to their close economic relationship and having highly influenced by British architects who were at that time inspired by the Islamic architecture. Thus, this grand mosque was not at all of the Malaysian architecture, but somehow managed to adopt the foreign architectures into their own surroundings, creating a breed out of the

Moorish and Moghul architecture. Though in general this mosque are not Malaysian in architecture, their existences speak of Malaysian history, standing as evident and telling common stories that Malaysia was a melting pot of different cultures due to trading and colonization by others.

**a) *Building Detail and Materials***

Masjid Zahir have its own identity forms by the structural elements. It is not only as a foundation and supports of overall structure of the building, but also imposed a sense of place through its aesthetical design and characters of the elements. It is found that most of the building structure applied different characters/ design for different spaces as to identify the space functions and some signify the royal concept.

The design of column was influenced by the architecture of India (Zarina, 1993). The structure of the mosque can be strengthened by the number of columns used. Yet, not all the columns function as structural elements, some has served as decorative elements that beautify the mosque and offer an aesthetic value that will enhance the spaces. Indeed, the intricacy of the column design portrays the richness of the mosque architecture.

The findings found that there are four sided brick masonry walls enclosed the main prayer hall. According to Muhammad ‘Uthman El Muhammady (n.d), the four walls signify four basic natural elements; earth, water, wind and fire (Zarina, 1993). The walls provide both privacy and protection from the climatic elements for the interior spaces of the main prayer hall, while the colonnade façade of the veranda forms a semi-transparent screen that re-establish a connection with the exterior environment of the mosque (Ching, 1996).

Meanwhile, ceiling is a major architectural element of interior spaces because it plays an important visual role in shaping the interior space (Ching, 1987). Different types of material are used as the ceiling finishes in Masjid Zahir to create various textural qualities and to add visual interest of the spaces. The structural grid pattern gives a sense of direction to the spaces.

The dome design, which differs from the local style, makes Masjid Zahir design unique and interesting. Zarina Hussein (1993) illustrated that the dome symbolizes ‘*arsy* (throne of God), where the curved part represents the sky while the

lamps characterizes twinkling of the stars. As a person enters the main praying hall, a feeling of standing in the centre of the earth can be evoked.

Non-structural elements of Masjid Zahir mostly influence by the Moorish and Indian Architecture. All the non-structural elements are the elements that portray the identity of a mosque which believes have its own functions and becomes an iconic representative of this building. Thus, have gives the building its own uniqueness to be seen by the users i.e. local community and visitors.

As for the aesthetics of the mosque, the windows position, proportion, and treatment all aid in the beautification of the place. At the same time these windows also fragments the view toward the outdoors and other interior spaces, which helps the idea of privacy and allows full concentrations of the Muslims in prayers. The positions of these windows are spaced out evenly, which helps in the visual integrity of the mosque.

Most of the *mihrab*'s decoration has symbolic significance. According to Zarina (1993), the dome- like ceilings of the *mihrabs* is of carvings of seashells to symbolically represent the close relationship between the shells and their pearls. The reference of the shell and its pearl was made because one Prophet Muhammad's *Hadith* stated that the relationship between the shells and pearls are precious in itself (Zarina, 1993). Perhaps, this concept reflects to the idea that the man in his prayers under the *mihrab* resembles that of the pearl in its shell. Furthermore, the shells are also representing the ears to the hearts of those who are ready for *kalimatIlahi*, Allah's revelations (Zarina, 1993).

Meanwhile, *Chatris* are a Hindu architecture incorporated into the Moghul's. *Chatris* used to function as cenotaphs (tomb or monument honoring a person's body who is somewhere else), but now as an Islamic element of architecture, they serve as decoration elements of mosques' roofs ("Dictionary of Islamic Architecture," 2007). In Islamic architecture, proportioning is of an important aspect, thus, the use of *chatris* in the mosque was to govern the proportioning of the elevations (Grube et al., 1995). The decorations of the *chatris* are the same repeated decorations found throughout the whole mosque: geometric designs, six-sided stars, and domes with a crescent moon at the pinnacle.

Turrets are little towers usually at angles of a larger structure and function as mere ornamental elements (Curl, 2000). According to Grube, Islamic architecture is

one that tries to achieve the perception of weightlessness (Imam Reza, 2007). The vertical view brought in by the turrets in Masjid Zahir negates the eyes from the actual massing of the whole structure, giving it a sense of weightlessness. It helped give the gradual change of hierarchy of elevation between the main dome and the body of the mosque. Perhaps the turrets were positioned only by the foyers to create a sense of welcoming.

On elevation of the Masjid Zahir, the fluted terminals bring forth a horizontal eyelevel of all the cupolas atop the smaller domes. The sense of continuation of repetition between the small domes to the other would be interrupted and abrupt. Thus, the fluted terminals do play important role for the aesthetical appeal. The repetitions of these cupolas bring visual rhythm and harmony to the mosque. The cupolas give the sense of elegance to the bulkiness of domes and *chatris*.

#### ***b) Islamic Art and Architectural Features***

The findings concluded that Islamic art and architectural style of Masjid Zahir is again influence by the Moorish and Indian Architecture. The character of Islamic art and architecture has strengthen the sense of place of as iconic and heritage building.

Firstly, calligraphy in the Islamic world is considered as the most important arts because, it records the word of God, where it is either taken in as a full verse or a single word such as the names of *Allah* and *Muhammad* (Jones, 2000). Nevertheless, it serves the same purpose which is to glorify Allah as the Great sustainer and Creator of the creature and the universe. Furthermore, it is a symbol of honor for the mosque as a sacred place of worship. The calligraphy of Masjid Zahir creates an extruded effect. The reasons for having the Quranic verses extruded outwards was to protect it from being stepped on by passersby since scientifically, any carvings carved within the walls or other elements will create shadows on the floor when cast by the ray of lights. Based on interview with Mr. Mohd Radzi, one of the mosque caretakers, some of the calligraphy in the interior spaces is new as this mosque had undergone some renovations recently (Measured drawing, 2008). Changes were made over the past few years with the addition of the calligraphy writings on the interior walls and the *mihrab*.

The geometrical pattern came into existence during the days of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh when the prophet and his *sahabah*, Saidina Abu Bakar were hiding



in a cave (*Hira' Cave*) from their rival. A spider began spinning its web, producing a star and later into other geometrical shapes forming an extensive network of geometrical, symmetrical and repetitive pattern. The miracle of the spider later became the guidance for craftsmen and artists to understand more on the geometrical concept, composition and patterns. Apart from beautifying and decorating the exterior and interior of mosques and other Islamic building, these geometrical pattern also symbolizes that God is single and He is everywhere as they represent 'unity and multiplicity' and vice-versa (Jones, 2000). Mohd.Radzi Hamid stressed that the Islamic ornamentation and features are based on the geometrical pattern, thus creating the six-pointed star where it symbolizes the six principle of the Islamic faith; the belief towards Allah, Prophet, angels, al-Quran, destiny and the Here after.

Meanwhile, the arabesque is characterized by a continuous stem which splits regularly, forming series of counterpoised, leafy, secondary stems where it can either turn to a split again or return to be reintegrated into the main stem. The characteristics of the pattern are limitless, rhythmical in movements with repetitions of the curved lines, producing a design that is balanced and free from tension. The artist of the Islamic world often observed nature faithfully, reproducing and interpreting it with great deal of accuracy (Jones, 2000; Zarina, 1993).

In Islamic architecture, light is a symbol of divine unity where it is believed that the Muslim artist seeks to transform his or her craft and decorations into a vibration of light. This happens as light not only functions in modifying other elements of decorations, but also creates patterns (Jones, 2002). In a nutshell, the use of calligraphy, geometrical patterns, arabesque and stained glass are the common elements used in the overall decoration of Masjid Zahir, where it not only symbolizes the Islamic faith and principles, but also to portray the inner beauty of Islam. Decorations in Islamic architecture not only serve to beautify the whole space, but it also creates the effect of weightness and unlimited spaces within its interior (Mitchell, 2000). Masjid Zahir uses four types of decorative elements in beautifying the overall space, which are calligraphy, geometrical pattern, arabesque and stained glass.

## **5.2 Findings on Public Perception Towards Masjid Zahir as Heritage Building**

In the cities of today, urban fabrics, buildings and forms provide functional needs but lack cultural and social values. Nowadays, city buildings have become insignificant to the cultural potential of an historic heritage city, and historical continuation is attributed little importance. In recent years, many new city developments have focused excessively on physical aspects, rather than nationhood and cultural significance. There are four variables discussed; the sense of identity, the sense of nationhood, the overall connection between identity and cultural heritage and the preservation of royal heritage buildings.

*The sense of identity:* Similarly, both Balai Besar and Masjid Zahir has appeared to play an influential role in symbolizing the identity of Alor Setar. Mostly the young and teenagers are most likely to regard the importance of identity in the cultural heritage of the city to be insignificant. The local inhabitants look this heritage building of Masjid Zahir as the symbolic of their culture and identity.

*The sense of nationhood:* It is found that both local inhabitant and tourist have seen the historical building of Masjid Zahir is very significant in developing the sense of nationhood, and as it is successfully promotes the senses. This finding explain that the users have seen the issue of nationhood as important and they are agreed that the cultural heritage itself have play it roles in promotes the value of nationhood. Thus, the value of nationhood vice versa have creates positive feelings towards the cultural heritage.

*The overall connection between identity and cultural heritage:* the findings shows that the importance attributed to this connection increased with the age groups. Both local inhabitants and visitors' choices all supported a perceived influence of the historic building on the connection between identity and cultural heritage; which had the same response distribution by age and the local/ visitor division as the responses to the identity question.

*The preservation of royal heritage buildings:* In corresponding with the positive response on the sense of identity and nationhood by most of the respondents, the preservation of this iconic building also seen is important. As the main users, the local inhabitants were much more encouraging the preservation to be done as compare

to the visitors. This is because the local community always believe that what is presented also portray their culture and identity of community.

Alike Balai Besar, Masjid Zahir also seems that the perceived importance of identity in this cultural heritage building among the public may generally act as architectural heritage generators. The findings indicate that the local inhabitants value historical architectural heritage as an element of their place identity in the historical city of AlorSetar, similarly with the case of Balai Besar. The historical heritage has emerged as an essential consideration in modern city development, and it also provides a lasting memory within local inhabitant's lives. However, to the visitors, the historical heritage is just an attraction for them to visit in the city of AlorSetar. It seems that the idea of nationhood is regarded as important by both local inhabitants and visitors. Thus, identity and nationhood not only provide a sense of historical settlement, but also provides the city with a local and global identity. In the current ever-changing world, the historical city of AlorSetar is facing transformation through new changes in the city's development, implemented to deal with the contemporary designs of today. However, the existing historical-urban context of AlorSetar remains critical to the local inhabitants as well as the visitors. They prefer to maintain the local historical identity, nationhood and cultural heritage, and support the preservation of the heritage building in recognition of the local personalities. Reflecting on these results, cultural heritage has contributed a great deal to the identities of cities, as described by Orbasli, "cultural heritage undoubtedly has communal value and the links between cultural objects and national identity have long been understood" (Syukri, 2008).

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Kedah, specifically Alor Star, housed many historical buildings, which portray various architectural styles that were introduced in the past. Each of the building has their own significance and history that contribute to the history of our nation. There are lots of information that can be gained by studying the historical buildings, interms of the history, technology advancement, social and culture of the community during that era and others. There are great potentials that can result out of Masjid Zahir in the future development of Kedah and Malaysia as a whole. Such potentials are of the national

pride of the state itself, while others are related to the economy, advancement for the people, and of beautification of the town.

When it comes to enhancing the national pride of Malaysians and promotion of the economy, Masjid Zahir has a high potential of being one of the valued heritage buildings and tourist attraction. Not only can it serve as a tourist attraction, but the mosque and its vast front yard can serve as a recreational or therapeutic garden where it can be enjoyed by the locals and foreigners as well, and at the same time preserve and maintain the landscape of the town. Furthermore, the mosque, aesthetically, will enhance the beauty of Alor Star as the garden of the mosque shall reflect the Jubli Perak Park across the street from it.

Masjid Zahir can also foster the sense of pride to the people by building a mini Islamic museum where the history of Islam can be preserved and the mosque can act as a future reference point for upcoming generations and at the same time act as a tourist attraction. Even though these various historical buildings strongly featured architectural style from abroad, they were designed to adapt to our local culture, religion and climate. Plus, the construction technology used explained the civilization and the development of the city during that era.

Masjid Zahir act as a beautiful icon for the panoramic view of the town of Alor Star. In order to improve the condition and quality of living for the people, social services, education, and economy the mosque can become a social service center, community center, and an Islamic center due to its location and function as a mosque. Instead of just being a place for worship, Masjid Zahir can revitalize the concept of mosque being a community center. Services such as sheltering the homeless and needy, as well as hosting other ceremony such as wedding, funeral and *gotongroyong*(helping one another), and educating the public can be made possible with future expansion to the building.

In view of the outcomes of this research, there are two suggestions for the historical city of AlorSetar. The first is to enhance the sense of identity that will also create integration between the local inhabitants and the visitors, with the cultural heritage events and activities acting as an operational interface between them. As mentioned by Newman and McLean, the “process of constructing identities is probably most apparent in national museums where a national identity is being appropriated.”<sup>9</sup> Secondly, this interface should be public-oriented, focusing not only

on how cultural elements have been integrated into the historical city, but also on understanding the meaning within the historical city through the practical-interactive involvement of the public with museums and galleries.

## **7.0 Directions for Future Research**

The current study is limited in its scope because the limited of study period and budget. There is still a need on future research to other similar subjects. Areas of research that are still needed identified as follows;

- i. The study indicates on the current preservation strategy taken place for the heritage building. It is possible to study in future of the preservation strategy of different types of buildings.
- ii. The findings also pointed on the heritage building that influence the nationhood. It is important to study in depth in what of the variables that contribute to development of nationhood. .
- iii. During the literature study and site observation, it was found that there are different types of heritage buildings around the area. It is very pertinent to study the whole area looking as a heritage city instead of a single building.

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