

“Architecture is Gesture”: The Ornamentation of Minbars in Selected Old Mosques of Melaka

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*Received 28 September 2020, Received in revised form 12 November 2020
Accepted 10 December 2020, Available online 30 August 2021*

ABSTRACT

The argument of ‘architecture is gesture’ suggests an episteme of artefact that celebrates the narration of human culture. This article explores the ‘gesture’ of mosque architecture. The exploration is conducted with particular reference to the ornamentation of minbar. In the context of Malay art, minbar is considered evidence of traditional ingenuity. The design of minbar reflects the beauty of intricate composition and the skillfulness of craftsmanship. Visits to old mosques as recommended by the Malacca Museums Corporation enable the researchers to select minbars with unique design and carvings. The ornamentation of minbars with reference to three selected old mosques in Melaka, namely, Masjid Peringggit, Masjid Kampung Hulu, and Masjid Kampung Keling are discussed. The discussion highlights the ornamentation of minbars as a response to the cultural convergence in Melaka. The article recommends the study of minbars to be concentrated more on its function as ‘signs’ instead of just a mere ‘aesthetic element’. In this respect, the study of minbars may enrich the holistic meaning of Islamic architecture. It can also be seen as a sign of a harmonious plural society in 18th century Melaka.

Keywords: Minbar; Ornamentation; Mosque architecture; Sign; Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Architecture is gesture made with buildings. In order to understand any gesture we need to see it in its cultural context and once we have contextualized it then it can be highly expressive and accurate; but without context, the meaning is adrift and is not to be relied upon. We can measure and describe the form of a ruined building, but without a culture to locate it in, it remains meaningless.

In 2006, the architectural historian Andrew Ballantyne published the text *Architecture as evidence*. Through the text, Ballantyne highlights the ontology of evidence in the discussion of architectural historiography. He questions, “when we look at the ruins of buildings we are looking at powerful and incontrovertible evidence of something; but evidence of what?” (Ballantyne, A. 2006: 36). Responding

to the question, Ballantyne argues that the discussion of architectural historiography should go beyond the physicality of structures and the heroic narratives of a personal architect. He points to an episteme of an artefact that unravels the hidden stories of human culture. This becomes a basis for Ballantyne’s argument, stated earlier, “[a]rchitecture is gesture—gesture made with buildings” (ibid).

Ballantyne’s argument of ‘gesture’ rethinks the habitual comprehension of architecture that predominantly celebrates logical empiricism and pedantic measurements. He encourages architecture to act more as signs rather than merely an aesthetic element. In this case, a ‘sign’ which may narrate the development of human culture: the way human deals with and thinks about things as a means to adapt to environments. In other words, Ballantyne

acknowledges the contribution of culture in the discussion of architectural historiography.

Following Ballantyne, this article explores the ‘gesture’ of mosque architecture. The exploration is conducted with particular reference to the ornamentation of minbars. I will first turn to the relationships between mosque architecture, ornamentation and minbar; before focusing on the minbar within the context of Malay art. The discussion is continued with the study of minbars in selected mosques of Melaka.

MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE, ORNAMENTATION AND MINBAR

It is noteworthy to begin with, that the discussion of mosque architecture has its genesis in Islamic architecture. Several scholars have discussed in- depth and length about the establishment of knowledge related to Islamic architecture. Each scholar puts forward their varied arguments provoking polemical debates and contentious perspectives. The Islamic art historian Valérie Gonzalez, for instance, focuses on the philosophy of aesthetics (Gonzalez 2001). Gonzalez brings into attention the dialectics between abstraction and representation in the development of what she calls, the “Islamic artistic creation” (Gonzalez 2001: 4). In this respect, Gonzalez discusses the concept of beauty (and ugliness) with reference to the classical Arabic thought, known as *falsafa*. Her discussions are framed within the *falsafa* of prominent philosophers of the Middle Ages like Ibn Hazm, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averroës), and Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen). Acknowledging the philosophical concepts of sublime, metaphysics, and phenomenology, Gonzalez argues that the aesthetics of Islamic architecture is diverse. The diversity ranges from the rationalistic thought of material specificity to the spirituality of God’s beauty. To put it briefly, the *falsafa* becomes the point of departure for Gonzalez in suggesting three categories of geometry in Islamic architecture. The categories are conceptual geometry, kinetic geometry, and imaging geometry (Gonzalez 2001: 93). While the former conceptual geometry reflects mathematical abstractions, the two latter categories of kinetic geometry and imaging geometry illustrate the visual representation of movements and metaphorical patterns, respectively. Gonzalez’s suggestion is augmented with the studies of several mosques in the Middle East such as the Great Mosque of Isfahan, Iran and the Great Mosque, Aleppo, Syria.

In a similar vein, but with a different concern, the architectural historian Mohammed Hamdouni Alami marries the discussion of Islamic architecture with philosophical discourses (Alami 2011). He discusses the aesthetics of Islamic architecture concerning the theory of

Arabic language, known as *al-bayān*. The polymath al-Jāhiz proposed the theory. This reminds us to the discussion of ‘deep structure’ of the American linguist Noam Chomsky engaged by the architect Peter Eisenman (Abd. Manan & Smith 2013, 205). Alami describes the meaning of Islamic architecture as narrated in classical Arabic literature. From this perspective, Alami suggests a semiotic similarity between Islamic architecture and poetry. He writes,

Al-bayān is at once the process of production of meaning and its manifestation. Using five intellectual devices (al-lafz, speech; al-khat, writing; al-‘aqd, calculation; al-ishāra, the sign; and al-hāl, the state) al-bayān operates through different mediums, such as architecture, poetry and the art of the song, or books. Architecture creates meaning, for instance, through al-‘aqd and al-hāl. In this elaborate epistemological system, architecture, like poetry, assumes an important social role in the manifestation of al-bayān. Both architecture and poetry share the symbolic function of memorializing and celebrating, and they develop from the same procedure of meaning, namely al-‘aqd. (Alami 2011: 230-31)

For Alami, like poetry, the ‘real’ meaning of Islamic architecture lies on the reader (the user) rather than the sole description of the author (the architect). Elaborating the ‘epistemological system’ of *al-bayān*, Alami instantiates several mosques in the Middle East. These include the Great Mosque of Damascus, Syria and the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. The Mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo, Egypt

Source: Wikipedia; Creative Commons License

While Gonzalez and Alami explore the philosophical discourses, the architectural theorist Mohamad Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi takes a different approach. Running away from the Middle Eastern context, Mohamad Rasdi suggests the discussion of ‘otherness’ in Islamic architecture. He draws attention to the polemics of nation-building in the context of Southeast Asian Islamic architecture (Mohamad Rasdi 2010). Mohamad Rasdi argues that the comprehension of Islam as *ad-Din* (loosely defined as a religion) touches upon the complex realities of everyday life. Thus, to speak about Islamic architecture, according to Mohamad Rasdi, is to illustrate the discursive conflicts between social

practices and political institutions. Formulating his argument, Mohamad Rasdi outlines three historical types of mosque architecture. The types are early vernacular; colonial adaptations and modern or postmodern (Rasdi 2010: 6). In these respects, Mohamad Rasdi describes, among other things, the vernacularism of Kampung Laut Mosque, Kota Bharu, Kelantan; the colonial adaptation of the Ubudiah Mosque, Kuala Kangsar, Perak, and; the modernistic expressionism of Masjid Negara, Kuala Lumpur.

Though there are multiple (yet interesting) perspectives among scholars, the mosque becomes an important reference in the discussions of Islamic architecture. The main function of the mosque is a place of worship: a place to perform prayer (*salat*) in the congregation. The function has been expanded to a place for calling to prayer (*adhan*), educational lectures, and community activities. Historically, there is no specific architecture nor standardized blueprint in the design of the mosque. Throughout the development of Islamic civilization, the designs of the mosque have flourished and diversified. Such development later calls for critical reviews on mosque architecture.

Ornamentation is the main character in the aesthetics of mosque architecture. The ornamentation normally displays the configurative patterns of Arabic calligraphies and geometric shapes. In Islamic architecture, ornamentation appears on both the exterior and the interior of the mosque. (In this sense, I may argue that Islamic architecture is an antithesis to the modernist architect Adolf Loos's statement: "the building should be dumb on the outside and reveal its wealth only on the inside" (Wilson 1992: 63). On the one hand, the ornamentation in Islamic architecture is designed to celebrate the *Qur'anic* verses, Prophetic narration texts (*Hadiths*), the invocations (*selawat*) to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), supplications (du'a), as well as the creation of nature. Aniconism is applied in Islam. On the other hand, the ornamentation reflects human achievements in intellectual ability and technological skills. The art historian Claude Humbert through his text *Islamic Ornamental Design*, published in 1980, highlighted the scholarly artistry of ornamentation (Humbert 1980). He describes that the Islamic ornamental designs are "the testimony of a civilization. [... The designs] suggest remarkable intelligence, inventiveness, precision, and complete freedom of expression" (Humbert 1980: 19).

The discussions on the ornamentation of mosque architecture primarily revolve around mosaics and the epigraphic evidence of facades. There is little emphasis on other ('minor') features which altogether constitute the aesthetics of mosque architecture. One of the features is minbar. Minbar is a pulpit used by the *imam* (prayer leader) to deliver sermons (*khutbah*), especially during the *Jumu'ah* ('Friday prayer'). The archaeologist Andrew

Petersen once described the significance of minbar in mosque architecture. In his text *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*, published in 2002, Petersen discussed, among other things, the architecture of Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, Turkey. He writes,

The mosque [the Selimiye Mosque] is built mainly of yellow sandstone although red sandstone is also used for vousoirs in arches and for outlining architectural details. The interior of the building is provided with traditional mosque furniture, the most impressive of which is the tall marble minbar. The sides of the minbar are decorated with a carved geometric interlace pattern based on a twelve-pointed star and circle.

(Peterson, A. 2002: 255)

The following sections discuss the significance of minbar with particular reference to Islamic architecture in Malaysia. I shall begin the discussion with minbar in the context of Malay art; before elaborating the ornamentation of minbars in selected mosques of Melaka.

MINBAR IN THE CONTEXT OF MALAY ART

Since the late 13th century, Islam has been well accepted by the Malay society. The earliest evidence of the coming of Islam to Peninsular Malaysia is the Terengganu Stone, a stone inscription discovered in 1887 A.D., dated 1303 A.D. (Nasir 1987: 10; Ali 1994: 47). Before Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism was the religion of state across the peninsula. The *religious transition* from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam can be clearly seen in the artefacts of Islamic art. The art historian Zakaria Ali in his text *Islamic Art in Southeast Asia, 830 A.D.-1570 A.D.*, published in 1994, described such a 'religious transition' (Ali 1994). Ali writes,

Islamic art of Southeast Asia draws on the Hindu-Buddhist art implanted earlier in the region. Evidence of such borrowings is found in carvings and reliefs, especially those with the mask and floral themes. [...] The questions of precedence, then, is articulated in terms of localized artistic vocabulary. Hindu-Buddhist art had been transformed by indigenous artists in earlier centuries, forging a distinctive tradition with its own identity, and special flavour. Now, the localization of forms was a task artists undertook to fulfil the requirements of patrons living in an Islamic doctrinal climate. (Ali 1994: 25-26)

While the discussions of Middle Eastern architecture largely emphasize on the ornamentation of mosaic tiles, there are different focuses on the Islamic art of Southeast Asia. Discussing the 'carvings and reliefs' of the Islamic art, Ali draws attention to the artefacts of stonework such as fortifications and embrasures, stone inscription like pillars, gravestones and tombstones, carved granite monoliths, coins, and krises. Also, Ali investigates mosque

architecture with an emphasis on the beauty of woodcarving. His investigation includes the minbar of Panjunan Mosque and the minbar of Sendang Duwur mosque. Both mosques are located in Indonesia.

In the context of Malay art, minbar is considered evidence of traditional ingenuity. The design of minbar reflects the beauty of intricate composition and the skilfulness of craftsmanship. The cultural critic Farish A. Noor, while discussing the traditional artistry of Malay woodcarving, once described: “[i]t is the carvings on the *minbar*, or pulpit, of mosques, however, which most clearly demonstrate the splendour of Malay woodcarving and its role in enhancing Islamic architecture” (Noor, Khoo & Lok 2003: 63). Elaborating his point, Noor emphasizes the strict beliefs and rules in the practices of Malay woodcarving. According to Noor, the splendour of Malay woodcarving artefacts lies not just in its physical appearance. More than that, the splendour is manifested through the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) of Malay cosmology. “The cosmology of the Malays”, Noor argues, “has always been one that was predicated on the division between the seen and the unseen, the material and the metaphysical, *zahir* and *batin*” (Noor, Khoo & Lok 2003: 20). Hence, it is important among the Malay woodcarvers, Noor describes, to respect and reflect the spirit (*semangat*) of nature while completing their woodcarvings. Noor supports his suggestion by referring to the woodcarvings of minbars. He instantiates the minbars of Surau Langgar, Kota Bharu, Kelantan and Masjid Losong, Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu.

The Islamization of Melaka has a close relationship with its development as an international entrepot since the early 15th century (Ali 1994: 117). As an international entrepot, Melaka provides fertile ground for cultural convergence between Malay and other civilisations such as Chinese, Indian, and Arab. The Portuguese traveller Tomé Pires once recorded that there were 84 distinct languages spoken in Melaka around 1509 A.D. (Ali 1994: 118). One artefact that may describe such a ‘cultural convergence’ is the ornamentation of minbar in old mosques around Melaka. The study aims to interpret Islamic ornamentation in old minbars and view it from the perspective of the present social structure.

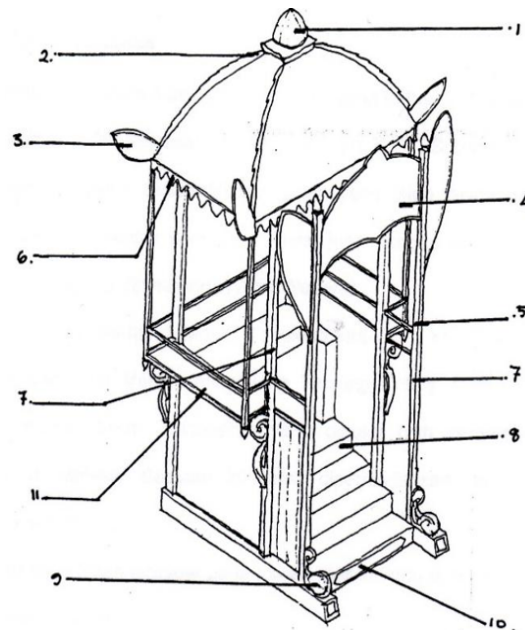
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Out of the five old mosques recommended by Malacca Museums Corporation or *Perbadanan Muzium Melaka* (PERZIM), three were selected because the minbars available on site at the time of the visit were in pristine condition. From this perspective, the ornamentation of minbars in three old mosques is discussed. The old mosques are Masjid Peringgit, Masjid Kampung Hulu, and Masjid

Kampung Keling. All were built by mid-18th century.

The design of these old mosques can be categorized into sino-eclectic form (i.e., its ornamentations, stone fences, and tower-shaped pagoda) with distinctive Javanese mosque architecture detailing (i.e., raised main prayer hall and multi-tiered roof). These particular observations are in agreement with many studies in Melaka old mosques (Ismail 2017; Ahmad & Mujani 2015; Surat 2008).

Before discussing the minbars for each mosque, let us first describe the general features of a minbar. A minbar consists of eleven main features (Figure 2). The ‘roof part’ includes *buah mahkota*, *kepala som*, *ekor som*, and *ukiran cucur atap*. The ‘front part’ contains makara, *tiang makara*, *unsur pengimbang*, *anak tangga*, and *ukiran pada tapak minbar*. And the ‘elevation part’ involves *awan larat* and *bahagian minbar yang dleibihkan*. These general features are discussed here starting with the minbar of Masjid Peringgit.



Legend:

1. Lotus crown (*Buah mahkota*)
2. Som head (*Kepala som*)
3. Som tail (*Ekor som*)
4. Mythical creature (*Makara*)
5. Makara column (*Tiang makara*)
6. Fascia board carving (*Ukiran cucur atap*)
7. Balancer element (*Unsur pengimbang*)
8. Steps (*Anak tangga*)
9. Motif *Awan larat*
10. Minbar base carving (*Ukiran pada tapak minbar*)
11. Extended portion of the minbar (*Bahagian minbar yang dleibihkan*)

FIGURE 2. The general features of a minbar. (Source: Author)

THE MINBAR OF MASJID PERINGGIT

Masjid Peringgit was originally built in 1726 A.D. It is considered among the oldest mosques in Melaka. The design of the mosque reflects the characteristics of Chinese architecture with a tiered roof and Chinese tiles. A similar reflection can be traced in the ornamentation of its minbar.

The minbar resembles the appearance of a curvy tiled roof that of Chinese influence (Figure 3.1, 3.2 & 3.3). The roof is pointed up with decoration, called the rounded type of *buah buton*. The decoration is amplified with carved roof eaves in the area of *hiasan cucur atap*. Such ornamentation named *tumpu kasau*. On the front part, both the makara and unsur pengimbang are decorated with carved floral motifs. The makara displays an Arabic calligraphy to celebrate the invocations (*selawat*) to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The influence of Chinese ornamentation can also be seen in the elevation of the minbar. The elevation shows an arrangement of Chinese tiles.



FIGURE 3.1. The front view of the minbar of Masjid Peringgit.

Source: Author



FIGURE 3.2. The elevation view of the minbar of Masjid Peringgit.

Source: Author



FIGURE 3.3. The perspective view of the minbar of Masjid Peringgit.

Source: Author

THE MINBAR OF MASJID KAMPUNG HULU

The second minbar, the minbar of Masjid Kampung Hulu. Masjid Kampung Hulu was built circa 1720 A.D. to 1728 A.D. While the former Masjid Peringggit describes the dominance of Chinese architecture, the design of Masjid Kampung Hulu narrates a different story. The design of Masjid Kampung Hulu tends to celebrate Javanese architecture, an architecture which is highly influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist beliefs.

Looking at the minbar of Masjid Kampung Hulu, it reveals the rich embellishments of Javanese motifs (Figure 4.1 & 4.2). Both the roof part and the front part of the minbar clearly show the symbolism of Javanese crown. On the top of the roof, its buah mahkota, there is a representation of lotus petal, a sacred element in Javanese art. From the elevation, the minbar seems like a sculpture with a wavy effect, particularly in the area of *awan larat*. Such a symbolic, sculptural look recalls Ali's previous statement: "Islamic art of Southeast Asia draws on the Hindu-Buddhist art implanted earlier in the region. Evidence of such borrowings is found in carvings and reliefs, especially those with the mask and floral themes" (Ali 1994: 25-26).



FIGURE 4.1. The front view of the minbar of Masjid Kampung Hulu.
Source: Author



FIGURE 4.2. The elevation view of the minbar of Masjid Kampung Hulu.
Source: Author

THE MINBAR OF MASJID KAMPUNG KELING

The third minbar to be discussed here is the minbar of Masjid Kampung Keling. Masjid Kampung Keling was a wooden building, originally built in 1748 A.D. Over a century later, in 1872 A.D., the mosque was rebuilt in brick. The uniqueness of Masjid Kampung Keling lies on its architectural *eclecticism*. In this case, an *architecture* that mixes Hindu, Chinese, Javanese, English, and Malay style.

A clear resemblance of Indo-Corinthian capital, an element of Hindu architecture, in the decoration of the main pillars (*tiang seri*) of the mosque (Figure 5.1). Besides its building structure, the minbar of the mosque continues such an architectural eclecticism. On the one hand, the roof part of the minbar describes the symbolism of *stupa*, a key element of the Hindu-Buddhist architecture. On the other hand, the front part: the makara, unsur pengimbang and anak tangga are embellished with Javanese motifs (Figure 5.2). This phenomenon, the architectural eclecticism of the minbar, occurs perhaps due to the historical fact of the mosque. It is believed that Indian Muslim traders built Masjid Kampung Keling. (Indeed, the term 'Keling', in Malay, denotes 'Indian-Muslim children'). Thus, the ornamentation of the minbar (as well as the mosque) becomes a manifestation of the traders' sentiment. Their sentiment to at once recollect the nostalgic memory about

their homeland and embrace the new cultural diversity of Melaka.



FIGURE 5.1. The front view of the minbar of Masjid Kampung Keling.
Source: Author



FIGURE 5.2. Detail of ornamentation on the *makara* of the minbar.
Source: Author

The aforementioned discussions of the minbars of Masjid Peringgit, Masjid Kampung Hulu, and Masjid Kampung Keling describe the argument that ‘architecture is gesture’. The minbars narrate the development of human culture, in particular, the function of ornamentation as a response to the cultural convergence in Melaka. Focusing on the embellishment of Malay woodcarvings, the minbars open up a new perspective in the discussions of Islamic architecture. The minbars while at first glance share a common expression (Figure 6), looking deeper, they reveal complex stories on the way human deals with and thinks about things as a means to adapt with environments. This

is a reminiscence of Ballantyne’s statement, as pointed out earlier in the opening quote of this article: “[w]e can measure and describe the form of a ruined building, but without a culture to locate it in it remains meaningless” (Ballantyne, A. 2006: 36).

Features on the front and roof parts of the minbars, namely, the *makara* and lotus crown, respectively, were known to be inherited from Hindu-Buddhist architecture from Java which has been retained with Islamic interpretation accepted by the community at that time (Mohd Shafri 2020). As explained by Burckhardt, Islamic art reduced the archaic motifs into the most abstracted designs, taking away “every magical quality” and giving in return the “spiritual elegance” (Burckhardt, T. 2009: 66). The abstraction of motifs portrays the unified character of the Islamic art that includes artistic expression from a wider scope of the Southeast Asia Muslim community (Naf’atu Fina 2018). This also corresponded to the tolerable character of the local Malay people in Melaka to embrace external influences, without disrespecting their own heritage (Ismail & Hassan 2017). By understanding Melaka’s local wisdom, the embracement of the harmonious plural society here remains relevant for the future generation to witness in her old mosque architectures.

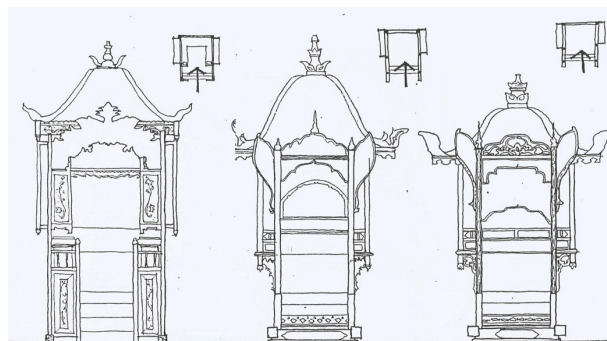


FIGURE 6. Drawings of the minbars. From right: the minbar of: Masjid Peringgit; Masjid Kampung Hulu, and; Masjid Kampung Keling. Insets depict the plan view of each individual minbar.
Source: Author

CONCLUSION

This article discussed the ‘gesture’ of mosque architecture with particular reference to the ornamentation of minbars. The discussion with Ballantyne’s argument of ‘architecture is gesture’. Following Ballantyne, an episteme of an artefact that celebrates the narration of human culture is explored. The exploration was conducted with respect to the relationships between mosque architecture, ornamentation, and minbars. Such relationships were further elaborated by focusing on the minbars of selected old mosques in Melaka, namely, Masjid Peringgit, Masjid Kampung Hulu, and Masjid Kampung Keling.

The study of minbars discussed here provides the basis for further investigation. It is recommended that a detailed investigation of the topology and the materiality of minbars. Also, a specific investigation on the processual production of minbars is suggested to understand its relation to the Malay cosmology. In other words, the study of minbars should concentrate more on its function as 'signs' instead of merely an aesthetic 'element'. In this respect, it is believed that the study of minbars may enrich the holistic 'meaning' of Islamic architecture. As the Islamic scholar Tariq Ramadan once described while delivering his talk at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, "[t]he difference between a sign (ayat) and an element is when you look at an element, you see an element. But, if you look at the sign behind the element, you see the meaning of the element" (Ramadan 2015).

ENDNOTE

Another view is suggested by the Malay sociologist Md. Salleh Yaapar while comparing the discussions of Islamic architecture between the Middle East and Southeast Asia, particularly among the Malays (Yaapar 2010). According to Yaapar, there are two unique elements in the development of Islamic architecture among the Malays. The unique elements are the plan, and; the type of roofing in the design of the traditional mosques, called *meru* (Yaapar 2010: 433).

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None.

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