

GURUPIAH

The conformity of contemporary architecture worldwide and the inherent loss of local identities is a paradox of the century.

MURSIB:

Hello. My name is Gurupiah, and I'm from the MIT-UTM Malaysia Sustainable Cities Program. In this video, I'll be presenting the significance of local involvement in continuing architectural identity within rapidly globalized cities.

Malaysia is experiencing rapid development from little villages into mega cities, steered by a series of grand transformation plans, such as the 2020 vision. One consequence of rapid development is the disappearance of local architectural values embodied in the functional built form, the living culture, and their relationship with the environment.

The transformation of Malaysian local architectural identity can be seen in government-led developments and is epitomized by the new federal administrative center, Putrajaya. There and elsewhere, the government's attempts to define identity through architecture have been characterized as top-down and exclusive in approach. Instead of elevating Malaysia's local architectural traditions, the top-down approach to asserting identities turns to lead to mimicry or copying of architectural styles from other parts of the world. Meanwhile, some attempts for a local identity are trapped in prestige and parody.

The challenge of preserving local identity poses several questions. How do we ensure the continuity of architectural identities in the face of rapid development? Would a more inclusive approach to the formation of identity be the way forward?

One project that exemplifies the struggle of a local identity in Malaysia is Kota Iskandar, the Johor new state administrative center, located outside Johor Bahru, the state capital. Intended as the economy catalyst project for Iskandar Puteri, the site for Kota Iskandar was offered by a land developer UEM Land, a joint venture between this state of Johor and UEM Land was created.

A jointly appointed property developer was entrusted to design, build, and manage the project. Working within tight budget, time framework, work on site began in 2004 and was completed in 2008. UEM Lands' development strategy for Kota Iskandar was dominated by outside consultants. The criteria of having strong project references and proven track record sidelined local consultants.

For the master plan process, the only local involvement was a user requirement survey. No engagement with local professionals. No engagement with the local community. No design competition. And no public forum. These were not required by contract, and involved more time and cost to execute.

Although stakeholder workshops were held, but did not provide any real opportunity to offer feedback on the design of the buildings. The urban design and architectural concept guideline made it clear that this project was intended to showcase Johor's cultural heritage. Johor's two main leaders, the Chief Minister and the Sultan, had different design preferences.

Committed to preserving local identity through cultural heritage, the Chief Minister had traditional Johor architecture in mind. The Sultan of Johor, on the other hand, suggested we get to [INAUDIBLE] administrative building as the reference for Kota Iskandar. Designed by a British consultant in 1942, the building is an Anglo-Indian structure with traces of various Islamic styles.

But to avoid the stigma of colonial architecture, the design team and several state governments' officials made a study tour to the Alhambra Palace in Spain, a 14th century Moorish-Andalucian heritage site. The resulting Kota Iskandar master plan, this, compromise of two identities.

First, a Moorish-Andalucian identity for the central axis, which includes the state legislative assembly building, and the state secretariat office, and the main plaza. Second, a Johor traditional identity for the state office complex is at this site clusters.

The Moorish-Andalucian identity came up off a process that was top-down and exclusive. All the projects were exclusively awarded to the architect member from the master planning team who was a non-local. There was no base selection. There was no opportunity for local engagement. There was no local feedback.

For the Johor traditional identity, the process was more inclusive and locally engaging because the chief minister asked for involvement from local consultants. One local consultant submitted [INAUDIBLE] that were twice rejected because his track record and project references were not comparable to a larger firm's. To overcome this obstacle, he formed a joint venture with another passionate local consultant. To understand the local value and aspiration in forging identity, the new team sold out a heritage expert from a local university.

In comparison, a process that led to Johor traditional identity was more inclusive and locally engaging. It engaged a local consultant. It was a joint venture with a local partner. It saw the local heritage expert. It studied local design values.

The outcome of the top-down and exclusive Andalucian identity is impressively grand, but foreign to Johor. A tower mimics that of [INAUDIBLE] but has pseudo-Andalucian detailing, and copies of Alhambra arches and columns.

MOHD TAIUDDIN Now here in the modern times, we simply take things at its end form. And so a building, like
RASDI: the Alhambra, supposed to represent great Islam, so we just transplanted. I wouldn't even use the word replicating, it would be like copying something from the past.

And I think it's too much of a copy, of an imitation.

GURUPIAH The uncritical direct copy of foreign identity results in designs unsuitable for the local climate.
MURSIB: What do we see? Huge skylights, too hot for Johor's equatorial climate, which require costly technology to reduce heat gain. Courtyards that are made of heat radiating surfaces. Gardens without shade. Vast open space makes for an unbearable sun-baked plaza.

CHAU LOON WAI: If we really consider our tropical climate, which is generally warm and humid. So if we want to make places comfortable for people, then this needs to be really taken into consideration in the design in how we arrange buildings, in how we plant trees, provide shading.

GURUPIAH Even though these foreign forms produced unsuitable design for the climate, they prevail in
MURSIB: Malaysia's administrative and public architecture. By contrast, the more inclusive and locally engaging process for capturing local identity translates Johor identity in modern forms.

RA'ALAH [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE]

MOHAMAD:

GURUPIAH Reinterpreting local identity, as opposed to adopting foreign styles, pave the path to cultural
MURSIB: and environmental sustainability today. THE design creates functional contemporary forms, accommodates the social features for office culture, and responds symbiotically to the environment. A-frame porches make friendly and welcoming entryways. Multi-level verandas cater space for meeting and greeting under generous roof shade. Common lobby features drama of traditional farms in space and volume. Layered roofs allow greater ventilation and frame a visual experience. Delightful overhangs provide ample weather protection. And craft

tradition extended expressive contemporary detailing.

The Chief Minister, the approving committee, the master planner, and most of the professional community were impressed. Inclusive engagement and design methodology were quickly adopted as a benchmark for the remaining design puzzles. Comparison between the two identity processes in Kota Iskandar shows the importance of local value and the role of local involvement in continuing local identity.

Here are some key lessons. Include local consultants and local experts to allow for deeper intrinsic attitude and approach in incorporating local values. Practice, a transparent and open-bid process, to promote competitiveness and to prevent design complacency. Consider local citizen involvement for sense of commitment and attachment.

In order to reflect the culture and values of the population, planning process must move from exclusive to inclusive. This is vital for cultural and environmental sustainability in developing cities today. It is our responsibility to make sure our cities do not end up looking the same. Help preserve our local heritage and values.

[MUSIC PLAYING]