THE PERCEPTION ON IMPLEMENTATION OF ISLAMIC BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN CITIES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Because Islam is the nation’s majority religion, the government of Malaysia strives to adopt Islamic values in its regulation of Malaysia’s built environment. Yet, given Malaysia’s multi-racial and multi-religious lifestyle, how can an Islamic-based, built environment play a role there? Have Islamic concepts been implemented correctly and appropriately in the construction of Malaysia’s cities? Thus, this paper will utilize a methodology meant to elicit the perceptions of experts—those who are related in the decision-making process of city development and design concepts including administrators, professionals, academicians and Islamic scholars—on the meaning of an Islamic built environment in Malaysian cities. This ongoing research employs descriptive and survey-based research designs rooted in qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. The research method implemented is a Delphi method that uses structured and semi-structured interviews for primary data collection to achieve the objectives of this research include (1) to define the perceptions of experts from a variety of races and religions on the subject of Islamic built environments in order to ensure the appropriate implementation of the concept in Malaysian contexts; and (2) to evaluate and analyze the findings with regard to the degree to which the study area in Putrajaya are truly Islamic cities and are compatible with the criteria associated with an Islamic built environment in Malaysia. This research anticipates coming out with the characteristics of an Islamic built environment based on the input of “experts” and suggestions regarding how professionals can use these perceptions as guidance to concretely act on the design process.

Keywords: Perception, Islamic Built Environment, Malaysia, Islam
INTRODUCTION

Social justice among Muslim and non-Muslims in Malaysian heterogeneous society is required by Islamic norms and value systems. There is both indirect and explicit evidence that equal treatment should be given to all mankind (Badawi, 2011). Thus for example the Qur’an says that the penalty or compensation due to the family of a person who is accidentally killed (manslaughter) is exactly the same whether the victim is a Muslim or non-Muslim. The blessedness of life, honor and property of every person, including non-Muslim, who lives peaceably with Muslims is upheld by both the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh). The Prophet (pbuh) said, "Whoever is unjust towards, or hurts a non-Muslim, who is living under the protection of Muslims, hurts me". The early Muslims who lived after the fall of the Prophet clearly understood this and, as the book by Abu Yusuf called ‘Kharaj' says, tried to ensure that all who were living in the Islamic state were treated fairly including, the Jews and Christians.

Islam has a whole body of regulations to govern the proper relationships which should exist between Muslims and non-Muslims. In parallel to this Islamic principle this research see the importance of eliciting perception regarding Islamic built environment among all Malaysian either Muslim or non-Muslim. One of the key elements in providing convenient built environment to the community is by considering user’s perception towards the environment. This research is confined to the perceptual psychology of the spiritual dimension of sensory stimuli (sensibility) associated with the Islamic ambiance of Islamic cities. Sensibility or emotional responses are a tool by which humans understand phenomena around the world, enabling them to perceive their environment and objects within it (Mahdieh, Majid and Mostafa, 2011). Environmental perception is not only considered a clear response resulting from certain stimuli but also involves, in determining roles, such cognitive processes as memory and thinking (Irvani, Khoda Panahi, 2007). In summary, this research treats the interaction among environmental characteristics, perception, cognition, evaluation, and human behavior (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Process of interaction between human and environment. (Source: Golkar, 2006)
The definition of “Islamic built environment” in this research is based on the context of Malaysia as an “Islamic,” Asian nation that possesses a multi-racial and multi-religious community. It is crucial to highlight that the concept of an “Islamic built environment” in Malaysia might differ from an understanding of the concept in another region, such as the Middle East or Africa. This research will identify a pure definition of “Islamic built environment” on the basis of perceptions by “experts”, i.e., those who are relevant to the decision-making process. These include (1) administrators, (2) professionals, (3) academicians and (4) Islamic scholars from the variety of races and religions that are found in Malaysia’s heterogeneous society.

**RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

Malaysia is one of the more colorful countries in South Asia, which is a region renowned for its diverse cultures. The country boasts a heterogeneous society composed mostly of indigenous people. The majority is constituted by Malays in peninsular Malaysia and other natives of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo (the so-call the bumiputra). The rest are citizens of Indian and Chinese origins, as well as other ethnic minorities (the non-bumiputra). Although Malaysia is a multi-religious society, it is predominantly Muslim, with Islam as its official religion.

While it designates Islam as the state religion, the Malaysian constitution guarantees freedom of religion. According to data from the Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2000, ethnicity and religious belief are highly correlated. Approximately 60.4% of the population practices Islam.

Meanwhile, 19.2% of the population are Buddhists, 9.1% are Christian, 6.3% are Hindu, and 2.6% practice Confucianism, Taoism or other traditional Chinese religions. Of the remainder, 0.8% of the population reported no religious beliefs, and 1.5% practiced another religion or did not provide any information (Malaysian government statistics department, 2001).

Due to the religious convictions of Malaysians, this research assumes the significance of religious values in built environments in Malaysia. Previous studies verify that religion can play an important role in, have a profound influence on, and present a conceptualization of people’s relations to places and places themselves through the design of cities (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Religion and religious values affect not only the layout of cities but also the use of land, such as the planting of particular trees and vegetation, the orientation of streets and buildings, the structure of neighborhoods, and the designs of homes, places of worship, cemeteries, and gardens (Sopher, 1967; McDannell, 1986; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 1993, 1999, 2004). Islam, as with other prominent world religions, has become associated with its own sacred characteristics (Eliade, 1959) and particular cities, such the Islamic city of Madinah (Spahic, 2009).
According to the Islamic scholar Ali Falak (1980) in Zen (2008), the basic qualifications of an ideal Islamic city are found in a comprehensive foundation composed of three characteristics. The first is the presence of a stable government that ensures the rule of law and effectuates programs of social justice as required by Islamic norms and value systems. The second is the presence of wealth, and the third is the presence of a clean environment. Consequently, given that Islam is the nation’s majority religion, the government of Malaysia strives to inject Islamic values into Malaysia’s built environment. Yet, given its multi-racial and multi-religious character, how can an Islamic built environment play a role in Malaysia? Have Islamic concepts been implemented correctly and appropriately in Malaysia’s built environment?

The Background of Malaysia’s Islamic Built Environment

Malaysia’s ruling party, the Barisan Nasional, has always been moderate with regard to Islamic issues. When Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad became Prime Minister in 1981, he was perceived as an essentially secular political figure. However, he also came to power during a time of rising Islamic power (e.g., the Iranian Revolution). Subsequently, he declared in 1983 that the Muslim Bloc was more important to Malaysia than the Non-Aligned Movement or the Commonwealth (Mohamad Rasdi, 2010).

During the 1990s, the Barisan Nasional began to face serious challenges from the far-right Islamist Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). To undermine the appeal of the PAS, Mahathir began openly pushing less secular, more Islamic policies throughout the 1990s. As a result of this gradual Islamization, the government has legitimized previously marginal discourses, such as that of an Islamic State (Calvin, 2010). As Helen Ting writes, “...the state-led Islamization policy during the premiership of Mahathir Mohamed to deprive the rival Islamic party, PAS, of its Islamic political credentials, has also mainstreamed and legitimized among an important section of the Malay community the discourse of Islamic State” (Ting, 2009).

A planned capital is one of the best ways for a state to articulate its values and self-image. For example, Putrajaya, the Federal Administrative Capital of Malaysia since 1999, embodies much of the character of the government that designed it. Putrajaya was developed in the image of an Islamic city by the inclusion of prominent mosques, Middle Eastern architecture, and an abundance of Islamic geometrical designs. Putrajaya’s planners, including the director of the Town and Country Planning Commission, Zainuddin bin Muhammad, had concerns regarding the possible negative social effects of such a high-tech city. Zainuddin developed plans based on three relationships: that between man and his creator, that between man and man, and that between man and nature. Inspired by the verses of the Quran describing paradise, he called for Putrajaya to possess clean water, gardens, and centrally located mosques (Bunnell, 2004). Thus, it was determined that Putrajaya should adopt Middle Eastern architectural forms and urbanism to legitimate its status as an Islamic city (Calvin, 2010).
The Middle Eastern influences on Putrajaya, particularly on the most important government structures at the core of the city, are widespread and obvious, from the onion domes atop the Prime Minister’s Office and Palace of Justice to the Putra Mosque. Brenda S.A. Yeoh describes how the aestheticization of the urban landscape in the form of the “cultural Imagineering of the city” has become a popular method of generating growth, especially in Southeast Asia (Yeoh, 2005). Revivalist architecture, such as that found in government districts, is generally very expensive, but it is appealing to investors and to architects, who receive higher commissions (Mohamad Rasdi, 2010). Rasdi, however, argues that the very presence of Putrajaya’s monumental buildings is not Islamic and cites the Prophet Muhammad’s condemnation of monuments built to bolster personal grandeur. This concern leads to a basic question: how truly “Islamic” is the Islamic built environment of Malaysia’s cities?

Malaysian Perceptions of the Islamic Built Environment Issue

The impulse to brand Malaysia as an Islamic country while continuing to engage in urbanizing and globalizing processes may push decision makers to create their own conception of what is best for the public when planning or providing an identity to a city or town (Ismail, 2008). The process of creating an identity for a space sometimes involves ignorance of local contexts (Lang, 2005) and a lack of concern for involving the public in the design process (Sulaiman, 2000), particularly with regard to popular perceptions. However, in the design of urban spaces, public perception is the most important element in the perceived form of the city (Rapoport, 1977). Decision makers may create the ideal elements of identity in a development process, but it is the public who will determine whether this created identity is recognized and associated with the community (Eben Saleh, 1998).

This research assumes that the desire to inject Islamic values into built environments in Malaysia as a method for providing the nation with an Islamic identity can be clearly ascertained by viewing the approach to architecture, landscaping and planning in such locations as Putrajaya, Kota Bharu in Kelantan, Taman Tamadun Islam (Islamic Civilization Park) in Kuala Terengganu and Nusajaya in Johor. Most designs in Malaysia demonstrate the selection of an architectural language derived from the Middle East or West Asia (Utaberta, 2008). The adoption of Middle Eastern design styles began in the early 1960s, when many students and religious scholars travelled to Mecca and other Middle Eastern cities in a quest for knowledge and pilgrimage experiences. They were generally influenced and enchanted by the beauty of the new places and buildings they found in the Middle East, an experience which revived spiritual feelings and created a sense of identification with the Great Time of Islam.
This experience was also supported by statements from such Islamic scholars as Serageldin (1989) and Zaman (1990). These statements commented on perceptions of physical image and design elements in Islamic built environments, for example, the continuity of key symbolic elements (minarets, domes, gateways and mihrabs) and the phenomenon of false images of Islamic architecture. Often a dome or a pitched roof, as seen from the outside, is actually built over a flat concrete roof. Spahic (2002) highlighted the judgment that it is inappropriate to use the adjective “Islamic” to describe such entities or phenomena because they only partly and superficially represent Islamic doctrine and its value system. Mohd Rasdi (2008) strongly disagrees on this issue, questioning why politicians and architects would settle on a universalistic notion of Islamic architecture consisting of onion domes, multi-foil arches and exotic calligraphy with geometric tiles as the Islamic language *par excellence*.

All these statements point to the possibility that designers and administrators as decision makers may have misinterpreted Islamic designs. Mohd Rasdi (2008), through a content analysis of Islamic architecture literatures and observations, has discovered the designs that have been derived solely from the Quran and sunnah as religious sources, as interpreted within the Sunni perspective of Islam, and that have distilled the eternal idea of architecture in Islam. He then combines this idea with considerations derived from contemporary societal problems of Muslim communities to produce an activity and an architectural framework. He has also hinted at the problem of Sufistic and Shia’istic frameworks in many architectural writings. These frameworks have been blindly accepted by clients and professionals in their justifications of design ideas.

This perception issue creates additional questions regarding the perception of an “Islamic built environment” among Malaysians in a heterogeneous society and whether this concept has been interpreted and implemented correctly and appropriately by the experts (architects, designers, planners, administrators, policy-makers).

**Typical Interpretations of the Islamic Built Environment Issue**

Over the past few centuries, studies of Islamic built environments have thoroughly investigated a variety of topics. The scope of these studies covers the context of the “Islamic city,” including urban planning and housing, while those studies that investigate “Islamic Architecture” in particular specify the nature of that architecture and include treatments of interiors, detailing and decorative elements (Utaberta, 2008). Studies of landscape architecture are usually connected with both of these topics and typically focus on the characterizations of an Islamic garden. These studies are typified by the work of such modern scholars as Mostafa (1989), Schimmel (1976) and Tabbaa (1992, 1987).
Although Islamic built environments endure, progressive developments in research areas and the tremendous growth of built environments create common but erroneous perceptions and interpretations regarding Islamic environments. These perceptions and interpretations attribute vagueness and confusion to the concepts of such environments (Rabbat, 2008), such as the proposition that Islamic architecture is the so-called “architecture of the veil” because the beauty of structures lies in inner spaces (courtyards and rooms) invisible from the outside (from street views). Furthermore, these perceptions underline the use of grandiose forms, such as large domes, towering minarets, and large courtyards, intended to convey power. In spite of these misinterpretations, there have been several studies that address interpretations of Islamic built environments, such as Leaman (2004), Samer Akkach (2000), Rabbat (1995), Depaule (1992), Grabar (1983), Grube (1978), and Geertz (1973). From those studies, we can conclude that the issues regarding interpretations of Islamic built environments involve the relationships among the culture, aesthetic and arts of Muslims with regard to the architecture of cities.

Due to the importance of such interpretations, it is important that Malaysia, a country with a majority Muslim community and its own cultural background, possesses its own interpretation of Islamic built environments pertinent to Malaysian cities. Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify Malaysian perceptions on the meaning and implementation of the concept of an “Islamic built environment” in Malaysian cities, focusing on outdoor spaces in public areas (Al-Shareef, 1986). Understanding the perceptions of the Malaysian people is necessary to determining whether this Islamic built environment is read and understood by ordinary citizens and is an element worth sustaining in Malaysia’s public domain.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This research is designed to define the meaning of an “Islamic Built Environment” infused with real Islamic values based on the perception of Malaysians and to evaluate the implementation of the concept of an “Islamic built environment” in Malaysian cities. The research paradigms in this study are qualitative and quantitative. The research method implemented is a Delphi method using structured and semi-structured interviews for primary data collection. The literature review includes relevant studies from journals, books, articles and the internet as sources of secondary data. The research methodology began with the preliminary study process. This process included a combination of reviewing literature, data collection, sampling and data analysis to determine the research findings.
The Delphi method for Primary Data

The Delphi method is based on structural surveys and makes use of the intuitively available information held by the participants, who are mainly experts (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). Linstone and Turoff (1975) captured the common characteristics of this method in this description: Delphi may be characterized as a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem. The Delphi method is an iterative process used to collect and distill the judgments of experts using a series of questionnaires interspersed with feedback. The questionnaires are designed to focus on problems, opportunities, solutions, or forecasts. Each subsequent questionnaire is developed based on the results of the previous questionnaire. The process stops when the research question is answered, e.g., when consensus is reached, theoretical saturation is achieved, or when sufficient information has been exchanged (Skulmoski, Hartman and Krahn, Jennifer, 2007).

Selection of the Delphi Methodology

Although this study could conduct a traditional survey to gather input from Malaysians regarding perceptions of Islamic built environments, it judged the Delphi method to be a stronger methodology for a rigorous query of experts. The Delphi method was selected for the following reasons. First, this study is an investigation of perceptions among Malaysians to determine the meaning of an Islamic built environment in the Malaysian context. This complex issue requires knowledge from people who understand the issues thoroughly. Thus, a Delphi study answers the study questions more appropriately.

Second, a panel study most appropriately answers the research questions rather than any individual expert’s responses. Delphi is an appropriate group method. Among other high-performing group-decision analysis methods, such as the nominal group technique and social judgment analysis (Rohrbaugh, 1979), Delphi is desirable because it does not require the experts to meet physically, a feature that is more practical in terms of time and cost.

Third, a Delphi study is flexible in its design and amenable to follow-up interviews. These features permit the collection of richer data, leading to a deeper understanding of the fundamental research questions.

Research Tools / Instruments

To use a Delphi survey as a research tool in the theorizing process, qualitative, open-ended follow-up structured interviews are used to probe some of the answers and to discover their meaning and significance.
The questionnaire was also developed and tested carefully before being used on the respondents. The questionnaire is a combination of types; it begins with a series of closed-ended questions, with boxes to tick or scales to rank, and concludes with a section of open-ended questions and more detailed responses.

**Reliability and Validity**

Pre-testing also provides important reliability assurance for the Delphi method. However, test-retest reliability is not relevant because researchers expect respondents to revise their responses. In addition to general survey requirements, the Delphi method can employ further construct validation by asking experts to validate the researcher’s interpretation and categorization of the variables. The fact that the Delphi method does not require that respondents be anonymous to the researcher permits this validation step; this feature does not pertain to many other survey methods.

**Sampling and Sample Size**

Selecting research participants is a critical component of Delphi research because it is their expert opinions upon which the output of the Delphi method is based (Ashton 1986; Bolger and Wright 1994; Parente, Anderson, Myers and O’Brien, 1994; Skulmoski, Hartman and Krahn, Jennifer, 2007). There are four requirements for the identification of an “expert”: (1) knowledge and experience with the issues under investigation, (2) capacity and willingness to participate, (3) sufficient time to participate in the Delphi, and (4) effective communication skills (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). For significant findings, the sample size of Delphi group does not depend on statistical power but rather on group dynamics for arriving at consensus among experts. Thus, the literature recommends 10-18 experts on a Delphi panel (Paliwoda, 1983).

This study selects “experts” from among those who are relevantly related in the decision-making process of city development and design concepts. These include (1) Administrators, such as state authorities, political or government leaders and developers; (2) Professionals, such as architects, planners, designer, surveyors, and engineers; (3) Academicians, such as professors or researchers on the topic of built environments; and (4) Islamic scholars such as ustaz and motivator experts. All groups consist of a minimum of two Muslims and two non-Muslims from a variety of Malaysian races (the exception is the Islamic scholars group, which requires the presence of Muslim respondents only).
Interview Topics

In addition to (1) critically presenting and analyzing the meaning of “Islamic Built Environment” in Malaysian contexts, (2) determining the element that makes the built environment “Islamic” in Malaysian cities (Islamic places) and (3) evaluating the existing implementation by selecting the “places” in the study area (Putrajaya), the following topics were also addressed in the sequential interviews:

(4) The familiarity of Malaysians regarding the authenticity of Islamic built environments; to what extent is the study area, Putrajaya, actually “Islamic”?

(5) The Malaysian people’s awareness of the implementation of an Islamic built environment; do they care/not care about it and why?

(6) The Malaysian people’s views on the implementation of Islamic built environment; what do they like/not like about it and why?

(7) The Malaysian people’s satisfaction with the existing Islamic built environment (Islamic places); how does this environment relate to what they do (work) and how they live and interact?

(8) The role of professionals in better implementing an Islamic built environment; do they strive/not strive to implement it? How can professionals use these perceptions as guidance to concretely act on the design process?

Data Collection and Method of Analysis

Administration of the questionnaires involves three general steps: (1) brainstorming for important factors, (2) narrowing down the original list to the most important factors, and (3) finalizing the relevant list.

In phase 1, brainstorming, treat experts as individuals (for this phase only), not panels. With regard to Questionnaire 1: Ask experts their opinion on the meaning of “Islamic Built Environment” in Malaysian contexts and list the elements that make the built environment “Islamic” in Malaysian cities (Islamic places). Consolidate these two points from all experts, regardless of the panel. The study should remove exact duplicates and unify terminology. With regard to Questionnaire 2: Send consolidated lists to experts for validation and refine the final version of the consolidated lists.

In Phase 2, narrow down the factors and begin to treat the experts as four distinct panels. With regard to Questionnaire 3: Send the consolidated lists of (1) the meaning of “Islamic Built Environment” and (2) the elements of an Islamic built environment in Malaysian cities with a new topic that asks the experts to evaluate the existing implementation of the concept by selecting “places” represented by photographs of the study area (Putrajaya). These photographs (within the research parameters) work as surrogate representations provided to each expert. Each expert must evaluate each photograph by reference to at least five supporting factors.
In Phase 3, finalize the relevant list. The goal of this final phase is to reach a consensus in the ranking of the relevant factors within each panel. Studies have consistently found that it is more difficult to reach a consensus with Delphi groups than with groups that incorporate direct interaction among participants (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). However, with a panel design, it is less difficult to attain a consensus because the researchers intentionally select panel members for their homogeneity.

With regard to Questionnaire 4: Ask experts to finalize factors on the evaluation of implementation of an Islamic built environment on each panel’s lists. Subsequently, ask about Topics 4 through 8 and calculate the mean rank for related items. The study assesses the consensus for each list within each panel using Kendall’s W. There are a number of different metrics for measuring non-parametric rankings, but Kendall’s W coefficient of concordance is widely recognized as the best. The value of W ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating no consensus and 1 indicating perfect consensus between lists (Siegel and Castellan, 1988).

At the end of this final phase, the study will have eight ranked lists (two from each of the four panels) representing the priorities that each of the panels placed on various topics with regard to perceptions of Islamic built environments in Malaysia. This rigorous process assures that the factors in the list are the most important and that the rankings are a valid indicator of the relative importance of the various factors. Based on these results, the study will be in a position to reassess the theoretical observations from the literature and to offer propositions on the meaning and role of the development of Islamic built environments in Malaysia cities with heterogeneous societies.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

This research is significant in that it provides vital information on Malaysian perceptions of an Islamic built environment. This research will reveal the true perceptions of the implementation of “Islamic” concepts in Malaysian cities in the context of Malaysia’s status as a multi-racial and multi-religious country. The findings will help Malaysian administrators specifically and experts concerned with built environment generally to generate a better and more appropriate process of implementing an “Islamic built environment” in Muslim countries, particularly with regard to landscape design and planning. This study is most important and relevant to Malaysia and its Asian cultures. The various ethnic and religious groups in Malaysia will perhaps generate a diversity of perceptions with regard to this Islamic issue.
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