

The Role Of Cultural Context In Shaping The Islamic Built Environment In Malaysia: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In the context of Malaysia's diverse and multicultural society, the Islamic built environment presents a unique synthesis of religious, cultural, and environmental factors. Shaped by the nation's historical background, Islamic architectural principles, based on universal spiritual values, must be adapted to consider the local context, particularly its multicultural society and tropical climate. This study addresses the challenges in applying Islamic principles within Malaysia's built environment and investigates how cultural context influences the formation and interpretation of Islamic architectural concepts. Through a comparative analysis with other Islamic countries, especially in the Middle East, the study highlights the distinct ways Malaysia's built environment integrates local cultural elements and sustainability, in contrast to the more uniform, heritage-driven approaches seen in the Middle East. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing Delphi technique surveys and Media Content Analysis to gather expert opinions from political figures, professionals, and scholars. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the key issues and factors affecting the adaptation of Islamic principles in Malaysia's urban and architectural development. Key findings reveal that Malaysia's multicultural and religious diversity significantly influences architectural design, leading to distinct forms that reflect social harmony, tolerance, and inclusivity, particularly in public spaces. These elements distinguish Malaysia's Islamic built environment from the more homogenous interpretations found in Middle Eastern countries. The study provides a framework for integrating cultural context with Islamic principles, offering valuable insights for architects, urban planners, and policymakers.

Keywords: Islamic built environment, Cultural context in architecture, Public space inclusivity, Malaysian architecture, Multicultural society

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of an Islamic built environment is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings that emphasize spirituality, social justice, and the alignment of human-made structures with divine principles. However, adapting these principles across different cultures and climates presents unique challenges. In Malaysia, where Islam is the official religion, this process is further complicated by the country's multicultural and multireligious society. Unlike Islamic countries in the Middle East, Malaysia's architecture must carefully balance preserving Islamic values with accommodating its diverse cultural heritage, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous influences. Additionally, Malaysia's tropical climate necessitates architectural adaptations that differ significantly from those in arid regions (Bakar, 2011). Figure 1 provides a representation of the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The diagram encapsulates the three critical elements that shape the Islamic built environment in Malaysia: religious values, cultural context, and environmental adaptation. These elements discuss how Islamic principles guide architectural design, how Malaysia's multicultural society influences the aesthetic and functional aspects of buildings, and how the tropical climate necessitates specific architectural adaptations.

It reinforces the argument that an appropriate Islamic built environment in Malaysia must harmoniously integrate these three elements to create spaces that are spiritually meaningful, culturally inclusive, and environmentally sustainable. The Islamic built environment in Malaysia is profoundly shaped by the country's rich cultural heritage and religious values. Historically, early Islamic architecture in Malaysia emerged through the influence of local Malay traditions, combined with Islamic elements introduced via trade routes. This blend resulted in a distinctive architectural style that integrated Islamic principles into vernacular Malay architecture (Nasir, 1995). The colonial period further enriched this architectural landscape with European influences, which were skillfully adapted to align with Islamic aesthetics and functional needs (Gullick, 1998). Following Malaysia's independence, a resurgence of Islamic identity became evident, significantly influencing the built environment, particularly in the design of mosques and other Islamic structures (Mohamad Tajuddin, 2003). Traditional Malay architectural elements, such as the use of timber, stilts, and intricate carvings, were historically integrated into Islamic structures, showcasing a seamless blend of local materials and climatic considerations (Lim, 1987). Modern interpretations of Islamic architecture in Malaysia, seen in landmarks like the National Mosque and the Putra Mosque, embody a fusion of contemporary architectural techniques with traditional Islamic design principles (Ismail & Rasdi, 2010). These buildings are not only religious landmarks but also serve as community hubs, highlighting the mosque's role in supporting both social and religious activities (Othman, 2006).

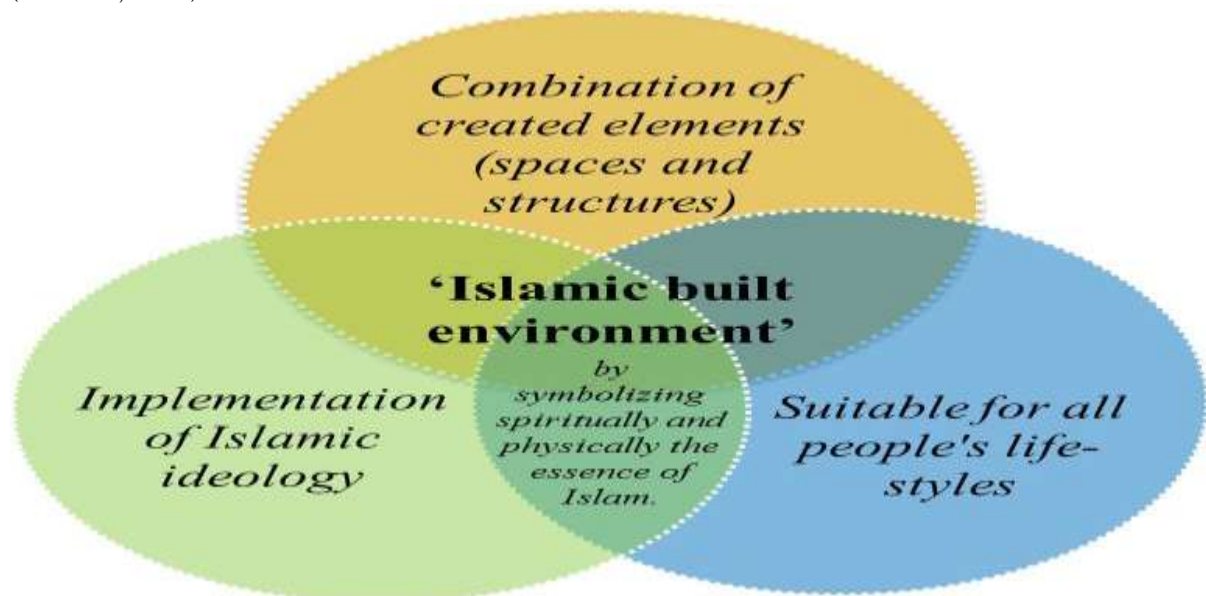


Figure 1 The conceptual diagram showing "The three elements to define an appropriate Islamic built environment in Malaysia to illustrate the theoretical framework. (Researcher's graphic illustration, 2015) The influence of Islamic teachings on the design and functionality of these spaces is evident, with a clear emphasis on promoting spiritual well-being and fostering community cohesion (Abdul Rahman, 2012). Recent research underscores the integration of sustainability principles within Islamic architecture, reflecting an increasing focus on environmental and social responsibility (Sharif, Jalil, & Bekhet, 2019; Ibrahim, Al Shomely, & Eltarabishi, 2023). Case studies from cities such as Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur illustrate how Islamic motifs and sustainable design practices are integrated, demonstrating the ongoing influence of cultural context in shaping the Islamic built environment in Malaysia (Shamsuddin, 2011; Isa, 2020). The contemporary discourse surrounding Malaysia's Islamic built environment raises important questions about the interpretation and application of Islamic values in urban planning and architecture. Although government initiatives have sought to incorporate Islamic imagery into public spaces, critics argue that these efforts often rely on superficial symbols rather than a meaningful integration of Islamic principles into the broader architectural framework (Ibrahim, Al Shomely, & Eltarabishi, 2023). This study aims to explore these issues by examining how Malaysia's unique cultural context—specifically its multicultural society and tropical climate—shapes the development of its Islamic

built environment. Recent research emphasizes the critical role of cultural identity in shaping Islamic architecture in Malaysia, highlighting that architectural expressions are often localized rather than universal. For instance, urban centers like Putrajaya exhibit Islamic motifs adapted to modern materials and local spatial norms, reflecting the influence of cultural pluralism in national planning (Othman et al., 2022; City, Territory and Architecture). Cultural context remains integral to shaping Malaysian Islamic architecture. A 2023 comparative study found that Islamic buildings in Malaysia often incorporate local floral motifs, multi-faith symbolism, and Malay craftsmanship, suggesting a culturally adaptive paradigm rather than rigid religious replication (Ismail, 2023). By drawing on expert opinions and conducting a comparative analysis of Malaysia's architectural practices against those of other Islamic countries, this study seeks to define a uniquely Malaysian approach to Islamic architecture. This approach aims to harmonize Islamic values with the country's cultural and religious diversity, offering a framework for the development of inclusive and context-sensitive urban spaces (Sharif, Jalil, & Bekhet, 2019).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a combination of the Delphi method and Media Content Analysis to gather insights from experts and public opinion shapers (Adler & Ziglio, 1996; Trueman, 2012). The Delphi method reached a consensus among experts, including architects, scholars, urban planners, and policymakers, on what constitutes an Islamic built environment in Malaysia. This method is particularly effective for complex issues where subjective judgments are crucial, as it allows for the collection and synthesis of expert opinions through multiple rounds of surveys. The iterative rounds of the Delphi survey enabled experts to refine their views on the subject, with emerging ideas validated through group consensus. This process helped reduce the range of responses and resulted in a more accurate and reliable consensus (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Contemporary studies reaffirm its effectiveness for complex, norm-sensitive domains. For instance, a recent application of a Delphi technique to develop Shariah-compliant frameworks in Malaysia demonstrates its robustness in achieving expert consensus through controlled feedback loops (Che Jamaludin et al., 2025, BMJ Open). Similarly, Delphi was used in 2023 to establish consensus on Islamic creative media models within Malaysia (Rasit et al., 2023).

The second method, Media Content Analysis, investigates how Islamic architectural elements are framed in Malaysian public media. The method focused on major news outlets, user-generated platforms, and political discourse, identifying recurrent themes, narrative bias, and ideological framing (Cuhls, 2003; Krippendorff, 2018). A relevant example includes a 2019 study analysing the portrayal of Islamic environmental themes in Malaysian newspapers via MCA, highlighting patterns that aligned architectural discourse with spiritual and societal values (Mohamad Saleh & Nik Hasan, 2019). Additionally, Media Content Analysis was conducted to analyze public and political discourse on Islamic architecture and urban planning in Malaysia. This method systematically examined media content to identify patterns, themes, and biases in how Islamic elements are framed in public discussions (Cuhls, 2003). Media Content Analysis is valuable for understanding the broader societal context in which architectural practices are situated, as it reveals how public opinion and political narratives shape and are shaped by the built environment (Krippendorff, 2018).

2.1 Data Collection - A Selection of Respondents

Data was collected from a diverse pool of experts, including political figures, academics, architects, and professionals involved in urban development projects. This approach enabled the study to capture a broad spectrum of views on how Islamic principles should be integrated into Malaysia's built environment, providing a nuanced understanding of the subject. The inclusion of various stakeholders ensures that the findings are comprehensive and reflective of different perspectives within the society. The selection of respondents for this study was carefully designed to ensure a comprehensive representation of stakeholders involved in the development of the Islamic built environment in Malaysia. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, respondents were chosen from a diverse pool of experts, including professionals from architecture, urban planning, academia, and government sectors. This variety ensured that perspectives on both theoretical principles and practical applications were incorporated into the study. The study employed the Delphi method, selecting a panel of experts with deep knowledge and

experience in the fields of Islamic architecture, urban design, and environmental sustainability (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). These experts were primarily drawn from architects and urban planners who have worked on prominent Islamic architectural projects in Malaysia, such as mosque design, urban centers, and public spaces in cities like Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur. Additionally, academicians specializing in Islamic studies, architectural history, and cultural sustainability were included to provide insights into the theoretical underpinnings of Islamic architecture and its adaptation in Malaysia's multicultural context. Government officials and policy makers from national and local government agencies involved in urban planning and the regulation of the built environment were also part of the panel, ensuring that the practical implications of policy decisions on Islamic architectural projects were considered. Respondents were chosen based on several key criteria to ensure a high level of expertise and relevance. Participants were required to have a proven track record of working on Islamic architectural projects or contributing scholarly research to the field. They also needed direct involvement in Malaysia's urban planning and development, ensuring that their insights were rooted in the local context. Efforts were made to include respondents with different religious, cultural, and professional backgrounds to reflect the diversity of Malaysia's society and its influence on the Islamic built environment (Trueman, 2012). The study aimed to include respondents from various regions within Malaysia to account for regional variations in the interpretation and application of Islamic architectural principles. This included experts from urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru, as well as those from smaller towns where traditional Islamic and Malay architectural practices are more prevalent. A total of 30 experts were initially invited to participate in the study, with 24 ultimately providing detailed responses. This response rate ensured a robust dataset, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of expert opinions on the challenges and opportunities in shaping an Islamic built environment that aligns with both religious values and Malaysia's cultural diversity (Cuhls, 2003).

2.2 Data Analysis

2.2.1 Delphi Method Analysis

The data analysis for this study involved a multi-step process to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Islamic built environment in Malaysia. The analysis was conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a nuanced interpretation of the collected data. The Delphi method was employed to gather expert opinions on what constitutes an Islamic built environment in Malaysia. This method involved multiple rounds of surveys, where experts provided their insights, which were then refined through iterative feedback. The responses from each round were analyzed to identify common themes and areas of consensus. The final round aimed to achieve a convergence of opinions, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were representative of the collective expertise of the panel (Adler & Ziglio, 1996). The qualitative data from the Delphi method were coded and categorized into themes using NVivo software. This software facilitated the organization and analysis of large volumes of textual data, allowing for the identification of patterns and relationships within the responses. Key themes that emerged included the integration of traditional Malay elements, the influence of Islamic teachings on architectural design, and the challenges of balancing modernity with religious principles.

2.2.2 Media Content Analysis

Media Content Analysis was conducted to examine how Islamic architecture and urban planning are portrayed in Malaysian media. This involved collecting articles, news reports, and social media posts related to Islamic built environments. The data were analyzed using a combination of manual coding and automated text analysis tools, such as Leximancer, to identify recurring themes and sentiments (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis focused on the framing of Islamic architectural elements, the public's perception of these elements, and the political discourse surrounding urban planning. Themes such as sustainability, cultural identity, and community cohesion were prominent in the media content. The findings from this analysis provided context to the expert opinions gathered through the Delphi method, highlighting the broader societal and cultural influences on the Islamic built environment in Malaysia.

2.3 Integration of Findings

The findings from the Delphi method and Media Content Analysis were integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Islamic built environment in Malaysia. This integration involved

comparing the expert opinions with public and political discourse to identify areas of alignment and divergence. The combined analysis revealed that while there is a strong consensus on the importance of integrating Islamic principles into architectural design, there are varying interpretations of how these principles should be applied in practice. The data analysis also highlighted the influence of Malaysia's multicultural society and tropical climate on the development of Islamic architecture. The need for sustainable design practices that respect both religious values and environmental considerations was a recurring theme across both expert opinions and media content. The multi-method approach to data analysis provided a robust framework for understanding the complexities of the Islamic built environment in Malaysia. By combining expert insights with media analysis, the study was able to capture a holistic view of the challenges and opportunities in integrating Islamic principles into urban planning and architecture. This comprehensive analysis will inform future research and policy development in the field of Islamic architecture in Malaysia. The combination of the Delphi method and Media Content Analysis provides a robust framework for exploring the complexities of integrating Islamic principles into the built environment in Malaysia. The Delphi method offers depth and expert consensus, while Media Content Analysis provides breadth and contextual understanding. Together, these methods allow for a thorough examination of both expert opinions and public discourse, ensuring that the study's conclusions are well-rounded and grounded in both theoretical and practical insights.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's results identified six major themes that shape the Islamic built environment in Malaysia: inclusivity, environmental sustainability, community orientation, spiritual symbolism, cultural identity, and functional adaptability. Experts agreed that Malaysia's multicultural and tropical context plays a critical role in defining the architectural form of its Islamic buildings and urban spaces (Bashri, 2000).

The findings revealed that Malaysian Islamic architecture must go beyond Middle Eastern models and instead develop a localized identity that respects the country's diverse cultural heritage while staying true to Islamic values (Mohamad Tajuddin, 2014; Al-Ameer & Al-Mosawy, 2024). Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of inclusivity in public spaces, where both Muslims and non-Muslims should feel a sense of belonging. This was particularly emphasized in urban spaces such as parks, plazas, and civic centers, where architectural features should reflect unity while maintaining Islamic principles (Abidin, Othman, & Mohd Noor, 2010). The experts stressed that Islamic architecture in Malaysia should not be politicized but rather serve as a unifying force that brings communities together. Furthermore, the results indicated that environmental sustainability is a crucial element, with architects advocating for designs that respond to Malaysia's tropical climate by utilizing natural ventilation, shading, and sustainable materials (Abu Bakar Jamil, 2002; Ibrahim, Al Shomely, & Eltarabishi, 2023). The integration of Islamic architectural elements with sustainable design practices was also a recurring theme. Case studies from Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur showcased successful implementations of Islamic motifs, which were seamlessly blended with sustainable and environmentally conscious urban planning efforts. These examples illustrate the potential for Islamic architecture to evolve in a way that respects both cultural identity and modern sustainability standards (Sharif, Jalil, & Bekhet, 2019).

3.1 A Comparative Analysis

Recent studies validate the comparative analysis between the Islamic built environment in Malaysia and that of Middle Eastern countries, particularly focusing on cultural and environmental sustainability. Malaysia's architecture, which integrates traditional Malay elements and embraces multiculturalism, contrasts with the more homogenous, heritage-driven approaches seen in the Middle East. For instance, Malaysian mosques blend Islamic and Malay cultural features, distinct from the Middle Eastern emphasis on preserving Islamic identity through classical forms like domes and geometric patterns (Sanusi et al., 2019; Ismail & Rasdi, 2010). Middle Eastern countries, such as the UAE, often prioritize architectural motifs like geometric patterns to reinforce Islamic identity (Ibrahim et al., 2023). From an environmental sustainability perspective, Malaysia adapts its architecture to the tropical climate through natural ventilation and the use of local materials, while Middle Eastern countries rely on strategies suited for arid conditions, such as stone and courtyard structures (Sharif et al., 2019; Othman, 2006). Recent research

from the UAE also indicates a growing focus on sustainability using Islamic geometric patterns in design, emphasizing both cultural and environmental sustainability (Ibrahim et al., 2023). However, Malaysia's adoption of green technologies in urban planning is more advanced, reflecting a stronger integration of sustainability principles (Sharif et al., 2019). This comparison underscores the distinct approaches to Islamic built environment, shaped by differing cultural and environmental contexts. While Middle Eastern architecture focuses on preserving traditional Islamic forms, Malaysia's Islamic built environment is more inclusive, reflective of its multicultural society, and driven by sustainability concerns (Ismail &

Theme	Findings in Malaysia	Comparative (Middle Eastern Context)	Insights Eastern
- Inclusivity - Environmental Sustainability - Community Orientation - Cultural Identity - Spiritual Symbolism - Functional Adaptability	- Public spaces emphasize inclusivity, ensuring that both Muslims and non-Muslims feel a sense of belonging. Urban spaces (parks, plazas) reflect unity - Malaysian architecture is highly adapted to the tropical climate through natural ventilation, shading, and the use of sustainable materials - Islamic architecture in Malaysia serves as a unifying force, promoting social cohesion and avoiding political motivations in design - Malaysian Islamic architecture blends traditional Malay and embraces multiculturalism elements with Islamic principles to develop a localized identity - Spiritual values are incorporated in a way that respects Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage, while maintaining Islamic principles - Malaysian architecture integrates flexibility in design to	- Middle Eastern architecture often focuses more on reinforcing Islamic identity in public spaces - Middle Eastern countries rely on strategies suited to arid climates, such as using stone and courtyard structures - Middle Eastern architecture focuses on symbolic structures that emphasize national and religious identity - Middle Eastern designs often emphasize preserving classical Islamic forms like domes and geometric patterns - Middle Eastern architecture tends to focus on more uniform religious symbolism rooted in classical Islamic architecture	

	accommodate diverse social and cultural uses of spaces	• Functional adaptability is more focus on preserving traditional forms and monumental structures
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Rasdi, 2010; Sanusi et al., 2019).

Table 1 Key themes and findings from the study and comparative analysis

Table 1 summarizes the six major themes identified in the study, comparing how Malaysia's Islamic built environment integrates inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural adaptation, while contrasting these aspects with the more uniform, heritage-driven approaches in Middle Eastern countries.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Islamic built environment in Malaysia must be shaped by a localized interpretation of Islamic principles, considering the country's cultural diversity, tropical climate, and societal needs. The findings underscore the importance of integrating Islamic spiritual and ethical values with practical considerations such as sustainability and inclusivity. As Malaysia continues to develop, its Islamic architecture must evolve to reflect both religious values and the multicultural nature of its society. The research offers valuable guidelines for architects, urban planners, and policymakers on integrating Islamic principles into the Malaysian context without compromising cultural inclusivity or environmental sustainability. Future research could focus on exploring the role of technology and innovation in the evolution of Islamic architecture in Malaysia, particularly how advancements in construction techniques and sustainable materials could further enhance the country's built environment. The study also suggests a broader exploration of public perceptions of Islamic architecture and the role of community engagement in shaping inclusive urban spaces.

acknowledgements

This research was conducted as part of a PhD study at the Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design (KAED), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), with support from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), funded by the Ministry of Higher Education (KPT) Malaysia.

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