

# Native Regionalism in Development of Sustainable Resort in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Current growth in the tourism industry especially in the South East Asia region has sparked the emergence of various resort amenities to cater for the tourists' needs. In vying for the influx of tourists, tourism spots and destinations such as Bali, Phuket and Langkawi and other resort locations in the region, strive to offer tourists a more culturally sensitive form of travel accommodation. These infamous tourism and resort destinations has distinctively portrayed the exquisiteness of the traditional regional architecture as its prime development concept and resort identity. This uniqueness interpreted an authentic aesthetical values and strong ethnic cultural influence which is often translated into a concept known as 'authentic regionalism'. The exquisiteness of the traditional Malay architecture, known as Malay vernacular architecture, symbolizes decades of richness of the Malays' cultural heritage, creativities and civilization. Traditional Malay designs interpreted strong aesthetical values and cultural influence, which are relatively patterned from the Malays' creative attitudes together with their sensitivities and intimate relationships with their surroundings. In other words, the industry strive to offer an environment as 'local' as possible without sacrificing creature comforts. This paper will cover element of regionalism, approach, issue and character in the tourism Architecture in Malaysia. It will also presents the analyses primarily in regards of construction materials adapted in the development of resorts in Malaysia as the fundamentals for sustainable development and how successful the adaptation is in representing the Malay vernacular architecture

**Key-Words :** Tourism, Culture, Architecture, Development, Aesthetical, Regionalism, Sustainable Development

## 1. Introduction

Current growth in the tourism industry especially in the South East Asian region has sparked the emergence of various resort amenities to cater for the tourists' needs. In vying for the influx of tourists, tourism spots and destinations such as Bali, Phuket and Langkawi and other resort locations in the region, strive to offer tourists a more culturally sensitive form of travel accommodations. These

infamous tourism and resort destinations have distinctively portrayed the exquisiteness of the traditional regional architecture as its prime development concept and resort identity. This uniqueness interpreted an authentic aesthetical

values and strong ethnic cultural influence which is often translated into a concept known as 'authentic regionalism'. In other words, the industry strives to offer an environment as 'local' as possible and as 'nature friendly' without sacrificing creature comforts. Comprehensively, in Malaysia, the

incorporation of the combined architectural elements into the designs of commercial resorts has successfully realized the integration of the elegant Malay vernacular architecture with the Malay's highly artistic conspicuous image and look, together with practical and efficient designs.

Meanwhile, the term sustainable has created ambivalence and confusion. An examination of the meaning of "sustainable" identifies why this occurs. The popular interpretation of the words "sustainable architecture" describes an approach to architectural design that minimizes sustenance or resource consumption so as to prolong the availability of natural resources [1]. Sustainable architecture describes the fact that we receive what we need from the universe [1]. It explains that depletion of resources is inevitable in maintaining any environment. This realization compels us to respond with care or stewardship in the use of those resources. Sustainable architecture, then, is a response to awareness and not a prescriptive formula for survival. Sustainable design is not just the application of "green" design strategies to a building but an overall holistic approach to how the building impacts the environment before and after construction [2]. In other words, to limit any negative impact and to promote positive overall results to the environment and the image portrayed. Properly executed, a good sustainable building can actually give back to the environment. These ideas are being utilized, introduced and reemphasize in some distinguished resorts in Malaysia

'Regionalism' means something that is native to a place and harmonized beautifully with the climate, topography, landscaping, indigenous building materials, local surroundings, local cultures and local values. In his essay entitled '*The Concept of Regionalism*', Alan Colquhoun stated that :

*The idea of regionalism is dedicated to the essence of place, being in a certain place with a special culture or tradition, being in one place with an understanding of the*

*needs of that place - a special place with unique characteristics. Environment profoundly affects human development because daily life constantly responds to buildings, landscapes and other elements of the non-human universe as much as it does to social experience. Regionalism applies its sensitivity to the aesthetics of the past: an architectural evolution, which is responsive to the historical origin of the community, integrating with their contemporary culture and environment. It*

*enhances the particular context of a region with such features as climate, technology, economics, and life style.*

Whereas 'authentic/native regionalism' is an element in regionalism architecture which focuses on particular authentic values and cultural heritage of a nation. It faithfully represents the true ethnicity and conspicuous image while upholding cultural values and social norms. In Malaysia, the concept of 'authentic regionalism' in resorts' developments is inspired mainly through its adaptation and enrichment of the Malay architectural concepts and designs, known as vernacular design. Traditional vernacular designs is the prime manifestation of authentic regionalism and analytically regionalism designs in tandem with local values are able to contribute towards the search for national identity. Vernacular design in the development of resorts with traditional aspects has been successful in portraying an authentic spirit of regionalism resulting in a harmonious integration between the tourists, local surroundings and local people.

Authentic regionalism approach in Malaysia also illustrated by the ability of certain developments to defer to tropical architecture and to understand the demands of climatical impact. This is a key factor before adapting a distinctive design elements that accord to the tropical and regional needs. Natural resources of building materials and the traditional methodology of construction have demonstrated as a collective genuine interpretation of authentic regionalism.

## 2. Character of Malay Native Regionalism. in Resort Design In Malaysia.

The incorporation of the Malay vernacular architecture as an native elements in the design and development begins with site planning, its connection with the surroundings, façade design, construction methodology and the astute application of indigenous building materials together with locally inspired interior design motifs and decorations. The articulation of this architectural symbiosis has won the commendation and specific acknowledgement in the vernacular architectural field which are relatively patterned from the Malays' creative attitudes together with their sensitivities and intimate relationships with their surroundings. Intellectual management of the traditional art of design together with shrewd adaptation of the design elements have successfully portrayed the Malays' universal civilized values thus establishing the nation's cultural identity which is renowned globally.

However, current demands towards modernism require that regionalism be tampered with modern developments and contemporary designs in line with the emergence of various concepts of resorts designs worldwide. In order to achieve a subtle approach of adaptation, The present and past must be compared for differences and similarities in both in material and spiritual sense. This is why the buildings of the past must be studied and vividly described so as to convey a clear grasp of the essentials. It is not merely a matter of taking their greatness and significance as an architectural criterion but also of realizing that they were bound to a particular non-recurrent historical situation and thus place us under a duty to aspire to our own creative achievements. Geoffrey Bawa, a pioneer in regionalism architecture stated that :

*Regionalist architecture is judged largely in terms of how it manages to integrate remnants*

*of the "traditional" into modern ways of life and modern environments. The revival and reinterpretation of vernacular building traditions and their synthesis with contemporary architectural forms is seen as an effective oppositional strategy, a means of resisting the universalizing tendencies of western modernity and constructing a self-reflective and critically engaged local identity.*

## 3. Principle of Sustainable in Resorts Design in Malaysia.

**Understanding Place** - Sustainable design begins with an intimate understanding of place. If we are sensitive to the nuances of a place, we can inhabit without destroying it. Understanding place helps determine design practices such as solar orientation of a building on the site, topographic factors, climatical impact, preservation of the natural environment such as the adaptation of local construction materials and local vernacular influence.

- **Connecting with Nature** - Whether the design site is a building in the inner city or in a more natural setting like by the beach, on an island or within a secluded tropical landscape or jungle, connecting with nature brings the designed environment back to life. Effective design helps inform us of our place within nature. In Malaysia, construction materials and natural resources such as local hardwood or other natural timber species, rattan, bamboo, thatched, clay or stones, must be primarily introduced.
- **Understanding Natural Processes** - In nature there is no waste. The byproduct of one organism becomes the food for another. In other words, natural systems are made of closed loops. By working with living processes, we respect the needs of all species. Engaging processes that regenerate rather than deplete, we become more alive.

- ***Understanding Environmental Impact*** - Sustainable design attempts to have an understanding of the environmental impact of the design by evaluating the site, the embodied energy and toxicity of the materials, and the energy efficiency of design, materials and construction techniques. Negative environmental impact can be mitigated through use of sustainable harvested building materials and finishes, materials with low toxicity in manufacturing and installation, and recycling building materials while on the job site.
- ***Embracing Co-creative Design Processes*** - Sustainable designers are finding it important to listen to every voice. Collaboration with systems consultants, engineers and other experts happens early in the design process, instead of an afterthought. Designers are also listening to the voices of local communities. The understanding of authentic regionalism factors such as local vernacular traditions and comparing other authentic regional resort development must be studied. The role of tourism authority is utterly important in providing data, comments or opinions gathered from tourists towards improving the development of resorts in term of authentic architectural ideas, quality, comfort, as overall Malaysia's intrinsic image.
- ***Understanding People*** - Sustainable design must take into consideration the wide range of cultures, races, religions and habits of the people who are going to be using and inhabiting the built environment. This requires sensitivity and empathy on the needs of the people and the community.
- ***Minimizing energy consumption and promoting human health*** – These should be the organizing principles of sustainable design. The other elements of design can be organized: energy saving architectural features, energy conserving building envelope, and energy-efficient and health-promoting mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems.

With regards of the principles above, there are distinctive similarities between the sustainable vernacular architecture and 'authentic regionalism' in the construction of coastal resorts in Malaysia. The combination of these concepts also associate in maintaining a delicate balance between the human needs to improve lifestyles and the feeling of well-being on one hand, with preserving the natural resources and ecosystems on which we and our future generations depend upon. These combinations of ideas result in elegant and genuine interpretation of the earlier period of Malay architecture and in achieving deeper understanding of sustainable development. In addition to ingeniously applying traditional elements which are practical, efficient and harmonize beautifully with climatic requirements and surroundings, the designs must also depict clearly the way of life and local creativities of earlier civilization.

#### **4. Native Regionalism In Sustainable Resort Development and Design In Malaysia.**

In Malaysia, the excellence of native regionalism which stems from traditional Malay vernacular designs can be observed in the developments and designs of resorts such as Tanjung Jara and Aryani in Terengganu, The Datai and Langkawi Lagoon in Langkawi, Pangkor Laut in Perak, Impiana Resort and Club Med Cherating in Pahang, and many others. These resorts have successfully embraced the glory of native architecture and elevate the splendor and authenticity of the Malay culture on commercial scale thus attaining the desired aspiration which transcends the language barrier and traditional architectural synthesis from the design angle and the overall concept. Some have incorporated the traditional element by replicating directly while others have engaged in an intellectual interpretations of the design elements resulting in an elegant and authentic manifestation This is the prime effort taken by the resorts' developer in presenting to the tourists unique local intrinsic

values, accurately and exclusively. In addition to winning various international architectural awards, the developments of these resorts have placed Malaysia as a premier tourist destination especially in the South East Asia.

Native regionalism also associates with the idea of primitivism. Primitivism means maintaining a delicate balance between the human needs to improve lifestyles and the feeling of well-being on one hand, with preserving the natural resources and ecosystems on which we and our future generations depend on. It leans towards sustainable developments with holistic approach. The application and integration of primitivism elements encompassed in building designs which complement the surroundings are characteristics of native regionalism. This results in elegant and genuine interpretation of the earlier period of Malay architecture. In addition to ingeniously applying traditional elements which are practical, efficient and harmonize beautifully with climatic requirements, the designs also depict clearly the way of life and the local activities of earlier civilization.

To achieve the desired effect this concept capitalizes back on the use of indigenous building materials such as timbers and other natural resources. This is a major interpretation of regionalism which ensures a mature and complementary effect especially when faced with climatic assault. This approach is in line with the concept of traditional revivalism as pioneered by Hassan Fathi, an architect who preserves the vernacular characteristics, native elements and local regional influence in his designs. He also expressed his ideas by assimilating historical designs with present-day requirements and demands.

Forward planning or the arrangement of building sites is crucial in primitive regionalism. Topography is an important factor which governs the development of a resort which gives an authentic impact such as a location by the river, by the sea, in the water, on an island even in the jungle. A scheme with this approach is normally scattered in village setting to emphasize on the idea of merging with nature and provided a free flow

environment. It also translated the open concept for the purpose efficient ventilation in a tropical surroundings needing and allowing plants to be an essential part of the whole plan. The importance of soft landscaping and natural vegetation in between the buildings is conspicuous. Besides ventilation, the plants serve as gentle reminders of God's gifts and our beginnings.



Photo 1. Tanjung Jara and Pangkor Laut resort featured an authentic regionalism ideas which has portrayed a maturity and complete elegance of Malay vernacular architecture.

## 5. Application of Vernacular Construction Materials as The

## Fundamental For Sustainable in Resorts Design.

In Malaysia, the excellence of traditional Malay vernacular designs can be observed in the developments and designs of resorts such as Tanjung Jara and Aryani in Terengganu, The Datai, Bon Ton and Langkawi Lagoon in Langkawi, Pangkor Laut in Perak, and Club Med Cherating in Pahang, and many others. These resorts have successfully embraced the glory of native architecture and elevate the splendor and authenticity especially in the adaptations of local building materials, thus attaining the desired aspiration which transcends the language barrier and traditional architectural synthesis from the design angle and the overall concept. Some have incorporated the traditional elements by replicating directly while others have engaged in intellectual interpretations of the design elements resulting in an elegant and authentic manifestation

In capitalizing local vernacular materials as sustainable development in resorts, we must look back to the heritage of the development of traditional Malay houses that rely upon nature as the primary source of building materials and are thus very responsive and perceptive towards both the environmental and ecological balances. The resulting design methodology utilizing these indigenous materials is efficient and harmonizes with nature whilst providing effective protection against the elements. While maintaining the authentic of Malay image and culture, various approaches in blending the indigenous building materials are applied to, such as to ensure efficient heat transfer, to maintain effective ventilation and to protect from direct sunshine thus regulating indoor temperature. Thermal comfort within the house is an important factors hence the choice of building materials with low thermal capacity. The materials utilized in Malay architectural designs such as *nipah* or *rumbia* thatched roof, timber, bamboo and products sourced from the rainforests

blend nicely with the traditional village surroundings. All design problems are resolved by the traditional designers by emphasizing upon the adaptation of a shrewd, efficient and practical design. According to Tan Hock Beng, who studies the vernacular designs in South East Asia,:

Materials, in their raw state, stimulate senses. Materials are also testaments to the effects of the elements and the passage of time, and hence evoking a phenomenological awareness. They express their essence as well as their age. The texture of exposed timber, for example is infinitely pleasurable. Timber was hence given an intensely tactile quality, which with time was developed into a sustainable construction process of great subtlety [3].

Coastal resorts in either east coast or west coast of Malaysia are good examples of vernacular and indigenous architecture that have evolved with intellectual responses to the surroundings. Traditional resort designs, primarily based upon the Malay architectural designs, demonstrate the application of the indigenous building materials in-line with the local character for the main structure and finishing. Some of the developments are using wood structures set on post and stilts construction with steep pitched roofs and high ceilings. These designs enabled good ventilation and cooling of the interior spaces. Being up on post allowed for good ventilation beneath the buildings with the added bonus of keeping the living spaces above the flood line. The materials used tend to be lightweight and therefore do not retain heat for long periods of time (low thermal mass). These traditional designs have been reinterpreted in more contemporary designs that utilized passive energy methods/ strategies.

Tanjung Jara Resort was built with highly sophisticated vernacular style with the intellectual adaptation of local timber construction methodology. The building main structural elements are using *cengal* and *merbau* timber which are also applied to the flooring and roofing

structural systems. The choice of light hardwood such as *nyatoh* (*Payena dasyphylla*) and *kapur* (*Dryobalanops oblongifolia*) are primarily used for secondary structural elements such as the rafters, joists window and door frames, walls, doors and window panels and as well as interior decorations and finishes. Whereas the roofing is highly adapted local clay tiles '*singhora*' which is very popular amongst houses in southern Thailand. All the materials depict an intellectual understanding of local materials which are easily adapted and crafted towards emphasizing on a well balanced sustainable development.

Club Med Cherating emphasized on the creative usage and authentic design style of timber elements on the overall building systems enclosure and structural systems. The choice of wood such as *resak* and *kempas* is elegantly developed in accordance with the design concept and creativity of the Malay traditional houses built on stilts. In this resort's construction, beginning with the stilt structure up to the main structure such as the, rafters systems, main beams, ridges and the roof system, meticulous attention were given to the timber elements especially building facade which were exposed to display the unique intrinsic values of local building materials similar to those of old Malay palaces. All natural elements distinguish portrays ultimate Malay vernacular architecture such as the decorations of intricate fretworks along the roof eaves, railings and wall paneling.



Photograph 2. Tanjung Jara, a Malay Vernacular Resort.



Photograph 3. Club Med Cherating, adaptation of Vernacular Design

The adaptation of traditional materials such as timber elements, shows the authenticity of finishing and interior decorations. The usages of these elements in the finishing touch for the resorts are varied from those which are primitive up to those which are on a larger scale and with high commercial values. A resort such as Bon Ton in Langkawi, totally embraces the timber elements in the sense that almost the whole resort utilizes timber whether it is as the main structural envelopes or the finishes of interior setting. The emphasize given was to adapt as close as possible to the ideas of incorporating the authentic building materials of old Malay houses. All the materials used are simply sustainable mainly to express the fact that resources do maintain our environment.

For big scale resorts such as The Datai in Langkawi, which was built as a contemporary and luxurious resort, the modern and traditional elements commingles i.e. cement plastered walls blend with timber structures and integrated in tropical jungle setting. The resort portrays the image of Iban longhouse in Sarawak with the

dominance of thick rainforest. The interior decorations which features local hardwood wood such as *Berlian* (Borneo Ironwood) as main structures really demonstrates an outstanding exposure and utilization of building materials taken from natural resources. The traditional building materials utilizes in these resorts have been treated and handled with the latest know-how resulting in a more durable and strong materials while maintaining the authentic values in line with current design demands. The Datai has achieved an outstanding sustainable design emphasized on thoughtful integration of architecture with the prime concern for the traditional aesthetics of massing, proportion, scale, texture, shadow, and light, the facility design.



Photograph 4. The Interior of Bon Ton Resort



Photograph 5. The Interior of Datai

Timber is also used as decorative elements such as wall panels, partitions, window and door frames, as well as decorative fascia board and tracery as decorations and ventilation components on the

walls. At resorts such as Bon Ton and Aryani, rustic timbers are used to exhibit a more 'primitive' approach. At the same time, modern building materials such as concrete structure, plastered walls and other contemporary design elements are also used in line with the requirements and typology of modern resorts. Resorts such as Pelangi Beach, Pangkor Laut, Impiana dan Laguna Redang have successfully married the traditional and contemporary construction elements. Pangkor Laut for example, integrate the concrete structure and rubble with timber element in the design of the exclusive villas thus maintaining the traditional Malay design and strongly exhibiting the regional influence

Besides timber elements, other indigenous materials such as bamboo and rattan are also integrated into resort designs. These materials are mainly used as interior finishing i.e. ceilings at resorts such as Aryani in Terengganu and Datai at Langkawi. The Datai interior roofing finishes portrays an intelligent adaptation of bamboo as an indigenous element of construction materials and techniques that presents highly intricate and authentic combination of exposed roofing structural frames with post and beam system. At Pangkor Laut resort, the roof finishing utilizes shingles made from hard wood *Berlian* whereas at Kampong Tok Senik and Bon Ton, '*nipah*' thatched roof are used. The dried '*nipah*' leaves are tied together to form a simple, efficient and nature friendly roof albeit primitive. While weaved '*mengkuang*' leaves are used as ceiling decorations at resorts at the West Coast such as Bon Ton and Pangkor Laut, resorts at the East Coast such as Aryani, Marang Safari dan Club Med Cherating, utilize the '*singhora*' tiles, which are sourced from Terengganu and Thailand, as roofs. This emphasized that all the building materials such as mentioned above are clearly of tangible values of sustainable indigenous materials which ultimately response to awareness or to a natural and local resources.





Photograph 6. The utilization of Bamboo as authentic internal finishes



Photograph 7. *Mengkuang* weaving mat for ceiling finishes at Bon Ton Resort Langkawi.

The interior designs and decorations of the resorts mostly adapted timber structure elements to illustrate a strong concept of contemporary tropical. Timber such as *nyatuh* and *kapur* are the primary resources to demonstrate a true regional authenticity and Malay vernacular themes. The development of decorations of these resorts have a strong similarities with the intrinsic ideas of old revival Malay palaces or the elegant lifestyle middle class Malay society. All the presented elements were carefully crafted to emphasize the movement of contemporary Malay and tropical ideas, exclusively designed and at the same time patterned to induce the understanding and enhancement of natural local sustainable materials

and values in sophisticated resort development. Local mastercraftsmen have demonstrated a genuine understanding of craft elements such as carvings on the bargeboards, fretworks at roof eaves, screens, partitions, railings, flooring systems and decorated wall panels as well as interior furnishings. These qualities are highly emphasized on resorts such as The Datai and Pangkor Laut. These resorts have finally simply elevated the splendour of genuine and authentic Malay vernacular architectural identities which are primarily based upon the symbiosis of sustainable natural resources towards the development of the world class resorts.



Photograph 8. The Datai Interior



Photograph 9. Interior of Pangkor Laut Resort..

## Conclusion

On the whole, besides a strong influence on aesthetical cultural values, authentic regionalism concept pays a prime concern on the integration of

a building with its close relationship with surroundings. This is important to avoid 'congestion' in the overall development which coherent with the aspect of traditionalism and primitivism and spiritualism. Utilization of indigenous building materials and the construction of small scale buildings promote the continuation of local heritage and this incites a spirit of ownership. The importance of nature contemplation from religious and eastern cultural point of view dictates that the usage of materials such as stones and timber instead of manmade materials such as concrete and steel can provoke the eternal feeling in relation with thousands of years of primitive origins.

Resort designs in Malaysia which are firmly entrenched with the traditional Malay vernacular architectural values must be fine tuned and emphasized plus its ideas developed so as to cater for the current designs and resort typology. The designers must lay emphasis on presenting the true authentic image in a practical, efficient and intellectual ways in order to maintain the integrity of the excellence of traditional architecture. The results should depict the maturity and completeness of Malay vernacular architecture which can be appreciated by the tourists and renowned globally. This acknowledgement has great impact upon the development and admirable transformation of the Malay architecture within the commercial entities.

In conclusion, authentic regionalism is a design philosophy which can support and influence future designs. But, a word of caution; authenticity is frequently identified with the ideas of artistic autonomy and originality. The issue is not whether the structure conforms exactly to the criteria of the past, it clearly cannot do so and remain relevant to today's concern, instead the issue is whether the designer has learnt the lessons of the past,

internalized them, and used then as input, although partial, in defining the solution to a contemporary problem for contemporary clients.

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