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## REVISIT SHOPHOUSES IN KOTA BHARU: A CULTURAL STUDY

Mazura Omar<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Sufian Hamat<sup>2</sup>, Fadzidah Abdullah<sup>2</sup>, Nor Hafizah Anuar<sup>3</sup>, Yasmin Mohd Faudzi<sup>3</sup>, Norwina Mohd Nawawi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Kampus Bachok Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia  
Email: mazuraomar@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Kulliyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
Email: sufian@iium.edu.my, fadzidah@iium.edu.my, norwina@iium.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Architecture & Ekistics, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Kampus Bachok Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia  
Email: norhafizah@umk.edu.my, yasmin.mf@umk.edu.my

\* Corresponding Author

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### Abstract:

One of the major components of the old town centre of Kota Bharu is the shophouses. The heritage features are diverse from another town centre due to local characteristic influences. This paper aims to revisit the old shophouses in Kota Bharu city centre from the British Colonial up to the present day, in order to examine the cultural heritage along rows of abandon shophouses. The data in this paper were analysed using document analysis and site survey to examine the cultural issues of old shophouses in Kota Bharu. The document inclusive of diverse literature reviews and *Rancangan Tempatan Kota Bharu 2020* and the study of existing physical form at site in a way to understand the area occupied by the historic shophouses that involves research and analysis of the social, historical, climatic, geographic, legal and infrastructure aspects of a location. In particular, it discusses factors toward the declination of cultural value in the city centre. The study concluded that several factors relating to it are abandoned shophouses, lack of activities, rapid modernisation and poor awareness. Moreover, our findings indicated that Cultural values that enveloped the old shophouses in Kota Bharu should not be denied yet having potential to attract tourist and benefit the locals in return. It is important to ensure the sustainability and survival of the area today because Kota Bharu town centre is one of 5 heritage cities (others; Melaka, Georgetown, Ipoh and Taiping) that possessed significant architectural styles and town planning in Malaysia.

**Keywords:**

Shophouses, Cultural Heritage, Factors Of Declination, Façade, Kelantan

**Introduction**

Kota Bharu is one of the earliest districts opened in state of Kelantan in 1904. The old city established in 1844 near the east bank of Kelantan river called Kota Saba. Kota Saba was ruined into the river when the monsoon season hit. Thus, the Sultan during that time Sultan Muhammad II (Long Senik bin Long Tan), moved his palace to another old city named Kota Lama located nearby the Royal Bridge. Nevertheless, Kota Lama also destroyed by the flood, and the Sultan once again changed his government to a higher ground not far from Kota Lama and built a new fort. He named the fort as 'Kota Bharu' (new fort) as it is new and had become the main Royal City of Kelantan until today. Early settlement was started with a palace building called Istana Balai Besar in 1844 and the people during that time were less than 5000 (Nik Mohamed, 1984, A. Ghafar, 1998, Arkib Negara Malaysia). The palace was surrounded by timber fort and constructed by the Malay craftsmen's. Later, houses were built and shops were opened near surrounding area. The British then introduced colonial town planning afterward by constructing more of brick and mortar building. They built two-storey buildings in rows near the Royal Square and other facilities to support their governance. The buildings carry multi-function of shops, houses and offices. The colonial and local architecture blend that established as local heritage treasures today.

**Cultural City**

Malay tradition and Malay culture play important role in Malaysian society, so do the people of Kelantan (Kelantanese) where majority of the population is called Malay, Chinese and Indian. The three communities firmly hold to their cultures and preserve their heritage identity in their daily life. In July 25, 1991, Sultan Ismail Petra declared Kota Bharu as a cultural city due to two main factors: the historical elements and the arts and cultural heritage that lie in the heart of the town and the people (Siti Norlizaiha et al, 2011). Long before, Kelantan was known as the state of 'Serambi Mekah' since Sultan Muhammad IV reign because during his period (1900-1920) (Mahmud, 2015) he invited many Muslim scholars to the state and taught Islam. Then, he opened many Islamic religious schools of thought. Many of the schools are survived and well-known until today. They learn Islam from the scholars before traveling to Makkah to further their studies. Later Kelantan was known for its strong Islamic religious influence and outstanding scholars. It was known that since the Second Sultan Muhammad (1837-1886) and Sultan Mansur (1890-1899), the rulers adopted Islamic rules into the state government.

Apart from recognized religious schools and scholars, the daily traditional market routine, food and local products characterised Kota Bharu as different from other town centre. The trading activities is part of daily life thus many women are involved together with the men. During the old days, women only sell their goods along the corridor of the shophouses with simpler and movable equipments. Later they moved into *Pasar Siti Khadijah* for larger and permanent spaces. Other than trading local goods such as batik (hand drawn textile), jewelleryes and silverware, Kelantan was once popular with cultural activities for example *Mak Yong* (spiritual dance), *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet), *Dikir Barat* (traditional chants) and *Main Puteri* (spiritual dance). Nevertheless, all of these performances are strictly prohibited unless for

tourism or research purposes. This is due to some of the contents promoting against to Islamic law. However, *Dikir Barat* and *Wayang Kulit* are tolerated and performed with exceptional contents.

### Kota Bharu Old Shophouses

Due to its historical background and location, Kelantan received its cultural and architectural influences from the neighbour in the north: Thailand. The town centre is less mentioned in the history of Malaya even though the city was built of historical elements and arts and cultural heritage (Raja Bahrin Shah, 1988, Siti Norliza, 2011). The heritage features are distinguished from another town centre in the east coast of Malaysia because of its regional characteristics. The buildings appear as part of the architecture are different and unique belongs to the region. Malaysia Heritage Trust recognises that Malaysia built heritage is interwoven with the natural and cultural historic environment that give a sense of identity to a place. Related to the study, east coast vernacular architecture has its own local identity. The styles are more distinctive than other architectural style (Ab Aziz, 2012). The setting is not only monuments, or prominent architectural objects but inclusive of major cultural asset. Every small detail has its own meaning and pattern (Nik Ahmad Ariff, 2020, Nik Ahmad Ariff, Eris & Badke-Schaub, 2013, Nik Ahmad Ariff, Eris & Badke-Schaub, 2012, Nik Ahmad Ariff & Badke-Schaub, 2011).

The premises mostly built before 1948 and have gone through physical changes transforming to what is known as old shophouses today. Basic features of the blocks are normally two-storey building with the upper floor meant for residential while the ground floor is for trading. The shophouses also having a unique features that belongs to the place and the commonest is by having a veranda way. The five-foot-way is originated by Sir Stamford Raffles from Singapore (Wan Hashimah, 2005). Other appearances were belongs to the place where the shops located to ensure beautification and preservation of this colonial heritage.



**Figure 1 Shophouses at Jalan Temenggong**

The old shophouses in Kota Bharu city centre stretched along Jalan Temenggong (Figure 1), and between Jalan Dato' Pati towards Bazar Buluh Kubu (Figure 2).



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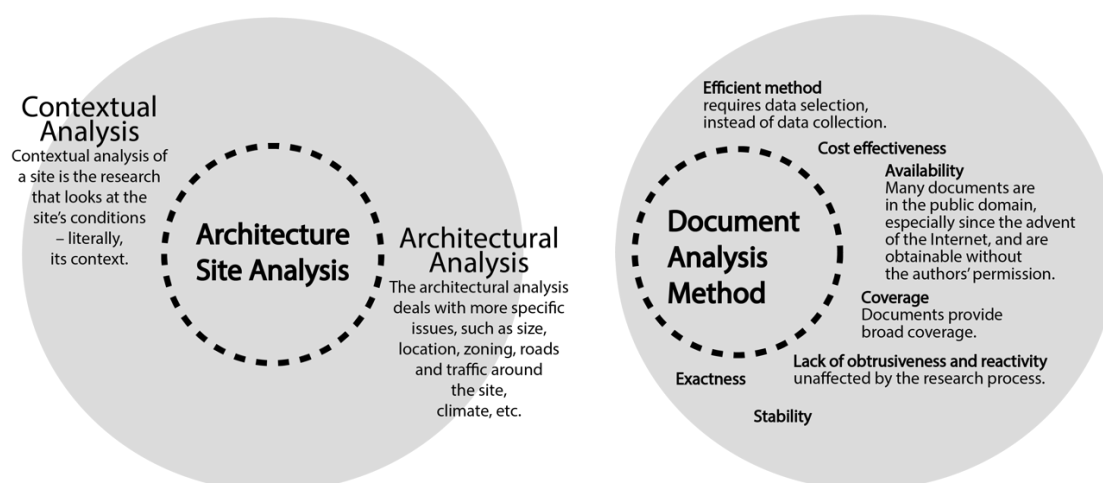
Penang, it reflects the locality in relations to the architectural style and original design (Figure 4) that includes roofs, doors and windows, materials and other decorative elements. The responsive to the climate design of the shophouses is to enhance the sense of place. Thus cultural attributes generated by this physical character of the building affecting psychological and behaviour of the residents and the visitor.

The abandoned old shophouses in Kota Bharu become apparent since year 2005 as reported by Wan Hashimah. New, modern and bigger shops opened throughout the city centre and other quarters attract tenants from the city centre to move in due to economic reason and leave the old town centre abandoned and unoccupied. Vacant shophouses also affected by people moved to suburb area because of high tenancy rate and of course the cost of living creating dark and silent area in the city. Later this area will develop as unsafe or black area if the situation continues.

The remaining old shophouses are the heritage property that stands as the prominent relic of the previous architectural style in Kota Bharu. These heritage properties owned its physical and spiritual strength. Negligence and poor awareness of heritage value (the shophouses) by local folks and new generations shall lead to declination of cultural heritage of the heritage. As agreed by Mohga (2014), in order to implement heritage conservation by considering cultural context and qualified planning and design, local traditional and cultural values of communities for future generations shall be a great challenge for construction and design team to take responsibilities on that issues.

## Methods

This study employed document analysis and site survey (figure 5) to examine the cultural issues of old shophouses in Kota Bharu. The document inclusive of diverse literature reviews and *Rancangan Tempatan Kota Bharu 2020* and the study of existing physical form at site in a way to understand the area occupied by the historic shophouses. Site analysis in architecture is a process that involves research and analysis of the social, historical, climatic, geographic, legal and infrastructure aspects of a location. In this paper, the work is delivered visually, such as site analysis diagrams, which are then used for further discussion related to the selected site.



**Figure 5: Method Of Architecture Site Analysis (Mahdavinejad Et. Al, 2012) And Document Analysis (Bowen, 2009)**

## Results and Discussion

In this section we will discuss the findings related to the factors of declination on cultural appreciation in the Kota Bharu town centre. The discussions are elaborated in the sub-sections that further explain the issues related to the abandoned shophouses, lack of activities at the focus area at the Kota Bharu city centre, effect of modernization and poor awareness.

### *Factors Of Declination Of Cultural Appreciation In The Town Centre*

The lack of awareness of old shophouses in Kota Bharu impeding admiration of cultural values within urban heritage (Nik Farhanah & Embong (2012), Shahrul, et.al. (2013). The visual representation of the old town includes the people, culture and the building structures that give sense of belonging to the place. Thus, public awareness and preservation actions by local authority towards urban heritage are important.

It is common phenomenon that the commercial and industrial pressure damaging parts of cultural fabric of the cities in Malaysia. Many historic shophouses are abandoned and demolished to accommodate for the rapid growth of economic and physical development. However, the concern and effort towards building conservation in Malaysia is increasing. Yet most of the old shophouses in Kota Bharu being abandoned and some were used as bird nest and some were having illegal additional floor. This is permitted due to the ownership of the building and the authority has no right to force the legal action. The observation and information gathered from the local authority resulted in; there are four major factors why Kota Bharu city centre turns to silent city now.

### *Abandoned Shophouses*

The emergence of abandoned and dilapidated old shophouses has generate a deprived urban pattern in heritage zone of Kota Bharu. Major modification and renovation of the shophouse from commercial and residential purposes to totally commercial to allocate the bird's nest have generated unfortunate surrounding. Karya (2007) mentioned that, the changes of functions of the building, has caused many changes were made not only to the layout of the interior space but also to the facades of shophouses. This situation shall cause different kind of ambiance with noise pollution as well as unhygienic environment because of lack of maintenance and safeguarding from the shophouse owners.

### *Lack Of Activities*

The consequences of abandoned shophouses resulted in less community engagement within that area. Moreover, the shophouses were not categorized in the heritage zone made the people to be less aware of the consequences of leaving the shophouses. No initiatives has been made to revitalise those 90 years old shophouses which definitely have more cultural values towards the community as compared to its architectural aesthetics. The heritage zone should be extended to the area of old shophouses whereas many activities such as trading started from Kota Saba to morning bazaar (*pasar pagi*) near *Pasar Siti Khadijah*. The authority should plan ways to enliven the areas during the day and night.

### *Rapid Modernisation*

Urban development of Kota Bharu, as a capital of Kelantan as a new develop township (*Lembah Sireh and Bandar Baru Tunjong*) has given some effects to the urban setting and cultural heritage of the town itself. On the other hand, the originality of historic city and cultural appreciation of Kelantan had slowly been disappeared due to extensive urban architecture

growth as shown in Figure 6. Crucially, the urban heritage sustainability has been neglected by society and future generation. The development of historic preservation as a professional field has, to some extent, created a division between the discipline of preservation and the practice of architecture (Sotoudeh & Wan Abdullah, 2012)



**Figure 6: Major Modification To Modern Architecture Style On Heritage Shop House Facade And Structure Has ‘Kill’ The Heritage Value Of The Building.**

To the extent of modernisation worldwide, the architectural growth in Kelantan is not exempted and the preservation of any unique historical value should be done (Wan Ismail & Shamsuddin, 2005). Hence, the construction of new buildings within historic districts or areas contains a significant number of historic buildings is often a conflict between new development and heritage preservation. As stated by Sotoudeh & Wan Abdullah (2012), the demands of new construction and building programs often make it difficult for new building to fit in a sympathetic manner with the existing urban fabric. The quality of views and vistas of existing heritage buildings have been took for granted by their poor safeguarding and maintenance. Consequently, this phenomenon has create the inappropriate heritage ambiance in the town centre that leads to declination of cultural appreciation among the local society.

### **Poor Awareness**

The young generations today are taking for granted the glorious history of the heritage area as it is an essential element in forming the country from the very beginning. The heritage buildings are being harmed because of destruction of the original owner and demolished the insistence of development and lack of concern for the community in an effort to preserve the heritage building (Hamilton & Zuraini 2002). The statement is agreed by Karya (2007) where shophouse owners and tenants also play an important role in conserving those premises, but they fail to keep and maintain the buildings occupied by either assuming the building has no interest to further restored and maintained. As a result, the authentic cultural of a city is lost.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the studies, we gathered some recommendations that suggested as below:

1. The urge to protect old shophouses premises should be place in heritage zone so that it will not be put into waste, an eyesore and isolated from other development progress. Any event shall integrate to encourage the area to be livelihood and continuously functions as city centre. There are many old developments land in the city centre that no longer economic and attractive, old and ugly that need to be redeveloped.

2. Inter-relation partnership which comprises the shophouse owners, the local authority, the museum, and also the Land and District Office to solve and recommend ways in making strategies upon revitalizations. As mentioned in the *Rancangan Tempatan Kota Bharu 2020*, local authority tries to upgrade the quality of the area through new approach of *Majlis Bandaraya Kota Bharu - (keilmuan, kepatuhan, kebajikan, kebersihan & kesejahteraan)*.
3. Kota Bharu to be known as east coast economic corridor becoming centre for services and trade. Therefore, new economic trend in Kota Bharu as proposed by the authority is having one stop centre mall (all in one) and the city centre will develop as cultural heritage and shopping hub under Tourism Department. The opening of new mall will only accepted with additional function for disable or by reused places for business purposes. The target is to remake the street shopping zone inclusive of gold business, textiles, garments, electrical and electronics, beside *Pasar Siti Khadijah* and *Bazar Buloh Kubu*.
4. Kota Bharu has potential in expanding the value of Islamic excellence centre with many Islamic oriented school, private and colleges, mosque and *madrasah* to the shophouses area. The premise is not restricted for trade activities yet open for Quranic classes, Islamic library and many more. Not only that, the exposure to continue the image of Islamic can be develop for new building facade and the layout. The authority should have a firmed style that can be applied to any building facade and become the image of Kota Bharu.

Although we have provided the current recommendations related to this study, further studies are needed to explain holistically in term of; 1) the strategies to conserve the shophouses, 2) Exploring current situation of the shop houses and 3) Examine the significant value of architectural attribute and historical shophouses at Jalan Temenggong, Kota Bharu, Kelantan.

## Conclusion

Key issues and problem associated with old shophouses preservation and conservation have long been discussed and documented. Cultural values that enveloped the old shophouses in Kota Bharu should not be denied yet having potential to attract tourist and benefit the locals in return. It is important to ensure the sustainability and survival of the area today because Kota Bharu town centre is one of 5 heritage cities (others; Melaka, Georgetown, Ipoh and Taiping) that possessed significant architectural styles and town planning (Lai, et.al. 2013). The centre also remains as administration centres and commercial hubs with multiculturalism and religious districts. The trading and cultural values lied in Kota Bharu becoming unique image and tradition as well as identity thus declared as cultural city in 1991. During the year *Bazar Buluh Kubu* serves as one stop centre for shopping in Kota Bharu along with the street shops at Jalan Temenggong. Therefore, the shop houses were deemed as cultural spaces in historic towns and should be conserved according to the Burra Charter (Icomos 1999). The conservation will help to redevelop the cultural awareness among the residents and the people of Kelantan about the importance of historic areas.



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