

ARCH-VOLUTION

Evolution of Malaysian Architecture



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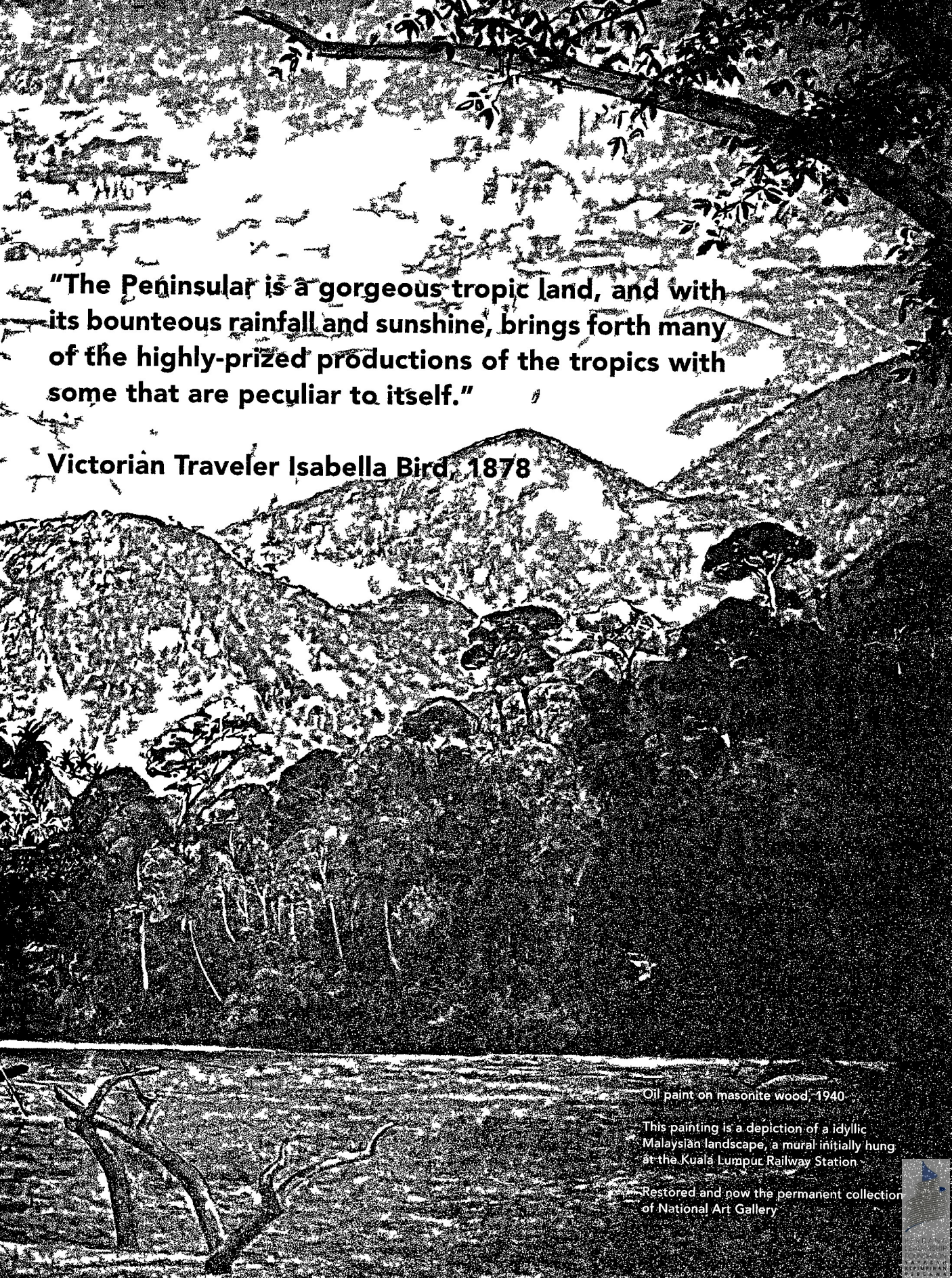
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Architecture
Versus Climate
Change





"The Peninsular is a gorgeous tropic land, and with its bounteous rainfall and sunshine, brings forth many of the highly-prized productions of the tropics with some that are peculiar to itself."

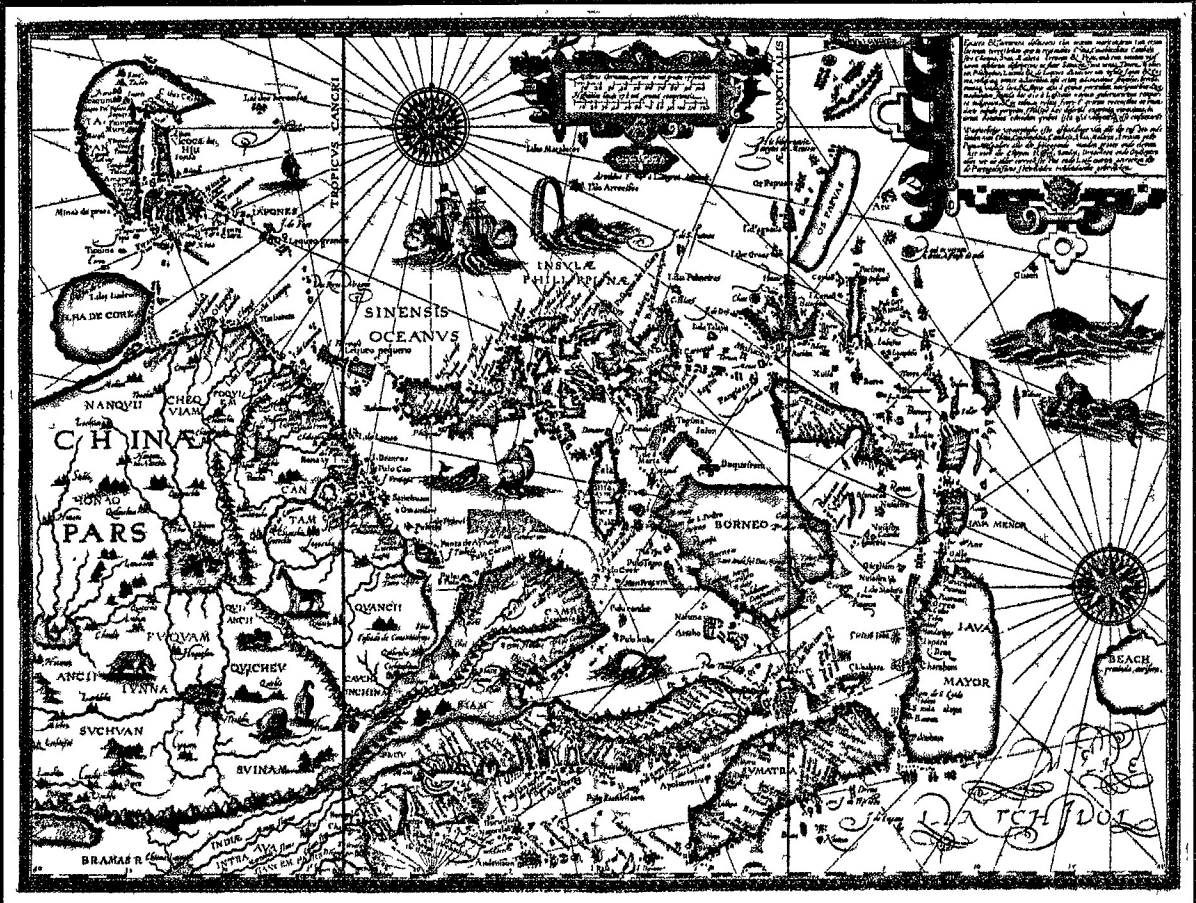
Victorian Traveler Isabella Bird, 1878

Oil paint on masonite wood, 1940

This painting is a depiction of an idyllic Malaysian landscape, a mural initially hung at the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station

Restored and now the permanent collection of National Art Gallery

INTRODUCTION: TIME AND CONTEXT



A European maritime map exaggerating importance of Malaya

Introduction: Architecture of Time and Context

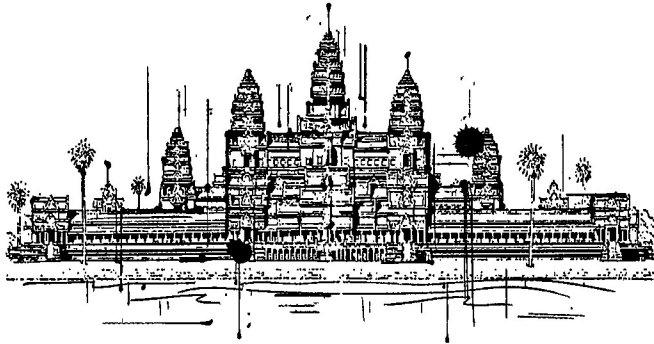
Lim Teng Ngiom

Architecture in the Ancient World

The weight of architectural discourse in Malaysia inevitably range from the peak of the last colonial (British) period to the current time. This is the period of record and the evidence of the constructions still stand and even used today. More than that – our system of governance, administrative, legal and economic system is a continuum of the British colonial period and we could still relate with buildings from that era. The constitution is still referred in the English language, and the interpretation of nuances required a reference to the context when the constitution was drawn.

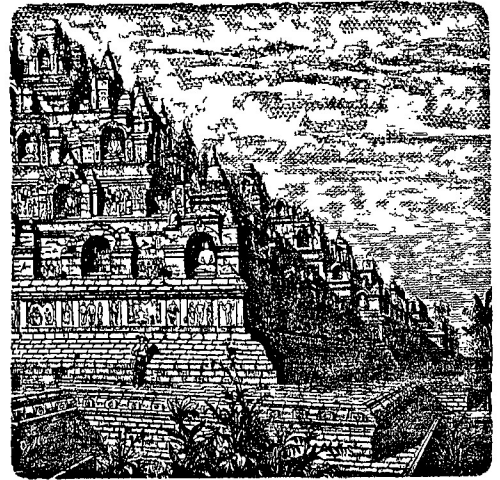
Since records and physical evidence are available to rationally construct a linear history from that era and even place the arguments in context, this form of historical narrative may not be that difficult to construct. That is, just follow the ostensive evidence, and in a logical manner, build up the narrative. However, architecture is much more than just edifices and objects, or even spaces – it is a human construct that includes the social milieu of the time and the cultural environment. Otherwise, architecture is mere interpretation of appearances.

If we were to say that whenever human civilization exists, architecture of some form exists with it, architectural history in Malaysia needs to include the time when civilization in this country first existed. Civilization allude to culture, communication, stability and propensity for cohabitation.



Left:
Angkor Wat, Cambodia
Built in 12th Century AD
Sketch

Right:
Borobudur, Indonesia
Built in 9th Century AD
Wood engraving, 1893



This goes back a long way. It needs to be remembered that peninsula Malaysia, was the mid-way interchange between the two most populated countries in the world, China and India, and before the European scientific revolution in the sixteenth century, these were also among the most advanced civilizations in the world. The Malay Archipelago, lying in between these giant civilizations was itself relatively populated when compared to other parts of the world, with its own hive of active seafaring activities.

In today's minds, we forget, but yet partially remember that Southeast Asia is home to some of the most intricate stone monuments from antiquity. These are relegated as mythological curiosities by the locals as little memory of these past legacies was passed down. Time is an effective eraser of memories with just remnant scholarship on past Southeast Asian civilizations and we are gratefully reliant on scholarships from foreign scholars who had taken a keen interest on our historical past, while the descendants lived in amnesia.

For example, the Angkor Wat temples in Cambodia were rediscovered by the French explorer Henri Mouhot in the 1840s after lying hidden in Cambodian vegetation since the sixteenth century. This, being the largest religious monument in the world was built in the early twelfth century, covering an area of 200 acres, four times that of the Vatican City. This is in the ancient Cambodian city of Wat – based on modern survey was as large as the city of Berlin.

Equally, significant but smaller, is Borobudur in Java, the rediscovery of which was sparked by Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1814, the same person who was to later establish Singapore. Built in the ninth century, the monument preceded Angkor Wat by two centuries, but built in a similar recognisable architectural language that could be traced to Indian influences. As a single edifice, this is considered as the world's largest Buddhist temple. The building is designed as a journey, taking the percipient from the base of the temple on a journey of mental reflection to the top. The journey is the ritual that determined the form and details of the building. This is probably one of the most layered work of architecture found anywhere, made dense by the sculptured narratives carved on the walls. If architecture were to carry meanings and, if form were to follow spiritual tenets, the Borobudur monument personify that.

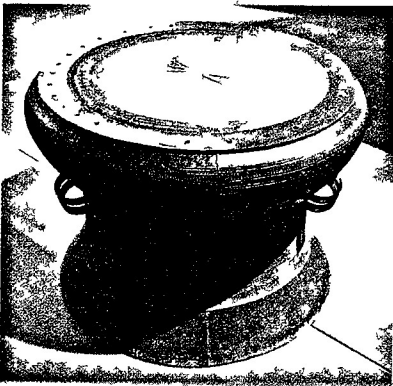
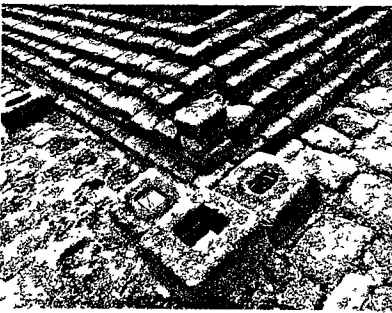


The often referenced Angkor Wat and Borobudur are memorable spectacles of past civilizations in Southeast Asia, but these remnants of advanced stone architecture are found all over the region, built over centuries between the later part of BCE and the twelfth century CE. Indeed, the Prambanan temples of the ninth century built out of stone just a short distance from Borobudur breaks the skyline even more spectacularly than Borobudur and stand more hauntingly against the green, vegetated plains.

It is fortuitous that these stone monuments have been rediscovered to remind us of a lost, forgotten past when clearly, there was order and administration of vast magnitude before the cycle of events took over and caused a decline. The way the architecture was pervasive across the region tells a story of bustling human exchanges across the Southeast Asian region during these early times and also, a population of higher density before the European intervention from the sixteenth century.

Malaysia has its own urban centres during this period, notably, the discoveries at Bujang Valley in Kedah show similar stone edifices at a smaller scale. Located along the ancient coastline in the Straits of Malacca, this ancient urban centre could well be the point of call for seafarers between the monsoon periods before the advent of Malacca a few centuries later. First rediscovered by archaeologists, H.G Quaritch Wales, Dorothy Wales and Alistair Lamb in the 1960s, site excavation is now continued by local archaeologists. The slow

—
Prambanan, Indonesia Built in the
9th Century AD Sketch



Above:
Artifacts from the Bujang Valley

painstaking and careful excavations are revealing more and more edifices that archaeologists are saying date from the end of BCE to the sixth century CE. At least seventeen temples (candi) have been identified. The relatively small edifices and artefacts found in the area suggests a trading port rather than a hugely populated conurbation.

Over the last two decades, university students around Malaysia have taken up research on the Bujang Valley, but there is yet insufficient evidence to build a definitive narrative about the valley. The location of the site faces the the trading route from India, from the Bay of Bengal to the entrance of the Straits of Malacca suggests that this could be the first port of call before continuing the journey through the Straits of Malacca. This was a well established seafaring route between Indian and Middle-eastern traders and China. This is the simple statement that is often made on the importance of the Straits of Malacca and the multi-dimensional cultural influences upon these lands. However, the thread of architectural influences suggests heavy cultural traffic between the nations in Southeast Asia.

Albeit that the stone monuments suggest organised societies, they may not portray the prevalent architectural types in the region as, other than ceremonial types of buildings every other building were of timber construction. These would perish over time leaving no trace of their existence.

Timber had been the ubiquitous construction material for most of Southeast Asia largely due to its availability and ease of construction. Although timber buildings also prevailed in the rest of East Asia, Southeast Asia carried a particular trait. We could say that in ancient times, borders were fluid, however the climate is largely shared among the regions of Southeast Asia, especially along the coasts. Other than the widespread stone buildings from around two millennia, other artefacts were also found across the region.

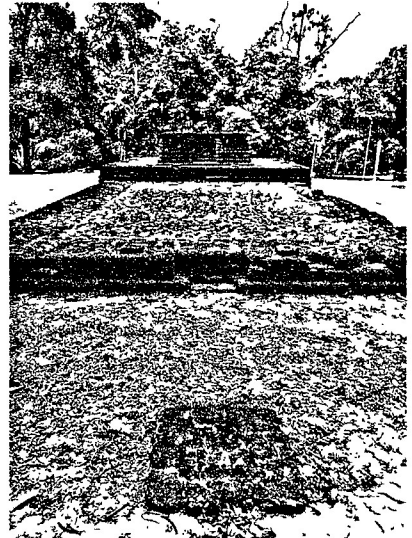
For example, the 'bronze drums' which originated in North Vietnam at around 600-400 BC and continued to be produced up to AD 100, are found all over Southeast Asia, including Malaysia. The images in the bronze drums include depiction of vernacular houses raised on stilts, with people sitting on the floor. People still do this in rural Malaysia and elsewhere in the region. The houses had prominent overhangs to keep the weather out just as we have them today.

Before the sixteenth century, the pervasive language throughout the region was the Austronesian language family, according to linguists originated from Taiwan, spreading as far as Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, off the coast of Africa to the east to the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific Ocean, and as far south as New Zealand. Even today, many common words are recognised between Tagalog and Malay. Historians suggest that the seaborne expansion from Taiwan began at around 1,500 to 1,000 BCE. As cultures diversify over time, the commonality between ethnic physical structures will become less distinguishable. However, the commonalities in vernacular architecture remain strong.

In local conversations, Malaysians often suggests that the unique qualities of the Malay house typify indigenous architecture. However, in the regional context, the steep-roofed houses on stilts is a common trait throughout the region. The style of these houses alludes to a common respond to climate and the external environment, which could be waterborne or are vulnerable to flood. The raised houses are also added security to the threat of animal intrusion.

However, since the style is so common, the widespread architectural language could be the manifestation of collective memory, or in simple terms, a shared culture. The houses on stilts bear resemblance to boats, therefore the vernacular style could speculatively be symbolic. For example, in parts of the Philippines, villages are referred to as 'barangay', derived from 'balangay', a type of sailboat used for trading and colonisation. In eastern Indonesia, some houses are built on platforms that resemble catamarans, and in other parts there are houses with roofs that have appearances of upside down boats. In Malay vernacular houses as in elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the main post of the house is significant. It could originally be symbolic of the mast of a sailboat.

While traditional indigenous Taiwanese architecture are of timber construction raised from the ground on stilts like other Southeast Asian examples, it is notable that a strain of Japanese architecture, all the way up north are likewise timber constructions raised on stilts along with steeply pitched roofs. Other than cultural appropriation, it is hard to justify the form of architecture in Japan based climate and physical environment.



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Top:
Candi remains at the Bujang Valley

Bottom:
A traditional building on stilts in Taiwan



Architectural examples point to us the extent of waterborne interaction during the distant past. Scholars suggest, from Neolithic era, generally known as the stone age, from around 9,000 BC to around 3,000 BC. Hence, we could say that Southeast Asian civilisation is as old as any other. Unlike the the remnants of stone architecture, buildings and artefacts made of timber would all have disappeared except for the most recent ones.

From the sixteenth century, visitations by the empire builders from the West would overhaul the old world. Ultimately, Southeast Asia would be broken into states that would forge their own identities, with borders drawn according to the rulership of different Western empires. For example, the lands and seas from southern Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, New Guinea and the Philippines were nearly singular in its physiography, broadly termed as the Malay Archipelago by the British naturalist, Alfred Wallace in the nineteenth century. Human interaction, usually by sea was borderless until after the Second World War when independent states began to appear, along with strong nationalistic nous, as if the different national characteristics had always been there.

For example, the Malaysia we know today, even patriotic about, is something that is artificially forged after the Second World War. Quickly over time, Malaysia developed its own characteristics, nuances, values and ethos that are different from its neighbours. There is no possibility in today's terms that Malaysia and Indonesia can share the mantle of rulership, one being a federation of autonomous states, each with its own monarch or governor, and the other, a fiercely independent republic. Culture, along with architecture has taken on its own trajectory.

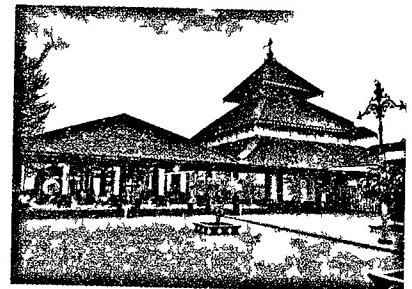
The remnants of stone architecture found throughout the region suggest ubiquitous Indian influences around two millennia ago. The influences still continue with local customs and arts, culinary and dress throughout the region. Even in writing for example, Thailand still uses a modified form of the ancient Sanskrit and their dance performances resemble Southern Indian dance forms. Until the recent decades, the northern states of Peninsula Malaysia exhibited similar cultural heritage. However, in vernacular architecture, except for localised nuances, the similarity in style, form and materials is still evidently shared throughout the region.

Further evidence about Southern Indian influence on Southeast Asia, Songkran festival in Thailand which celebrates Thai New Year falls on the same date as Puthandu, which is the Tamil New Year on the 14 April. The auspicious day is also celebrated in Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Songkran morphed into a water festival due to the hot weather in Thailand during time of the year.

When Islam became dominant during the Malacca Sultanate in the fifteenth century, mosques took on the vernacular style, with pyramidal pitch roofs, which are often multi-tiered. The layered roof style of mosque architecture is evinced by one of the oldest mosques in the region, the Royal Mosque of Demak, near Semarang in Java, which was built around 1480, at the peak of the Malacca sultanate. One of the oldest mosques in Peninsula Malaysia, the Masjid Kampong Laut, originally located at the mouth of Sungai Kelantan but later moved to Kota Bahru bear a close resemblance to the Royal Mosque of Demak, although the Kelantan mosque was built much later¹. The style of architecture, based on the local vernacular was established in the fifteenth century. The style gradually replaced the stone architecture for ceremonial buildings as Islam gradually spread with the influence of the Malacca sultanate. The Buddhist-Hindu style stone architecture were to diminish as Islam spread. Architecture was a cultural expression as it often is today.

During the fifteenth century and early sixteenth centuries, there were cultural contests between the waning Buddhist-Hindu hegemony and the emerging Islamic influences. The busy seafaring channel of the Straits of Malacca and the nearby seas played a significant role for the turn of influences. Although the Muslim traders from India were setting

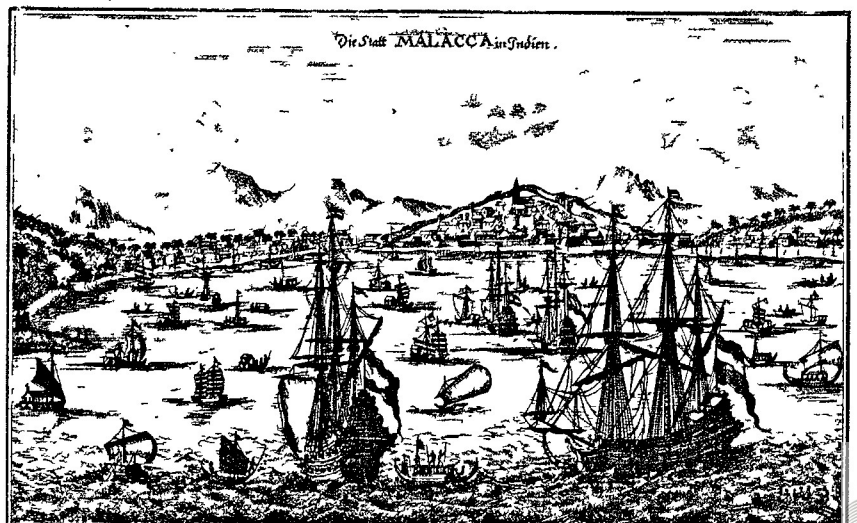
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Royal Mosque of Demak, Java



up places of worship, mainly along the Malaysian peninsula coast including southern Thailand, Muslim traders and voyagers from China were proselytising along the coastal settlements along the peninsula, Sumatra and Java. The northern coastline of Java faces the direct route from China whereas the western coastline of peninsula Malaysia and southern Thailand faces the line of travel from India.

Historical narratives about events along the waterways during the fifteenth century give the impression of hustle and bustle and, cultural exchanges between groups of people. Located near the narrower section of the straits, Malacca was the centre of it all being regarded as the main port of call. It could be envisioned as a miniature version of today's cosmopolitan cities. For example, it was said that one of the legendary knights of the state, Hang Tuah was able to speak twelve languages including Mandarin, Arabic, Javanese, Persian and Japanese. Indeed, historian Michael Vann suggests that at its peak, Malacca was in the same league as Venice, Cairo and Canton².

When Malacca became the new cosmopolitan centre replacing the earlier Buddhist-Hindu empires of Srivijaya and Majapahit, it offered a different proposition for ceremonial architecture. Gone were the monumental stone architecture to be replaced by vernacular style buildings. The palaces of the sultans, the aristocrats and the mosques followed the vernacular style.



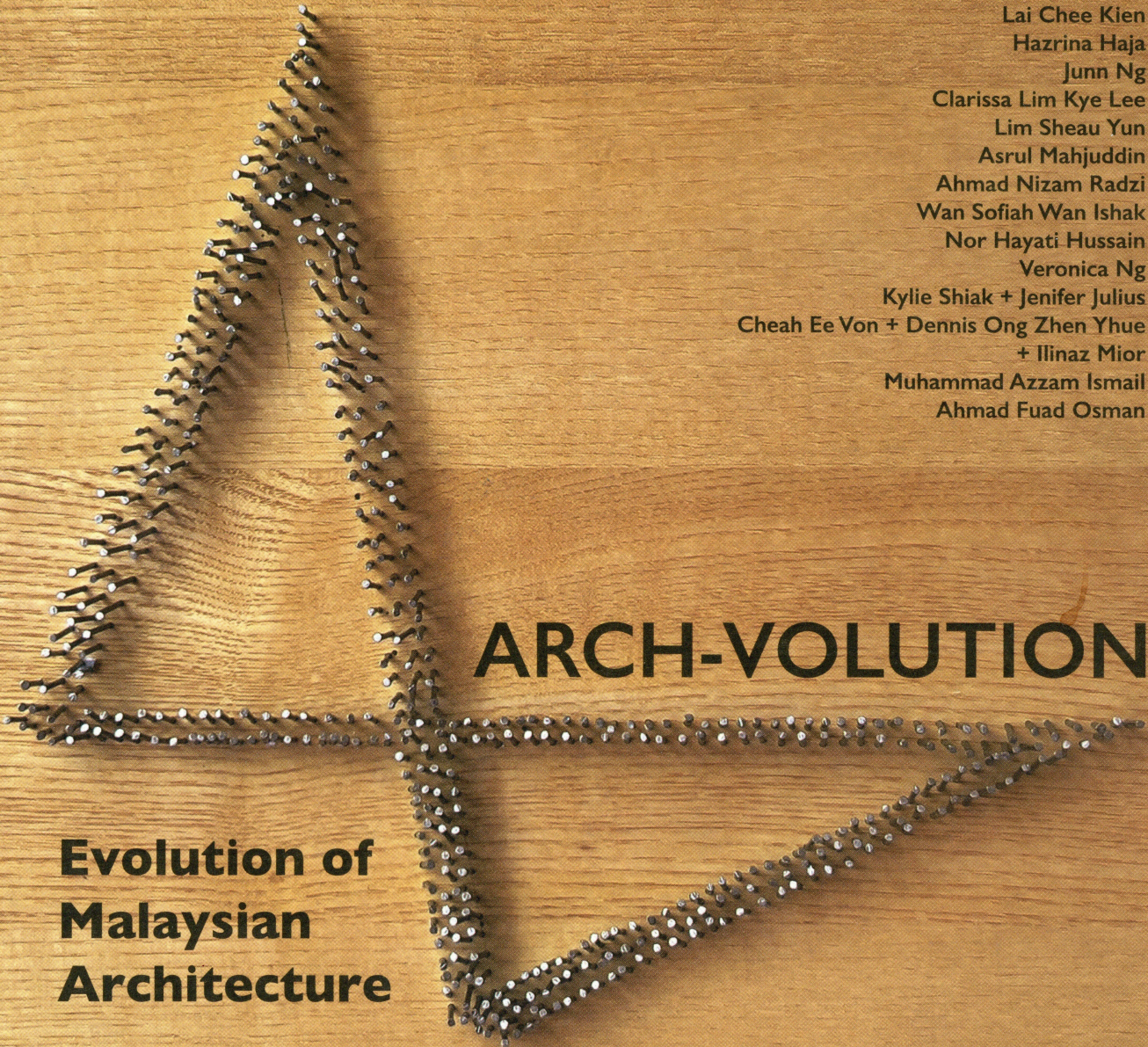
Port of Malacca during Dutch period
(1641 - 1825)



The world offered vast trading opportunities for European maritime fleets.

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