



THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ISLAMIC MALAY CULTURAL MOTIFS IN CONTEMPORARY BUILDINGS

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Abstract: After The National Cultural Congress was held in 1971, it has brought the idea of Islamic principles through the artistic development process. The Muslim artists have begun to shift and focused on the Islamic ideology to reflect their understanding towards the relationship between man, universe and its Creator. This phenomenon has somehow perceived the emergence of several remarkable masterpieces created by major Muslim artists which utilizing various unique methods in showing Islamic identity through their creative processes. Among the motifs which reflect the understanding of the traditional Malay ornaments called as 'Awan larat'. It has mainly used and served as a symbol of Islamic identity in most traditional architecture buildings such as mosque, house and even contemporary building. However, due to the modern globalization nowadays have given a new perception to the Malay society and the influences from the western country have somehow detached from applying this motif. The Islamic Malay Cultural ideology has slowly misplaced and being neglected by the Malay society. Therefore, this study aimed to understand in depth the implementation of this motif in several selected buildings in order to sustain the level of awareness among Malay society regarding the significance of the Malay Cultural Heritage. The objectives of this research were to identify the elements of the Malay ornaments as well as to analyze the function of motifs that applied in a selected contemporary building. The findings of this research showed that the lack of understanding among Malay culture was one of the factors that influenced the lack of applying these motifs on contemporary buildings. It can be said that a lot of information pertaining to the beauty of Islamic Malay cultural motif needs to be revised in order to sustain the understanding of these spirits. Islamic Malay cultural motifs have its own unique character, which allows users to be used in various forms and purposes. It is hoped that this research will make some small contribution toward guiding a Malay society to understand better and appreciate the Islamic art heritage.

Keywords - Islamic Malay cultural motif, Awan larat, Malay ornaments, traditional houses, contemporary buildings, sustainability.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Malay cultural motif is one of the most significant forms to express the beauty of the Islamic ornaments which illustrate the attributes of Allah SWT who is the one and only God in this world and created every single part in this universe. It is one of the ways to demonstrate to the people about the significant beauty of the Islamic world through this form of ornament. Some of the Islamic scholars agreed that these motifs serve as a symbol of beauty, and at the same time, it conveys a good meaning to the viewers. According to Rashidi Othman & Zainal Abidin (2011), these patterns are widely acknowledged and plays an essential role in reflecting the superiority of Allah the Almighty, and it develops as the main factors that contribute to achieving the perfection in illustrating the Islamic identity.

After the coming of Islam to the Malay world, it has influenced all aspects of life in Malay society, including the design motifs. The Islamic principles of design were introduced in the Malay world due to the reason that Islam prevents the designs that are based on the depiction of living things such as man and animals. Therefore, Muslim artists concentrate more on the geometrical pattern and other abstract designs as these motifs were a style that did not against the rule of Islamic teaching (Lois, 1985). From the perspective of the Islamic point of view, the philosophy of Islamic design is to clearly illustrate that Muslim artist focuses more on the intrinsic meaning rather than a physical form. This effort is to ensure the selection of the image must be based on the understanding of expressing the concept of Tawhid through design.

From the time when the National Cultural Congress was implemented in 1971, it has given a significant impact on the creative industry in Malaysia. As a result, it shows how the designers managed to assimilate the concept of Islam from a new perspective with emphasize on Islamic patterns as part of the main element. Malay cultural motif is one of the important elements that usually being used in designing most traditional Malay architecture. It includes a motif that extracts from the natural plant leaf in stylized form. Some of the scholars name it as 'Awan Larat', but in general it has usually known as Malay ornaments.

However, most of the people nowadays have no longer apply these ornaments in developing the buildings due to the lack of understanding about the value of the motif. The development of contemporary design nowadays has got influenced by western modernization. As a result, it has gone its identity and soul through the acceptance of Western ideology which gives the Islamic elements to be slowly abandoned and unappreciated (Utaberta & Sojak 2013).

Therefore, this research aimed to understand in depth the implementation of this motif in several selected buildings in order to sustain the level of awareness among Malay society regarding the significance of the Malay Cultural Heritage. Apart from that, this research also aims to preserve the motif as part of the Malay culture design by using it as a decoration to sustain the awareness of the Malay society in subsequent years. Since the Islamic Malay cultural motif is one of the most important components in reflecting the soul of Islamic and traditional art, it is important to see in-depth the use of these elements applied specifically in selected contemporary buildings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Philosophically, Islam creates certain beliefs in the mind of its believers. As a monotheistic religion, this atypical mindset of the Muslims summarizes all their activities, including arts and craft. Islam believes in the oneness of God (monotheism) through the proclamation of the shahadah, which explains about the ones of Allah who created this universe and has power over all of His creation. Muslims also believe that He is unique and that everything He created represents His greatness. Allah is the only God worthy of praise and worship, and the ultimate purpose of all creation is to submit to Him. The word 'Allah' is simply the Arabic name for God that affirms that He is One Singular God with no partner or equals and cannot be pluralized or limited to a specific gender, which establishes that God is One and He is unique from everything that He creates (Atiya & Irshaad Hussain, 2004).

In the context of visual art, in line with the teaching of Islam, the representation of human and animals are forbidden due to the reason that the representation of the figure has no meaning or functional purposes. Islam also rejects the creation of any form of a religious image as it is against the rule of Islamic law. All those figures and images were not accepted for fear that it would lead to idolatry. Although neither the Al-Quran nor Islamic traditions contain specific orders against figural representation in art, both the Al-Quran and hadith take a firm stance against idolatry and the worship of images (Lois, 1985). Consequently, geometry and repeated patterns are becoming the dominant forms in showing the identity of Islam. These patterns are considered suitable as they give an infinity meaning and reflect the infinite nature of Allah.

This alteration is known as stylized and denaturalized of the natural beauty into ornamental beauty (Ismail al-Faruqi, 1982). Not only that, these patterns are one of the methods that they commonly use to represent nature and objects by their spiritual qualities. According to Othman Yatim (1989), these intricate patterns and decorations sometimes create the impression of infinity, thus delivering a good function to the viewers. It is also a universal language that gives proportion, structure, and form to the cycle of growth in all aspects of life. It is a significant tool for design and subsequently, a way of appreciating spiritual values that govern the order of the cosmos. It is important in the making as it is a way to show appreciation towards The Creator and the greatness of His creation.

Since the coming of Islam to the Malay world, the influence of Hinduism in the lives of the Malay people had diminished. Islam had influenced all aspects of the Malay form of aesthetics. One of the main elements is the Islamic visual art that uses a traditional motif that was produced, directed by the concept of Islamic teachings. As a result, Islamic values began to be embedded in Islamic art. Motifs of living things that had previously been important began to change to plant motifs in stylized forms (Abdul Halim Nasir, 1986). Most of the motifs created in Islamic art are composed in the form of plants leaf in stylized form due to the reason that Islam prohibited designs that are based on the depiction of living things such as man and animals (Lamy, 1985). These motifs serve as decorations, and some of the motifs with the translucent technique have their functions, which is to express the concept of tawhid; thus it can develop a relationship between man and his creator in an abstraction form (Ismail Said & Ahmad Saifudin Abdullah, 2001). However, because of a lack of awareness about the motif among Malaysian society, it is now left unappreciated, and this leads toward the extinction of awan larat.

Apart from that, the formalistic approaches in Islamic art are visually demonstrated through the motifs and patterns which hold an honored place in Islamic artwork. It is considered a tool that developed into an intricate art form and was valued not only because of the religious messages it conveyed but also because of its decorative qualities. It is based on the primary basis concept of Islam which is the idea of Tawhid, which is to believe in the oneness of Allah by the proclamation of La illaha illa Allah, Muhammad dur Rasulallah, "there is no God except Allah, and Prophet Muhammad is His messenger." The essential requirement in Islam is to the belief in the absolute oneness and unity of Allah and to believe that everything in the universe is manifestations of Him, returning to Him and centered on Him (Atiya & Irshaad Hussain, 2004). Therefore, this is why we can see in Islamic art; there are three patterns that often implemented in the artwork, consisting of Islamic calligraphy, arabesque pattern, and geometrical patterns. These patterns are considered suitable as they give meaning to infinity and reflect the infinite nature of Allah. All these patterns are derived from the nature of plant motifs. This alteration is known as stylized and denaturalized natural beauty into ornamental beauty, which creates an abstract image that gives an endless meaning.

Motifs of nature or arabesque were styles that are often used by the Malaysian artist in their creative processes. The motifs and patterns that were being projected in their arts have their function, which is to express the concept of Tawhid. In Islam, The Holy Al-Quran that is aesthetically and socially shaping to the Malay people where it provides a concrete model for artistic content and form. The Malays appreciate beauty as an ethical, spiritual quality that is coherent with al-Ghazali concept of beauty (Braginsky, 1979). The key that connects the Malay art forms and Islam is nature as it provides the ethical, spiritual, ornaments which the concept of "adab" (manner) and "budi" (good deeds) are based. From the physical aspects, it will be manifested through reflections of moral values such as intricacy, refined, harmony, orderly, and functional. Both of manner and good deeds reflect the philosophical study of the Malays' mind and become the essence of Malay identity in the executions of their artworks. Malay ornaments reflect a person's gratitude towards his environment, and it devours spiritual, ethical, and cultural values.

According to Massoudy (1981), one of the patterns in Islamic art called as arabesque design which comes from the inspiration of the plant leaf. It gives a fundamental decorative element of all forms of Islamic art, ranging from architecture to ornamental design, and has been widely used throughout ancient and modern times. Besides that, the geometrical pattern is the expression of the personality of numbers that describes the properties of nature. It is also known as geometric modelling, which is a branch of computational geometry that deals with the construction and representation of free-form curves, surfaces, or volumes. As these concepts of forms, the static aspect of geometry could lead the contemplative mind from the zahir to the batin of a form (Ardalan, N. & Bakhtiar, L. 1973). According to Jones (1995), these patterns demonstrate the fascination of Islamic artists with the visual principles of repetition,

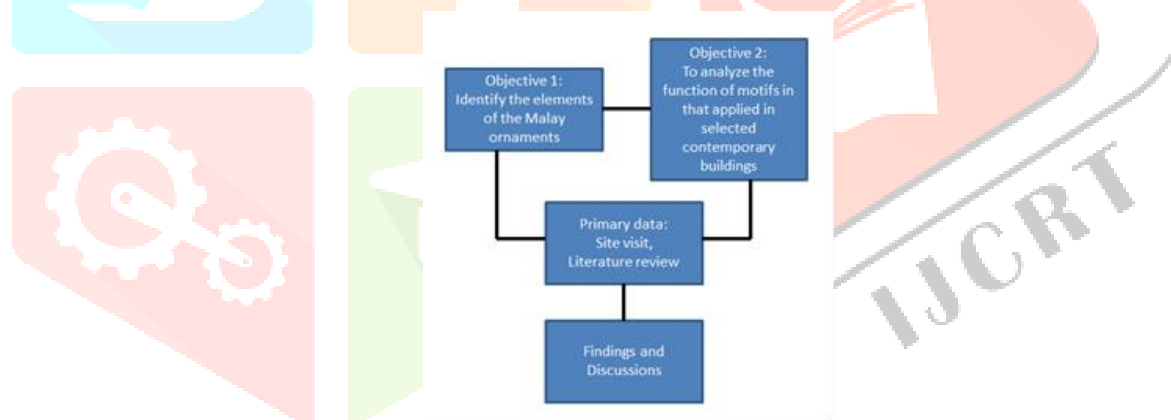
symmetry, and continuous generation of repeated patterns. In the Islamic context, these infinitely extensible designs have been interpreted as visual demonstrations of the singleness of God and His presence everywhere. They represent “unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity.”

All these principles have the same meaning as the awan larat motif where it can be directly translated as ‘stretching clouds’. It is a metaphor for the movement of ornaments, about life and nature as well as a mirror of Islamic philosophy. Syed Ahmad Jamal (1994) stated that “awan larat motif is used in Malay houses to enhance their beauty with controlled patterns, which are kept within bounds. The design of a building stands out clearly. Thus these carvings play their role as contributors to the overall appearance or as supporting elements for the form.” (p. 56) Apart from that, Ismail Said and Zumairah Kamaruddin (2010) supported that the motif and woodcarvings usually signify the identity of the region. It illustrates the beauty of the Malay world through its decorative ornaments.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study only covers on awan larat motif, particularly its significant and its application on selected contemporary buildings. This study is also delimited on the philosophy, function and placement of awan larat motif that commonly found in the traditional Malay house to be adopted into contemporary building design. The study found that awan larat has a unique character which is versatile and can be used in various forms and purposes. However, the motif is commonly used for aesthetic purpose only. Despite the finding, it is still necessary for awan larat to be used in contemporary building design to sustain the cultural value that can be displayed through the motif. Results from this study would aid in the effort to resuscitate the motif as an aesthetic creation that symbolizes Malaysian identity.

In terms of the data collection, this research employed a case study as a methodology in order to answer the objective of this research. According to Creswell (2003), he defined a case study as “researcher explores in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals”. This method is suitable to be used either by referring to a single case or a case bounded by time and place (Creswell, 1998). Creswell also suggests that the structure of a case study should be the problem, the context, the issues, and the lessons learned. The data collection that collected for a case study in general and it comes from several sources including site visit or direct participant observations, interviews, archival records or documents, physical artefacts, and audio-visual materials. This method usually let the researcher spend their time on-site while observing the material that desires for completing the research. Hence, the report would include lessons learned, or patterns found that connect with theories. This research has visited several places in answering the objective of this research which is to examine the sustainability of the Malay cultural motifs on contemporary buildings. The research design used for this study is exploratory research design as it addresses a topic that has a high level of uncertainty and ignorance or when the problem is not very well understood. For instance, this study addresses the subject of awan larat motifs which is not familiar and understood by everyone in general (Wyk, 2012).



3.1 Sample and Procedure

In conducting a case study research, the primary data is collected through the site visit of selected buildings. As a result, only two places were selected as a case study for this research, namely Muzaffar Hotel, which is located in Melaka and Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor. Both of these buildings were selected as it shows the significance of information which could provide better findings at the end of this research. The case study was chosen for this research as it enables the researcher to analyze the data within each situation as well as across the situations. Baxter and Jack (2008) agree that a case study can provide a better understanding of certain phenomenon where the researcher can thoroughly differentiate the nature of some instances in each situation. It ensures the researcher to understand the development of stylistic language that represents in each selected buildings. Consequently, a case study was employed in this research as an approach for conducting a qualitative type of research which is aimed to develop an understanding of the relevancy of the Malay cultural motifs on contemporary buildings. Findings from the data collected were transcribed with visual research analysis of selected buildings to elaborate on the significance of the Malay cultural motif that decorated on the buildings. This effort was taken in order to observe and understand the philosophy, motif, functions and placements if it were suitable to be applied to contemporary buildings.

Besides the primary data, the secondary data is gathered from multiple written sources such as journals, articles and publications. Secondary data were used as a source of additional information to analyze the previous study that was conducted on the same topic. Therefore, this study mainly used written documentary sources such as publications, journals and websites that can be retrieved efficiently from subscribed library databases and online journal publications (Hox & Boeije, 2010).

IV. RESULT

4.1 Visual Analysis: Usage of Awan Larat Motifs in Muzaffar Hotel Melaka.

Researchers had selected two types of contemporary building to study on how the awan larat motifs were used in terms of its placement. The selected of the buildings were Muzaffar Hotel Melaka and Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor. Both of these buildings were selected as it shows the significant usage of Malay cultural motif which known as awan larat as decorations in their buildings. Based on the observation, both of these buildings were employed this Malay cultural motif in a variety of purposes. One of the most dominant functions used by these two buildings were as decorative elements. As these two buildings hold a traditional Malay motif as their main theme; therefore, these decorative elements were used to decorate the entire parts of both of these buildings. Most of the placement of this motif can be seen throughout the buildings such as in the main entrance, the door, the lobby, the wall as well as the privacy room.



Fig. 1. The Malay cultural motif can be seen throughout the entrance of the Muzaffar Hotel Melaka. (Picture taken by Abdul Muhaimin Abd Basir)

Figure 1 shows the Malay cultural motif was used as decorative elements that decorated throughout the entrance and the lobby of Muzaffar Hotel Melaka. The Malay cultural motif which known as awan larat is a form of motifs which has existed in the Malay traditional culture for centuries. It is an ancient form of a motif which can be recognized by its abstraction shape and format. This particular motif was not only used in the Malay Peninsula but can be found throughout the Malay Archipelago as far as Sumatra and Java, mainly served as an important motif in designing batik, songket, and woodcarving. Looking at figure 1 above, the color that usually used for the motif is dark green and brown for the base. The combinations of colors gives an energy look thus reflect its significance beauty of this motif. It also represents the earthy color which symbolizes the beauty of our land.

Based on figure 2 below, it shows another function of this motif was used by Muzaffar Hotel Melaka in their private room. The motif of awan larat was decorated on the floor, which gives a luxury look to the overall design of its private room. The main significant form which could be seen in this motif is the idea of tawhid that depicted in abstraction form. The abstraction design of this motif creates infinity looks through its endless concept. Apart from that, the other important meaning of this awan larat motif was the same concept of interlace. This kind of concept gives the meaning that signifies for the patient and shows the concept of tawhid. Apart from that, the understanding of the abstraction concept is being decorated in the intricates interlacing technique that gives an intellection look to this design. Consequently, the implementation of this motif as the main theme employed by Muzaffar Hotel purely reflects the concept of intellectuality, where the combinations of this motif and contemporary elements were complementing each other. In fact, Malay culture itself has designed and stylized according to the teaching of Islam and includes the intrinsic meaning that related to Islam.



Fig. 2. The usage of awan larat motif being decorated on the floor and serves as a symbol of luxury to the room. (Picture taken by Abdul Muhaimin Abd Basir)

Therefore, the used of floral motifs in Malay culture also symbolizes the concept of growth which suggests the idea of reversion towards the origin. It signifies all lives of the livings will retreat to the Creator Allah SWT when it is time to return; from Allah we came and to Allah we will return.

4.2 Visual Analysis: Usage of Awan Larat Motifs in Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor.

Figure 3 below shows the second building that is chosen as one of the buildings which illustrated the Malay cultural motif. Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor was chosen as it shows the usage of the awan larat motif throughout the building. Unlike the Muzaffar Hotel Melaka, the Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam has decorated the motif using purely handmade carved wood to enhance the significance of its beauty as compared to the usage of the motif that used in Muzaffar hotel. As shown in figure 3 below, the usage of the awan larat motif being carved using a handmade throughout the main entrance door of the building. The owner of the building said that they used the awan larat motif as the main significant form to decorate this building due to the reason that this motif could reflect their building's theme which known as the garden of the Islamic art complex. Apart from that, it could also enhance the beauty of its motif by putting it at the entrance of the building. The awan larat motifs were authentically carved using a handmade, and it has placed at the main entrance of the building, which consequently making it more prominent and has a focal point.



Fig. 3. The usage of the awan larat motifs as an enhancement for the entrance. (Picture taken by Muhamad Hazirul Haiqal bin Baharudin)



Fig. 4. The usage of the awan larat motifs as an enhancement for the main entrance door. (Picture taken by Muhamad Hazirul Haiqal bin Baharudin)

Figure 4 shows the implementation of awan larat motif on the main entrance of the building from the closer look. In Malaysia, we used to call this entrance door as 'pintu gerbang.' This entrance door is one of the significant parts that existed in the most building as it represents the whole appearance that illustrates the beauty of the building. By scrutinizing this motif, it was a design that stylized from the plant motif which to interpret the concept of tawhid. The form of the motif metaphorically reflects the beauty of being a Malay society with full of a good attitude thus represents the beauty of the Malay world. According to Nursuriani and Ismail (2013), the concept of a floral motif since early Malay life has been used to express the physical beauty of good attributes of the Malays. The repetition of the floral motifs creates an infinity movement hence reflect the understanding of the beauty of God's creation.

Besides this entrance door, other places that illustrate this motif is located on the wall of this building. The wooden panels containing awan larat motif were used as a decoration of the wall to symbolize the Malay cultural heritage. Figure 5 below shows a

wooden panel that used as a wall decoration. Besides the concept of tawhid which illustrates throughout this motif, it also illustrates the fineness of human's character of the Malay society. The curvy leaves represent Malay's politeness, and the motif also symbolizes Allah's nature of the creation that has no beginning or end (Hamdzun Haron et al., 2014).



Figure. 5. Wooden panel as wall decoration. (Picture taken by Muhamad Hazirul Haiqal bin Baharudin)

Looking at figure 5 above, the motif of awan larat was used as a wall decoration which carved into several pieces of wooden panels. The placement of this motif somehow could enhance the beauty of the whole building. Awan larat is one of the significant abstraction motifs that project the element of Islamic teaching. It speaks an extraordinary quality through its significance of beauty in the Islamic world by interpreting the elements of structures, arrangement, and also materials. Muslim artists had utilized their knowledge as a servant who performs Islam as their religion to structure this kind of concept in their creation. All the elements that showed through awan larat motif are the most valuable thing which conveys the intellectual attributes of the Malay craftsmen in portraying the motif of the Malay cultural heritage. Moreover, this delicate piece of motif brings a lot of decorative designs which portrayed through the concept of stylization from the motif of nature. All these methods were executed to achieve the objective of the Muslim craftsmen who produce the design that has not to break the law of Islam.

This also because the main strategy implemented by this craftsmen in producing this motif is not allowing the existence of the illusion of three-dimensional space like the real picture of a natural world. Therefore, this motif became the main significant form which illustrates the beauty of the Islamic design. The elements that symbolize the culture of Islam could be seen through each of this motif that constructed in abstraction design.

V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the interviews with the owner of the buildings, the production of awan larat motif takes a lot of time and cost to complete the design. In terms of the price, it depends on how intricates the motif. The more intricates the motif, and the higher price would it be. Apart from that, in terms of the execution, the more intricates of the design will take a lot of time to complete. The reason why this motif is cost very expensive because it has done using a handmade. The more intricate the motif, the higher price and the longer time it would take in order to complete the whole design. This is the reason why there are some of the people who prefer to buy the design in other materials such as printed on the sticker, mass production and many more. With this method, it will save the time of execution as well as it can save up the cost of the motifs as compared to the handmade. In Malaysia, not all of the Malay society understand and appreciate this motif. This is due to the western-influenced, which has caused Malay society to forget the significance of this motif. It is also because some of the Malay society has their own taste in designing their desired houses and buildings design.

Based on the observations that were done at Muzaffar Hotel Melaka and Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor, the motif of the awan larat was used throughout both of these buildings and served as different purposes. In Muzaffar Hotel, the motif was used in decorating the entrance, the room as well as the privacy place, which created a serenity atmosphere for the guest to enjoy their holidays. Apart from that, the motif was also used throughout the main lobby, which serves as an aesthetic purpose. The elements of the motif which decorated throughout the hotel spaces create the sense of Malayness to the whole view of the building and also enhanced the design of the walls in all kinds of locations. Besides that, based on the observations that were done in the Kompleks Taman Kesenian Islam Selangor, this study found that the uniqueness of applying awan larat as a decorative element revealed the attractiveness of the traditional Malay motif. The findings of the observation done in this place have discovered many significant usages of this motif. The awan larat creates visual interest in this building, and it also can be considered as a decorative element which usually provides natural ventilation to the building. These ventilations come in the form of air ventilation as well as lights ventilation, and it is usually located on the upper section of the wall, windows and door panels. Awan larat motif was also carved on the wooden roof eaves that provide weather protection from the rain as well as the sun. The intricate detailing of the carving allows the guest and visitors to have visibility from inside the building without having the needs to go outside in order to appreciate the beauty of the motif.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is found that awan larat motif illustrated unique qualities that made the motifs look harmony and flexible to be used in several forms and purposes. The stylization of the motif allows it to be practically implemented in contemporary building designs. However, due to the lack of understanding among Malay society regarding the usage of this motif, it somehow detaches the public from appreciating it as a form of decoration. Based on this research, the findings showed that the motif of awan larat is still relevant to be applied in contemporary designs either in the form of decoration in the buildings or contemporary houses. Therefore, This study was conducted as an effort to increase the level of awareness among people regarding the significance of this motif and the aesthetic values that embedded behind it. This is because this particular area of research can unite and enhance the dignity of the nation's art as well as will further achieve the value of the Malay cultural heritage, which we can be proud of. It is important to uplift the usage of the awan larat motif, especially in this contemporary period of time in order to sustain the cultural value which incorporated through the motif. Consequently, one of the significant targets of studying and understanding this topic is to be able to sustain and uphold the arts and culture of the Malay world which could be a reference for the new generations to understand more about this motif.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the results and findings of this study, this research suggests and recommends some of the ways which could uplift and enhance the awareness regarding the usage of this motif on contemporary building design. Firstly, the effort must be carried out to generate interest among the craftsmen, artists, academics, art writers, art critics, and art historians to write more on academic writings and researches regarding the significance of this motif. Apart from that, all the public and private institutions such as schools, colleges and universities must play an important role in uplifting this particular topic by continuously organizing the events and seminars pertaining to the significance of it. Looking at the growth of the understanding and appreciating this motif among the society, it seems to be a slowdown in progress especially when the new emerging artists and craftsmen who are influenced from the western ideology comes in. Therefore, it is essential to be highlighted more on this topic in order to sustain it in subsequent years.

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