

# Historical development of administration architecture in Malaysia (15<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century)

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**Abstract.** The main purpose of this paper is to document the development of the state administration building in Malaysia before and after the independence era, in relation to the evolutionary period of Malaysia's political, social and economic history. Multiple case study approach [19] is applied by referring to six prominent case studies to represent state administrative buildings from various phases of Malaysian history beginning from 14<sup>th</sup> century to 21<sup>st</sup> century as exemplar. Since this paper formulates new ways to approach and describes state administrative building design and factors that influence them, it uses interpretivism paradigm and (semiotics) as methodological approach to study the relationship between the building design and contextual elements. This paper, therefore, offers new insights, which not only add to knowledge in this field by widening and strengthening the understanding of state administrative architecture in Malaysia, but also are valuable for range of associated fields including architectural semiotics and non verbal communication. This is because this paper reveals deep understandings of the built form and material environment operating as a sign in a cultural and social context.

## 1. Introduction

Administrative architecture is defined as political symbol which demonstrate the authority of the governing body apart from serving as a building to run the seat of the government [1-4]. The administrative buildings are determined by its function and placement to mediate forms of political power in order to propagate political ideologies to the pluralist society [4]. In this sense, it is often built in large scale to house the government lawmakers and to accommodate the work and activities of administrators despite of their levels. They are also designed in grandeur and monumental appearance in terms of its design style as well as physical appearance involving building spatial layout and built form. Furthermore, administrative building is usually situated at dominant locations like at high places namely on top of a hill, in the middle of open lake or in the city centre or capital that holds a specific activity or industry. Scholars such as [5-7] mentioned that. This phenomenon often occurred in many modern states throughout the world due to the uprising of political regimes, since they greatly relied on symbols in the form of architecture, rituals, ceremonies and displays to project the idea of legitimation [5-7]. By arousing nationalistic emotions of the masses and maneuvering the populace sentiments, they aim to maintain their status and position in society [5,8]. The ruling regime's main political ambition in modern states, and particularly in newly independent countries, is to utilise architecture for the purpose of: i) unifying the masses; and ii) representing achievement and gaining

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acknowledgement [7,5,4]. To explain this matter in depth, the paper will elucidate on the administrative built form style as well as discussing on the probable factors that influence the appearance of state administrative building in Malaysia during the pre and post independence period. This study is important because the present state administrative architecture portrays pastiche architectural style instead of referring to the country's national identity and regional values. This study is essential in two mean ways. First, practicing architects and designers will be able to understand that the present and existing examples of administrative architecture may not necessarily be the best example of administrative architecture to symbolize Malaysia as a multiracial society and a democratic country. Second this paper will provide a challenging perspective particularly for architects and designers to make a concerted effort to study the politics and the cultural context in which the built form is to be placed onsite before proceeding to the design stage. This includes the need to probe into the dynamics of the relationship between built form and its society. This act is important, as it will help to identify any biases brought to any new project by virtue of personal preferences as well as confronting any preferential treatment to the architectural design traditions of the most influential groups in society. Such appropriation will hopefully result in an architectural representation that responds to the traditions of the society and their culture rather than stress the presence of some dominant group.

## **2. Design Characteristics and Historical Development of Administration Building in Malaysia**

### ***2.1 Traditional Era***

During the traditional era, the country's administrative system was under monarchical ruling where Sultan held the highest ruling position in the Malay Kingdom. The Malay sultanate hence controlled the administration of the country from its palace located on higher ground and Islamic religion was used as political tool to unify the Malay populace. The most well known administrative center during this sultanate era is the Malaccan Sultanate's palace, which was built during the era of Sultan Mansur Syah, who ruled from 1458 to 1477. Besides functioning as a center for law making it also served as a place for conducting cultural and religious activities under the guidance of palace religious scholars [9-10].

The palace was built on the basis of power and to show excellence in administrative leadership of the sultan [11]. Located in the central part of Malacca during the golden age of the empire, this palace was constructed using wood from local area and was built to suit the regional climate and blends in with the surrounding context. Within the large palace compound, the spaces are divided to various areas to meet their needs and functions. These areas were separated by boundary walls and intermediate spaces like courtyards and open gardens. The center of the palace was marked by the throne room located at a raised platform in a large area in which the royal families quarters and the royal court were located. Here the sultanate throne room also terminates the long central axis to symbolise the imperial power of the Malay sultan [11].

This palace is a product of human anthropological approach of 'Head-Body-Foot'. From the aspect of 'head' of this palace, it was said to have a roof that resembles a pyramid and has several layers of 'body' and 'foot' as the base of the building. The roof has seven layers of levels and has a tip at each edge. There was a screen (*tebar layar*) and covered pavements (*gajah menyusur*) at the palace. 'Body' creates façade of the building. In this palace, there are three fractions that appear dominating the walls; lining at the top of the window or door, the second is the window or door itself and the last part is the part below the window. The 'foot', which also forms the basis of this building, has itself lifted from the ground level, which also proves it regionalism influences [13,14]. The column and beam system were more articulated and lavishly decorated than a commoner's dwelling. This palace however was ruined in a tragic battle between the princes as it was caught on fire. In brief, the palace reflect the strong influences of the Malay way of life and environment with reference to the local climatic, topography, environment and adaptive towards the Malay socio-culture.

## ***2.2 Colonial Era***

### ***2.2.1 Early Colonial era***

The glorious reign of Malay Sultanate ended when the Portuguese invaded and conquered Malacca in 1511. The seat of administration hence was transferred from sultanate absolute monarch to the Portuguese Army Governor. The entry of Portuguese in Malacca introduced a formal structured of political administration in the country. The Portuguese administrative structure, however, centered on defensive strategy and military ruling since they were continuously threatened by other western rivalry that envied the wealth of Malacca port. To gain maximum protection, the Portuguese built well-equipped forts as center of administration, which are located at strategic places facing the Strait of Malacca. Nevertheless, the Dutch destroyed these prominent forts and neighbouring buildings when they took over Malacca from Portuguese in 1641. This situation left no documented archival records on the building structure and its establishments. Similar like the Portuguese, the Dutch also improved and expanded the Portuguese Fortress as well as built walls to protect the harbour and expanded the city of Malacca. They built structures like administration, commercial, warehouses and private dwellings in the town area, including the Stadhuys or known as the city hall.

To symbolize the reign of Dutch authority and as visible sign of their progress as well as supremacy, the Dutch erect the Stadhuys in monumental scale with Renaissance architectural style. The external façade is covered using whitewash plaster made from limestone to keep the building cool and dry without being porous. The Stadhuys was built vertically and horizontally massive compared to human proportions and other surroundings. This building has a dramatic sculptural effect since it is located at the opposite of the northern gateway into the fortified town, across the river within the vicinity of the St Paul area. The Stadhuys is also strategically placed facing the open Dutch square. The building's interior has three floors and it is 30 metres wide [12]. The Stadhuys façade much employs panelling and projecting surface decoration, with arched window and door-heads ornamented with tracery. It has a very modest outlook with limited decoration on it but nonetheless, it is still very impressive in appearance. The most prominent feature of the building is the roof, which is gabled and parapeted with pediments at the edge of the roof and fitted with red Dutch roof tiles. The building has roof eaves protruding about 1 meter beyond the walls. This overhang feature keeps the second floor windows shaded, a common way of dealing with the harsh climate in this region. Another outstanding feature of Stadhuys is the two grand staircases that lead to a verandah on the first floor.

When the Portuguese and the Dutch took over Malacca, they brought in this influence and applied it on most buildings they erect during those times. This occurs because the early colonial powers deemed to utilize the building for the purpose of symbolizing stature and achievement besides, consolidating their authority over subjugated country and for mass control.

### ***2.2.2 British Era***

The administrative building during the British era reflects western designs and technology in construction with an assimilated outlook. These buildings had unique characteristics that were foreign to the local culture. British administrative had three phases of era. They are; Straits Settlement, the Federated Malay States and the Non Federated Malay States. The British begun to settle in Malaya in year 1786 when the Sultan of Kedah agreed to allow the British East India Company to build a trading post and to operate in Kedah in favour of protecting the Kedah state from external threats. When British developed the Strait Settlements, they built necessary buildings such as administrative building, churches, schools, shops and other institutional buildings. The most dominant administrative building owned by the British Empire during this period is the Penang Municipal Building located in George Town, Penang. This white painted building portrays Neo Baroque architectural style that presents extensive rustication, usually heavier at ground level, often running into and exaggerating the voissours of arched openings. In addition, exaggerated keystones, segmental arched pediments, columns with engaged blocks, attached block-like rustication to window surrounds; as well as colonnades of (sometimes paired) columns in the Ionic and Corinthian order are also visible. The

entrance of the building has a verandah on top of the ground floor arched opening derives from the Edwardian baroque style. The windows are all topped with either arched block of stones or having engaged pediments. Most of the windows on the first floor are in pairs and are multi-paned. The building was strategically placed in a large area in the middle of Penang city facing an open square.

British invasion continued and they conquered the Non Federated Malay States after signing the Pangkor Treaty in 1884. During the early 21st century, they managed to surmount The Federated Malay States. This era witnessed rapid development in the local built environment context. The previous main administrative building located in Penang was transferred to Kuala Lumpur. In the late era of their administrative period, the colonials built huge numbers of monumental structure across the country. This includes the Sultan Abdul Samad building which was the capital of British administrative center from 1896 onwards once Kuala Lumpur was declared as the capital town of Malaya. The building has three copper onion domes that marked the Moghul style of architecture. The built form is monumental in scale, vertical in height or horizontally massive compared to human proportions and other surroundings. The façade comprised of arches of different patterns such as the pointed arch, ogre arch, horseshoe arch, multi-foiled arch and four-centered arch punching through a red-bricked wall. It is richly decorated with floral finials, embellishments and sculptural elements arranged in hierarchical organisation at the roof, body and base section. The façade also has distinct focal point that ideally projects a strong central focus decorated with the center tower equipped with a tower clock and the other two side towers are decorated with arches in a spiral motion, enhancing the overall perceptual stability. This arrangement provides symmetrical axis and order while adding an element of interest to the bland monotonous façade. The placement of the building is strategically placed in an open ground facing a large square intending it to be noticeable and recognized to signify importance.

Nonetheless, the British left significant legacy that still prevails until the present context and this includes architecture, administrative system, lifestyle and culture in the local scene due to their long subjugation that lasted for 170 years.

### ***2.3 Independent Malaysia***

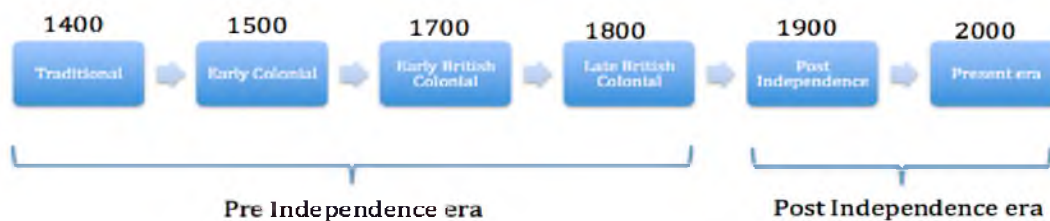
After achieving independence in 1957, the ruling of Malaysia is based on the federal representative democratic constitutional monarchy framework. The federal government has three main branches; the legislative, executive and judiciary. In Malaysian practice, more power is vested in the executive branch of government than in the legislative and judiciary. The early years after independence under the administration of Tunku, Razak and Onn portrayed political agenda that much focuses on nation building and national progress. During these periods, the leaders' main intention, strategies and actions were to unite all races and religion in the country while maintaining the importance of Malay culture and Islam as the main religion.

For that reason, the country's building scene evokes nationalistic sentiments among the masses due to the representation of the national identity image. Such prominent example is the Parliament building designed by Sir Ivor Shipley in 1962. To project the Parliament building as structure that uphold the principles of democracy for both the newly independent state and the populace – its design thus displayed no allusion to any ethnicity or of dominant ethnic group. It exhibits modernistic and progressive expression, which referred to local climatic conditions and regional values as well as the exploitation of contemporary materials and the latest available technology [13]. The Parliament House of Malaysia bears a modernistic expressionist style ready to be translated by the society [14]. The Parliament House has two parts; the main building and the tower building. The main building has a Malaccan traditional Malay roof style that definitely defined the Malay architecture. The tower emphasized more on the adaptation of the building towards the surrounding where there façade is being set back to shade the interior from direct sunlight. The Parliament building blends in with the surrounding context and not arranged in a hierarchical manner with wide scale base or high scale tapered roof [15].

The early era of 20th century Malaysia portrayed different political intentions and strategies unlike previous years. This is because the country's administration under Mahathir, Badawi and Najib much focused on the positioning of the Malay race and the Islamic religion as integral parts of the nation building process besides placing high interest on the aspect of economic and social development. This nation building programs does not only involve the erection of public but also government buildings throughout the nation. One of them is the Malaysia's new administrative capital; Putrajaya. The scale of the Putrajaya project was grandiose and the most prominent building located at the Putrajaya's Government Precinct (Precinct 1) is the Perdana Putra that houses the prime minister's office. Completed in year 1997, the architectural style of this building reflects the Indo Saracenic design approach. Perdana Putra is built on stone cladding walls that goes up to about 50 meters in height and had a mix of architectural language where the pitch roof and the domes are being used to give the strongest character to the building [16]. Nevertheless, the more appealing feature is the large green onion dome and also smaller domes that gives a reflection of Arabic and Islamic character on its surface. The building also has smaller domes surrounding the building. The façade of the building is classically designed with the use of columns and arches and topped with the classical ornamented cornice slightly below the roofline imitating the Roman temples. This is to signify that the government is symbolically as glorious as past eras and to show the advancement of the administrative system as well as its social and economical status of the country. It is clear that historical development fostered different types of administrative buildings and the four main types of administrative architecture in Malaysia each have its own unique characteristics.

### 3.0 Methodology

The paper utilized multiple case study analysis to gain information for the study [17]. The case studies were chosen based on prominent eras as segregated by changing regimes and political climate in Malaysia dating back from the 15<sup>th</sup> century till present era. In order to begin the project, it was necessary to gather information to identify the main administrative building of each prominent era as case studies, which were classified into six main eras. These eras are the Traditional era, Early Colonial era, British Colonial era that is broken into Early British Colonial era and Late British Colonial era and finally the Independent era, which is broken into Post Independent era and Present era.

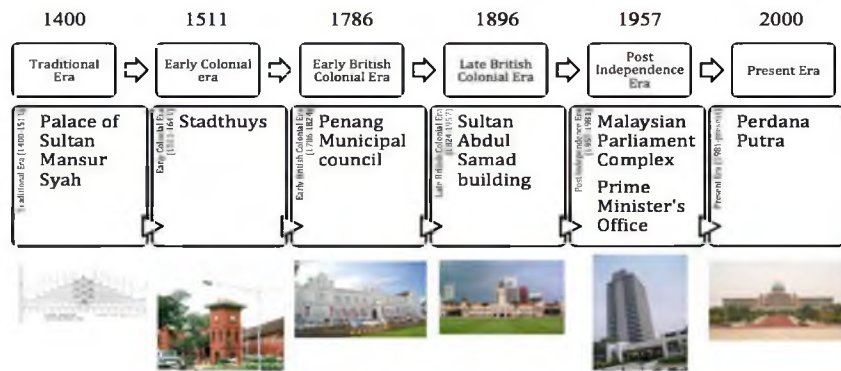


**Figure 3.** Malaysia main segregation of era.

These case studies are then analyzed based on indicators that could determine the architectural style and its influence. For this study, the architectural elements of each case study were observed from the form of the building and its relationship with the era that it was built in. For this reason, semiotics was chosen as the suitable paradigm that could be the tool to analyze the historical properties of an administrative architecture that links to the different identity being portrayed. Since this paper involves the investigation of interpreting on the building design to produce a specific understanding, interpretivism too is seen as an appropriate way for inquiring this study as the aim of the paper is to interpret the meaningful nature and concepts that are embodied in built form. This is vital in order to understand the building that is bound to a specific context and setting. This is because interpretivism accepts that the investigator and the investigated object are interactively dynamically linked [18]. In addition, "interpretivism also allows the researcher to make explicit her theoretical position by

participating in the social world to understand more effectively the emergent properties and features” [19]. As the objective of this paper is to gain information on the architectural elements in detail with ideas on the design features, field visits to the ‘case study’ sites are important in order to understand the phenomenon being studied and to perceive the existing building context first-hand. For this research, the investigations are conducted on two government buildings regarding them as ‘signs’, that can be read in a structured manner in order for it to symbolise various meanings to its receiver based on: i) design motif of the building (known as paradigmatic axes) and ii) elements within the building which include; scale of the government buildings, its setting, access to the building, spatial organisation of the government buildings, facades of the built form and structural arrangement of the form ( known as syntagmatic axes).

#### 4.0 Discussion



**Figure 4.** Historical Development of Administration Architecture in Malaysia since 15<sup>th</sup> Century to 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

From the above laid out information on the administrative architecture in Malaysia, it is clear that there exist continuity from one era to another era. Each era ties itself to the era before it. It is evident that each administrative architecture has unique characteristics and these characteristics are closely tied to the body of authority that holds the administrative system of that time. In a nutshell, the chronological evidence of these administrative architecture can be summarized in figure 4.1.

#### 5.0 Conclusion

From the laid out research on the historical development of administrative architecture since the traditional era to present era, it can be said that the chronological evidence of these buildings could be seen as linking to one another although existed or built in different era with different political climate and environment. For the benefit of this study, it is wise to make a comparison that could show this link. Traditional era started with no outside influence, therefore most of the elements found within its design proximity portray the originality of architectural elements be it on the design of space or its form rooted from the basic of humanistic value. IT also followed the basic needs of the building user. As the era moved on towards the colonial era, more and more foreign influences sipped in and merged into the cultural context of the country. This also affects the design of the administrative architecture that were built in these eras. As the country achieved independence, it can be seen that the administrative architecture evolved and somehow went back to the roots; traditionally influence in terms of space organization and climate adaptation. This was due to the country’s goal in searching for its original identity as well as trying to find the fundamental architectural vocabulary for an important building such as the administrative center. Nonetheless, there are also other factors affecting the design of the building such as religion, political climate, architect’s preference and also the client’s demands. Therefore, by understanding this chronological evidence, we can conclude that the design of

each building in every era each has their own special characteristics that build up the identity of Malaysian administrative architecture since 15<sup>th</sup> century to 21<sup>st</sup> century and together they render a unique composition of architectural styles creating broad variety architectural richness. It is also important to implement this research as a reference for future researchers, designers and politicians to have their objectives voiced out and thoughtful consideration on the importance of describing architecture in its proper context.

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