

# Revealing Malay Royal Town Identity: Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan

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**Abstract.** Malay royal town in Malaysia have been establish dating from the 16th century with a unique and significant identity that creates the image of these towns. Malay Royal town identity constitutes the physical environment, human activities, cultural and meaning that creates social phenomenon and place genius loci. Nevertheless, identity in Malaysia's royal towns were facing alteration which resulted to places are becoming less meaningful, placelessness and lose their identity. A case study was carried out in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan, which is one of the royal towns in Malaysia. Thus, this paper discusses the components that characterised the Malay royal town identity of Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan. The study methodology involves a historical map overlay, site observations and also the use of semi-structured interviews. The paper concludes that the vitality of these components contributed to identity of the Malay Royal towns in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

## 1. Introduction

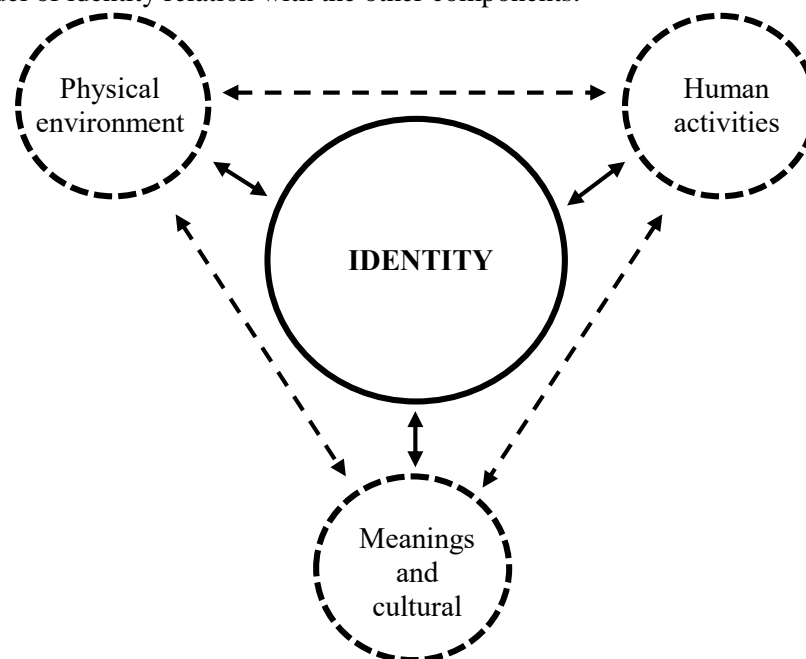
Physical characteristics, human activities, cultural and meaning plays a significance contribution in shaping the image and identity of historic towns in Malaysia. Malay Royal town is one of the historic towns with historical, cultural and identity value that is invaluable and worth preserving. Unfortunately the rapid development and progress has eroded the structure, genius loci and the importance of these towns. The primary aims of this paper is to discover the significance identity components of Malay Royal town that involving the tangible and intangible elements. Therefore, in this research, two (2) objectives have been set, which is the first (1) is to identify the components of identity that shaping the image of the town. The second (2) objectives is to understand the role of the identity components as the urban heritage of the Malay Royal town. The study method that used to archive this objective is involves a historical map overlay, site observations and semi-structured interviews. . The resulting findings on the identity components are categorized according to their physical, activities and cultural significance in the Malay royal town. As the research focuses only on a single case study in Seri Menanti Royal town, an overall picture of the identity of Malay Royal towns in Malaysia cannot be generalized. However, it is anticipated that the findings from this research will prompt greater interest in the preservation of other royal towns for the sake of the country's national heritage.



## 2. Identity of Malay Royal town

According to Zeisel (2006), Stanley (2015), Seamon and Gill (2016) it's hard to define the relationship between people, urban form and settings through the identity [1–3]. This happened because the identity of the place involves the perceptions of person and individuals. Identity also was defined by Wolman (1990) as an important character that have a condition similarity [4]. Therefore after review all definitions and justification that have been made from other scholar and authors, identity can be define as the quality of the similarity characteristics. Lynch (1981) had described identity in specific meaning in the term of sense of place as the simplest description of sense [5]. Lynch (1981), Shamsuddin (1997) and Cho, Trivic et al. (2015) also have describe sense as the accuracy that a specific town can be perceived and be seen to have a connection in a meaningful mental embodiment [5–7]. Therefore, Lynch have described identity as the extent to which a person can recognise or recall a place as being distinct from other places as having a vivid, or unique, or at least a particular character of its own [5]. Lang (1987), Mahmoud (2018) relates the clarifications of identity to the Gestalt laws of visual unity by describing that identity have a bond with the quality of figure ground and is part of the tangible elements in the urban form and setting [8,9].

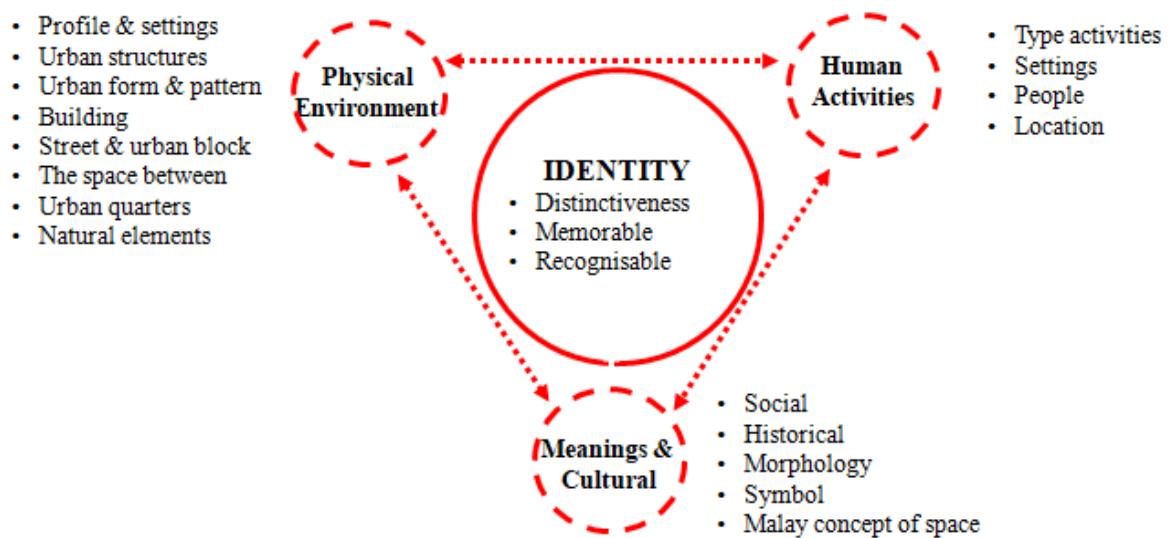
Franciscis (1987), Shamsuddin (1997), Ziyaae (2018) describe that the physical characteristics of the cities form is derive from the relationship between values, history and cultures of the people [6,10,11]. Thus from this review, urban form and settings should reveal their own identity and genius loci for the inhabitants. From the Franciscis's concept, he mentioned that there is a prominent bonding between the cultures and values of people who live in the place towards the physical visual of it. Thus from the review, it clearly defined that physical characteristics is a manifestation of the cultural elements and identity of a place that shown through the meanings. In addition to understand the physical characteristics of the place, the identity concept should include all aspect of meanings. It is importance to understand that meaning is derived from the identity associated with the physical characteristics. The research from the various international scholars clearly shows that the physical characteristics, perception and visual experience qualities can be elicited from the built environment with the purpose to archive the concept of identity. However, the most essential part of identity is to merge the uniqueness of the physical characteristics and capability for people or observer to be clearly recognised. Figure 1 below show the model of identity relation with the other components.



**Figure 1.** Model of identity. (Source: Shamsuddin 1997)

### 2.1. Components of Identity

Following a review on related literature, components of identity can be classified into three major themes which are the physical environment, human activities and meanings and culture [12–16]. The relationship between these components is necessary and informs the identity of the place concept. Relph (1976) mentioned that identity can be distinguished by simple physical patterns or character [17]. These components are derived from the complex elements of the identity of place. Garnham (1985), Shamsuddin (1997) outlined three elements of identity made up of firstly, the physical environment, which is the part of the tangible elements or structure of place including building, landscape and natural environment [6,14]. Secondly is human activities, whereby this part involves the relationship between people and place and this relates to the interaction between people and built environment. The last component is meanings and culture which is a part of intangible elements associated with experience and experiential elements. These are the most complex element of the components of identity.



**Figure 2.** The correlation of physical environment, human activities and meaning and cultural significance in determining the identity of the Malay Royal Town.

### 3. Methodology

In order to discover the identity components of Malay Royal town in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan, site observation, historical map overlay and semi-structured interviews were employed as a method of data collection. Seri Menanti have been selected as a case study because this town have already been gazetted and has a unique character of Malay Royal town that might help in differentiating from others Royal towns in Malaysia. Base on the site observation, all the existing tangible and intangible components will be determine and mapped. Meanwhile the historical map overlay will be used to map the historic tangible components which is included physical layout, urban contexts and settings in order to understand the relationship between the tangible and intangible components within the study area. Finally semi-structured interviews method was also used as secondary data to support the findings in the study area. Respondents were Malaysia Historian and also the Chairman of Malaysian Historical Society, Officer from state Museum, Officer at Department of National Heritage and a few local people with has a knowledge on the history of the particular study area. The data were then qualitatively analysed to determine the results to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the findings. By using this methods, the identity of Malay Royal Town can be identify and use for the future heritage study in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

### 3.1. Study Area

Seri Menanti in Negeri Sembilan was selected as the study area because this town have already been gazated and has a unique character of Malay Royal town that might help in differentiating from others Royal towns in Malaysia. Seri Menanti is located 32km from the state capital, Seremban and 14km from Kuala Pilah town within the Kuala Pilah district. Seri Menanti is located in a valley surrounded by green hills which is Bukit Putus. The people here is an origin farmer and economy of this area is agriculture. Adat pepatih is strongly visible and creates a great influences on the cultures in this area.

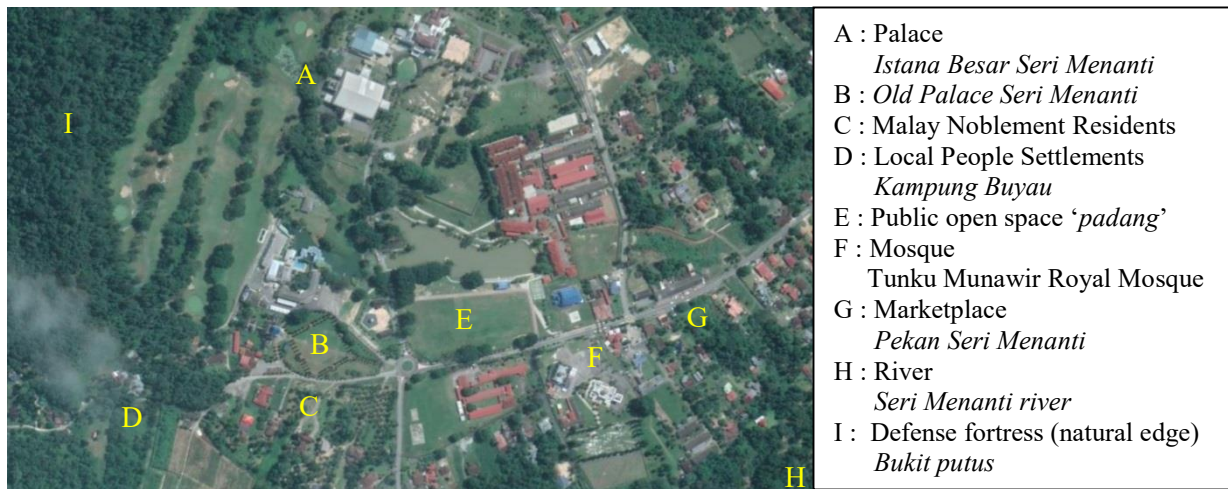
## 4. Finding and Discussion

The results of the analysis indicate that the Malay Royal town identity was defined by three (3) components namely physical environment, human activities, meaning and cultural [18]. The physical environment component consists of eight (8) elements which is profile and setting, urban structure, urban form and pattern, building, street, the space between, urban quarters and natural elements. Meanwhile, human activities consists four (4) elements included type of activities, settings, people and location. Finally, the meaning and cultural significance are represented by four (4) elements which is social, historical, morphology and symbol in the study area. Combination of this components will portraying the image of Malay Royal town with high potential to become part of the urban identity in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

### 4.1. Physical Environment in Seri Menanti

Seri Menanti Royal town urban fabric form is a district with a linear form ; *i.e.* starting with the Seri Menanti old palace and Istana Besar complex and continue with the public space 'padang' until Tunku Munawir royal mosque. It is different to other Malay Royal towns, the urban setting and forms is structured by the natural elements which is Bukit Putus that acts as a natural predominant line breaker and force the development of Seri Menanti Royal town within the valley and surrounded by the hilly terrain. The palace complex was surrounded by the hilly terrain that's act as the natural defence fortress in the past. Like other Malay Royal towns, Seri Menanti was primarily determined by paths that are circulate within the town center. The primary path in this royal town is Seri Menanti road and also known as a royal protocol road which is starting from the panca persada near to Seri Menanti old palace until the Tunku Munawir royal mosque. The uniqueness in Seri Menanti, the protocol road have been categorized into two (2) type which is firstly for the Yang Di-pertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan, starting from the panca persada near to Seri Menanti old palace until the Tunku Munawir royal mosque. Secondly is for 4 ruling chiefs which is Undang Luak Sungai Ujong, Undang Luak Jelebu, Undang Luak Johol and Undang Luak Rembau, starting from their areas until Seri Menanti using the traditional off road. Meanwhile the internal path was located around the Seri Menanti old palace that connected all the village to the town center.

For instance Istana Besar Seri Menanti, Seri Menanti old palace and Tunku Munawir royal mosque is the landmarks that still standing and characterize the image and identity of Seri Menanti town. The old palace Seri Menanti were originally built using timber that can only found around Kuala Pilah district. The craftsmanship of the buildings was further enhanced with the adaptation of natural elements (flora and fauna) into the design of the wood carvings that adorn the buildings. These motifs are believed to represent various beliefs. Seri Menanti old palace complex are located at the center of the town because the location of this important building are followed the Malay cosmology concept that the king is the highest hierarchy level and must be at the center of the settlements. The old mosque is the other traditional building that portrait the Minangkabau architecture style that located east side of the Seri Menanti town. As mentioned by Alias (2015), one of the 'Ketua Luak' in Sri Menanti, most of the people in the town follow Islam as their main religion [19]. Therefore, the old mosques are considered to be among the dominant traditional buildings that might influence the development of the town of Seri Menanti. Figure 3 shows the settings of Malay Royal town elements that form the identity of Seri Menanti town.



**Figure 3.** Settings of Malay Royal Town elements in Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

Another type of elements that influenced the characteristics of the Malay Royal town was the districts [18]. This district have been categorized into three (3) type which is Royal administrative district, settlements district and marketplace district. Istana Besar Seri Menanti and the Seri Menanti old palace have been identified located within the royal administrative district. Meanwhile Kampung Buyau is the local settlements district and the noble settlement area are on the south of the Seri Menanti old palace. Finally the marketplace district are located at the east part of the Seri Menanti town which is at the side of the Seri Menanti main road. The marketplace district in the Malay royal town sets itself as an important place due to it becoming the venue where people carry out commercial activities [18]. Observation reveal that the building architectural and character of this settlements are influence by the Minangkabau architecture style and this have made the image of the Seri Menanti Royal town more vibrant and unique compare to the others Malay Royal towns in Malaysia.



**Figure 4.** Istana Lama Seri Menanti (left) and ceremony at Istana Lama Seri Menanti which was attended by British residents and YamTuan Besar Tuanku Muhammad in the center (right). (Source: Arkib Negara)

The physical setting of public open space which is padang awam Seri Menanti, Seri Menanti old palace and Tunku Munawir royal mosque are discover as a major nodes on Seri Menanti Royal town. All this nodes are connected by the Seri Menanti road. This major nodes and elements of the Seri Menanti Royal town provides the backdrop for the vibrancy and vitality in the main activities occurring therein [20]. The orientation of this nodes are facing to the main road that also act as the protocol road for this Royal town. It is also be observed that the royal mosque is an important building for the local

community. As mentioned by Alias (2015), the majority of townsfolk were Muslims, therefore “...old mosques are considered to be among the dominant traditional buildings...” that might inform the development of Malay Royal towns [19]. The edge for this royal town was identified as the natural edge which is Seri Menanti river and Bukit Putus. This natural edge had made the boundaries and also act as the defence fortress for Seri Menanti royal town back then.



**Figure 5.** Tunku Munawir royal mosque (left), protocol road located in front of Istana Lama Seri Menanti (center) and Seri Menanti river that located on the south of the town (right).

The urban structure in Seri Menanti is dominant by the hill which is Bukit Putus and integrated with the palace complex and royal mosque. This hill and respective natural elements setting play a significant role in establishing imageability through distinctiveness, recognisability and legibility in the Malay Royal townscape [21]. This royal town can be recognised from the settings which is the natural elements such as the hill that appears as a backdrop, furnishing it with a unique identity to the Seri Menanti as a Malay Royal town. This is made possible through studies of Malay Royal towns in Seri Menanti. These royal town are greatly influenced by numerous physical characteristics of the Malay Royal town settings, and the said characteristics have been identified. Samsudin, Rosley et al. (2018) define Malaysian Royal towns as having a king’s palace, traditional Malay settlements and systems of fortification [22]. It is mentioned in the latest iteration whereby Shukri, Wahab et al. (2018) stated that there are eight prominent physical characters in Malay royal towns namely, royal palace complex, fortress, mosque, public open space, marketplace, settlement, gateway, and river and jetty [18]. Finally, all the elements that have been identified under the physical environment form an important role and function in characterize the identity and image of the Malay Royal town in Seri Menanti.

#### 4.2. Human Activities in Seri Menanti

Human activities in Seri Menanti may be observed based on the type of activities and setting in the study area. Daily activities that carry out around the royal town have a strong cultural influence that significance to the royal town [23]. The relation between the local social background and the type of activities made up part of the identity of the Malay Royal towns helping to establish a thematic point of concentration [24]. From the observation and survey, public open space specifically at the open field located opposite the primary school and next to the library was the location for the activities and events in Seri Menanti. Most of this activities conducted during the late evening and also during the weekend. Nearby to the open field, there is a lake which is called Lembah Londah Naga which is located since the opening of Seri Menanti town dating from 18<sup>th</sup> century. During those day, this lake serve as the importants source of the clean water to this town. However over time, the role of the Lembah Londoh Naga lake has evolve into a recreational center for the locals.

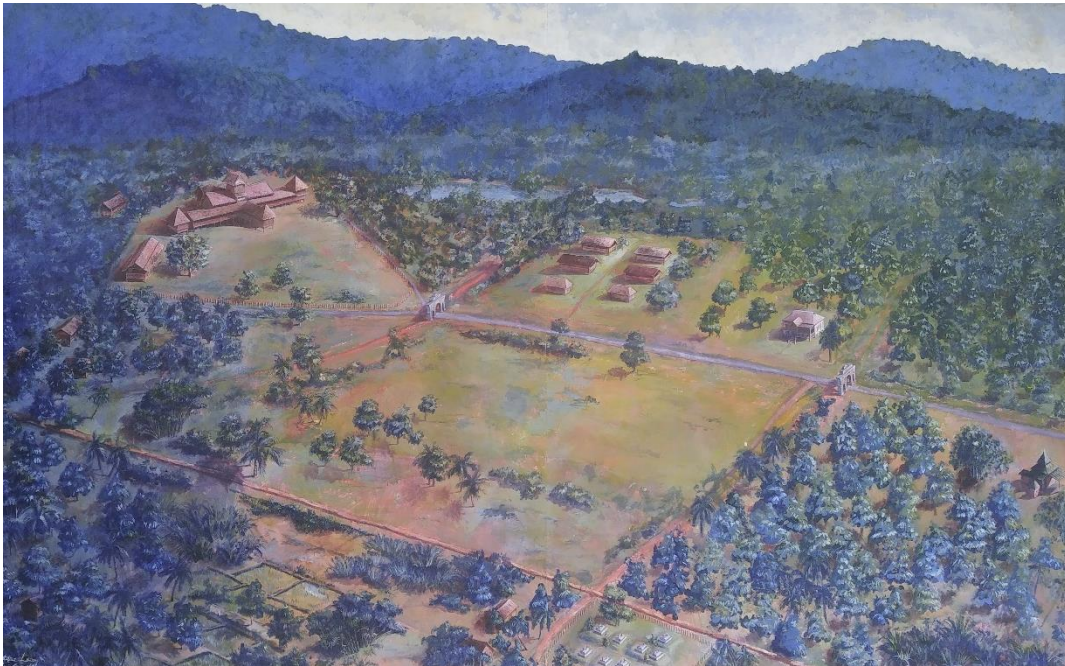


**Figure 6.** A royal ceremony with the people in the public open space Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.

Local people in Seri Menanti royal town stills believe and strongly uphold the Adat Perpatih culture. This culture strongly influence their daily activities as well as their social activities. The women in this areas belief that's they should not spend their whole time in mixing with the society but should concentrate on the household affairs (Azhar 2015). Marketplace and human settlements in kampong Buyau are another significant place for human activities in this royal town. Around the Seri Menanti Royal town, there are 4 place that serve as a lodge for the four Undang as well as a place where the cultural activities of the local community are thriving. 'Rumah telapak YTM Dato Undang Luak Jelebu' is one of the fines example of where the cultural activities among the local people was held around kampong Buyau. Besides that Royal mosque of Tunku Munawir also acts as a place of assembly for the local community for them to conduct any meeting or gathering other than prayers or religion talks (Abd. Kadir, 2015).

#### *4.3. Meaning and Cultural Significance in Seri Menanti*

The settings of Seri Menanti Royal town have great meaning and cultural significant that influence on the establishing of Negeri Sembilan history and morphology. Adat pepatih have shaped the culture and settings that symbolized the Seri Menanti Royal town. The Seri Menanti Royal town expressions scene in saturated with the Minangkabau culture and legacy dating from the 15th century. The inheritance of the Minangkabau legacy can be found in its special architectural style in numerous buildings all through the district. Minangkabau practice a matrilineal systems of guideline and legacy whereby the heritage legacy is past down over the generations on womens side of the family [18]. The privilege given to ladies that makes Minangkabau remarkable and fascinating. The Minangkabau community are split into twelve suku or groups, and marriage between individuals from a similar suku or groups is illegal. The Minangkabau influence in Seri Menanti Royal town also can be found in cultural dance and other community routine activities.



**Figure 7.** The old illustrate image that shown the settings of Seri Menanti Royal town dating from 1920. (Source: Archive Seri Menanti Royal Museum)

Intangible meaning elements is a demonstrated of the presence of the cultural and it symbolise of the local identity together attached with the sense of belonging and attachment. Intangible meaning elements is indispensable and without the acknowledgment of the tangible elements, it is difficult for individuals to memorize the culture. Meaning and cultural components is the mix of communities and historical elements with the environments. Sometime the identity of the historic towns relies on tangible features and more often than not it depend on intangible features. However the preservation of both tangible and intangible features guarantee that human root can generally be supported and ensured. Minangkabau is known for adat pepatih, interesting language, rooftop design and its culture. Minangkabau is nothing without the portrayal of these components and the local communities may effortlessly overlook their identity and most significantly their way of life and legacy.



**Figure 8.** Undang Luak Rembau handed the dagger to Tok Menti, Buapak Tribe Biduanda Sedia Raja Kampung Bukit, at the ceremony of Menyalang Datuk- Datuk Lembaga dan Buapak Suku Biduanda Waris Nan Dua Carak Luak Rembau at Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan.



## 5. Conclusion

The identity of Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan as a Malay Royal town needs to be preserved and conserve for its valuable character and historical significance to the nation. The township integration of traditional settings such as building, monuments and structures with the cultural activities had produced the diversity of its unique architectural features, urban settings and cultural significance. It is an important piece of the urban conservation framework of Malay Royal towns in Seri Menanti as well as all Malay Royal towns in Malaysia. The outcome on the physical environment, human activities, meaning and cultural have shown the strong and clear character of Malay Royal town identity of Seri Menanti, Negeri Sembilan. There are townscape character that define and established the urban structure and setting integrated with the unique cultural and architectural significance that's that are unique and deserved of preservation.

## Acknowledgement

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