



DEVELOPING A DEFINITION FOR  
ISLAMIC BUILT ENVIRONMENT IN MALAYSIA  
BY SIEVING THROUGH THE INTERPRETATION  
OF PUBLIC OPINION SHAPERS

BY

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Built Environment

Kulliyyah of Architecture & Environmental Design  
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MARCH 2015

## ABSTRACT

As Islam is the nation's official religion, the government of Malaysia strives to adopt Islamic image in Malaysia's built environment. Yet, given Malaysia's heterogeneous society, are Islamic concepts been implemented correctly and appropriately in the construction of Malaysia's built environment? Therefore, the aim of this study is to develop the definition of Islamic built environment in Malaysia by sieving through the interpretation of Malaysian public opinion shapers referred as 'experts' in this study. The 'experts' are defined as those who are relevant as a Malaysian opinion shapers or related in the design process including (1) public and political figures or administrators, (2) professionals, (3) academicians and (4) Islamic scholars, from the variety of races and religion in Malaysian heterogeneous society. This study has employed descriptive and survey-based research designs rooted in qualitative research paradigms with two research techniques (1) Delphi Method and (2) Media Content analysis. The first research method used structured and semi-structured interviews for primary data collection. The second method used the Media Content analysis as supporting data collection. This study fulfilled the aims and objectives of the research by obtain firstly, a definition of 'Islamic built environment' that is in accords to the situation in Malaysia. The study has defined an appropriated 'Islamic built environment' in Malaysia is a correlation between the (3) three elements with the six (6) main themes and ten (10) indicators. The first elements are; a situation or setting that encompasses the combination of created elements (spaces, places and structures), secondly, the implementation of Islamic ideology to serve human needs and values and third, the concept considers the suitability of people's lifestyle (both Muslim and non-Muslim) by symbolizing spiritually and physically the essence of Islam. The six main theme are; T1- Associated with Local context, T2- Avoid Political Agenda, T3- Created by Spiritual and Values of Islam, T4- Translation of 'Tauhid, Jannah and Jamaah', T5- Not for Branding and T6- Escape from Identity Conflict. The second finding is a framework of indicator of factors that make an environment truly Islamic. The ten indicators are; Tolerance, Natural Environment, Social Need and Human Comfort, Religious Identity, Order, Economic, Hygiene, Jannah, and Safety. The third finding is the level of satisfaction with comment on problems and shortcomings of the implementation of the existing 'Islamic built environment' happening in Malaysia. Fourth, recommendations for improving efforts towards implementation of existing 'Islamic built environment' and finally the fifth a comparative study between the opinion of the 'experts'. The findings of this study hopefully will be beneficial to Malaysian administrators, developers and designers because it's provided a fair and representative definition of Islamic Built Environment in Malaysia as derived from selected Malaysian opinion shapers. It is congruent with the nature of Malaysian heterogeneous society and with Malaysian current agenda of 1 Malaysia and the concept of Islamic moderation.

## خلاصة البحث

نظرا لكون الإسلام هو الدين الرسمي للدولة، فالحكومة الماليزية تسعى لانتهاج المفهوم الإسلامي في البيئة المبنية في ماليزيا. إلا أن في المجتمع الماليزي المتباين، هل يُطبق المفهوم الإسلامي في على نحو صحيح وملائم في بناء البيئة المبنية في ماليزيا؟ لذلك، يهدف هذا البحث إلى تطوير التعريفات حول البيئة المبنية الإسلامية في ماليزيا عن طريقة تدقيق النظر في تفسيرات مخططي الرأي العام المشار إليه فيما يلي بالخبراء في هذا البحث. هؤلاء الخبراء هم الذين يخططون الرأي العام وما شابه ذلك ممن له العلاقة الوطيدة في عمليات التصميم من (1) أعلام الشخصيات والسياسيين أو الإداريين (2) المحترفين (3) الأكاديميين (4) العلماء بصرف النظر عن الأعراق والأديان في المجتمع الماليزي المتباين. فهذا البحث يعتمد على المنهج الوصفي ودراسة الاستقصاء مع كونها البحث الكيفي بأسلوبين: (1) أسلوب ديلفي (Delphi) و(2) تحليل محتويات وسائل الإعلام. الأسلوب الأول بطريقة المقابلة المصممة وشبه المصممة لتجميع البيانات الأولية. أما الأسلوب الثاني بطريقة تحليل محتويات وسائل الإعلام تدعيما لجمع البيانات. وهذه الدراسة تحقق هدف وغرض البحث أولا، (1) التعريف الصحيح للبيئة المبنية الإسلامية وفقا لوضع ماليزيا. يعرّف البحث البيئة المبنية الإسلامية المناسبة في ماليزيا بأنها العلاقة المتبادلة بين (3) ثلاثة عناصر و (6) محاور رئيسية و (10) مؤشرات. العنصر الأول هو الوضع والإطار المحيط باندماج العناصر المكونة من (المسافة، المكان والبناء). والعنصر الثاني، تطبيق المبدأ الإسلامي لخدمة إحتياجات الناس والقيم. والعنصر الثالث، أخذ المفهوم بعين الاعتبار لملاءمة نمط حياة الشعب (بين المسلمين وغيرهم) تعبيرا برموز روح الإسلام نفسانيا وجسديا. أما المحاور الست هي T1 المحسوب على السياق المحلي وT2 تجنب الأجندة السياسية، وT3 تنفيذ القيم الإسلامية، وT4 ترجمة التوحيد والجنة والجماعة، وT5 ليس من أجل العلامة التجارية، وT6 الابتعاد عن النزاعات الشخصية. ونتيجة البحث الثانية هي إطار مؤشر العوامل المؤدية إلى كون بيئة ما بئية إسلامية. والمؤشرات العشرة هي التسامح، البيئة الطبيعية، الإحتياجات الإجتماعية،

رفاهية البشر، الهوية الدينية، النظام، الاقتصاد، النظافة، الجنة والسلامة. ونتيجة البحث الثالثة هي مستوى الإرضاء مع التعليقات على المشكلات ونقصان في تنفيذ البيئة المبنية الإسلامية الواقعة في ماليزيا حاليا. رابعا، توصيات لتعزيز تطبيقات البيئة المبنية الإسلامية الحالية وخامسا الدراسة المقارنة في آراء الخبراء. رجاء أن تكون نتائج البحث عوناً للمديرين والعمارين والمصممين لأنها تقدم التعريف المناسب والنموذجي للبيئة المبنية الإسلامية في ماليزيا كما أنه مستنبط من مصممي الرأي العام الماليزيين المختارين. وهي منسجمة مع طبيعة المجتمع الماليزي المتباين ومتماشية مع الأجندة الحالية لماليزيا ألا وهي ماليزيا الموحدة (1Malaysia) والمفهوم الوسطية الإسلامية.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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*With love and respect*

*Allahyarham Hj. Mohd Isa bin Hashim*

*Hajjah Aminah binti Abu*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Alhamdulillah...* From the bottom of my heart, I'm conveying my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Emeritus LAr. Dr. Ismawi Hj. Zen, whose motivation, counsel and intellectual guidance was a major contribution to my study regardless maintaining his tight schedule. I'm also indebted to Associate Prof. Dr. Spahic Omer whose advice has helped me during the early stage of my study and it was valuable in many respects.

I would like to express my utmost gratefulness to my other half Mohd Nor Azmin for his immeasurable support, love, endurance and constant encouragement who has assisted me to overcome any obstacles and challenging moments while finishing this study. To my beloved lovely daughter, Kasih Nasuha, and my beloved charming son, Muhammad Khalaf Nidaal who was born during this study, both of them are the most valuable and at all times been the sources of my inspiration, delight and bliss.

My biggest appreciation for the sincere prayers and devoted support from my mother, Aminah binti Abu, my mother in-law, Asnah bt. Sulaiman and my father in-law, Abdul Aziz bin Sidik. Not forgetting, a special dedication to my beloved late father, Mohd Isa bin Hashim who suffered the prolong illness and breathe his last breath during the period of my study. To my sisters, brothers and in-laws, for their unremitting assistance they offered me during my hours of need.

Last but not least, to my colleagues in Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment, UTM, especially to the Head of Department, Associate Prof. Dr. Hassanuddin Lamit, and all my friends for their great support in my academic and social life.

*Jazakumullah khairan kathira!*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATION

IBE	Islamic built environment
MCA	Media Content Analysis

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter presents the overall structure of the study that begins with a background of study to explain the subject matter followed by a review of the issues, research gap, problems statement, research questions, aims and objectives, research significance, scope of study as well as the methodology adopted. The methodology, sampling design and the information on the study are discussed in further detail in chapter three.

### **1.2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

The general interpretation of the term 'Islamic' will typically lead to reflection and image synonymous to Islamic like paraphernalia such like calligraphy of holy words or verses of Quran, construction of domes and arches similar to that of a mosque and a wonderful ambience or sense of holiness. An irrefutable fact is also that this Islamic image will often highlight public concern and perception of the Arab world which is also referred to as the Arabo-Islamist, by Darwis Khudori (1990: 60), an ideology of perception that is based on the following three reasons.

The first reason is because this perception acknowledges and believes in the existence of Islamic values and the need for expansion and development to counter the Western domination. The second reason is that this perception believes that Islamic values are derived from the basic principles of Islam which was revealed from the Quran and Hadith, and the third reason is the fact that this ideology was formed in a political framework and funded by Saudi Arabia.

This can be verified easily by searching for images with Islamic tagline through website search engines on the internet such as shown in Figure 1.1. This typical interpretation seems so deeply ingrained as a stigma in that any element related to the term Islamic will have similar perceptions and is synonymous around the world, including in Malaysia.

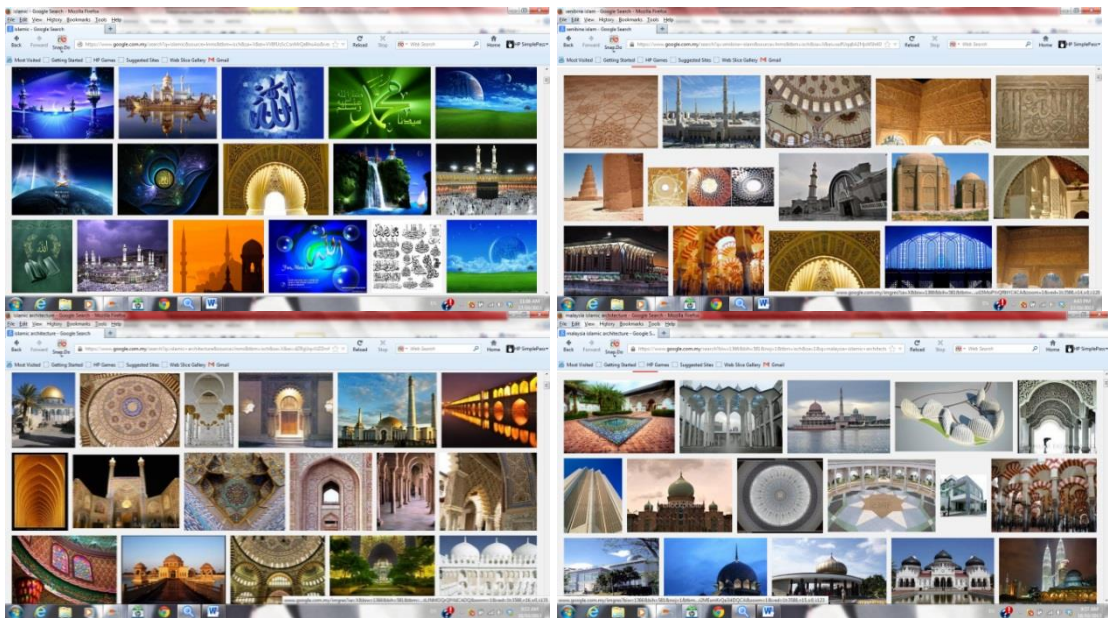


Figure 1.1 Search for 'Islamic' related images in internet website.

The term 'Islamic' is so synonymous from one to another all over the world and very popular in Malaysia. This compatibility is likely seen as a 'branding' or label and it is so strategic to Malaysia that has been striving for a long time to establish itself as a Muslim country with a developed nation status, as reviewed by Gregory (2006) in his article entitled "Foreign Occupation: Islamic Symbolism in Malaysia". This vision befits Malaysia as a country that placed Islam as the official religion. Besides the fact that the Malaysian community composition comprising a Muslim majority of 61.3% (Malaysia: Department of Statistics, 2010), the sensitivity of

Muslims in Malaysia is also seen as very high when it comes to issues regarding Islamic affairs.

When the name of Islam is linked to other phrases such as 'Islamic Architecture', 'Islamic Fashion', and 'Islamic Music' and various other terms that came together with the word 'Islamic', it is an effort to bring forth religious element and the sanctity of Islam through other mediums as well. The same motive applies when the Islamic environment and development is mentioned. It translates into an atmosphere and environment that is built based on Islam. In Malaysia, the development through the adaptation of the concept of 'Islamic built environment' has been actively commenced, and amongst the most dominant examples are the development of Putrajaya, Kota Bharu in Kelantan, and at the planning stage is in Shah Alam in Selangor.

Does the definition and interpretation of the 'Islamic built environment' that has been implemented in Malaysia so far is accurate? Clear understanding of the true meaning of the term 'Islamic built environment' is very important. This is to ensure that the concept of 'Islamic' being absorbed into the development in Malaysia is not tainted due to misinterpretation and contextual incongruence. Therefore, this study is very important to specifically address the Malaysian society's interpretation with regards to 'Islamic built environment'.

From the language standpoint, the term 'Islamic built environment' brings to mind the development or environment that is built (not naturally) encompassing the scope of planning, architecture and landscape that are Islamic in character. This study defines the 'built environment' as a 'situation' or setting which encompasses the created elements (spaces, places and structures) to serve human needs and values (for people live, work and socialize), connecting people to the context with comfort and

well-being, with results that affect the environmental context (the towns, cities, regions and earth) for both built and natural and to human-environment relationships” (Maslow, 1975; Habraken & Teicher, 2000; Bartuska, 2007).

The question is, what are the indicators to measure the extent to which a certain environment is considered to be Islamic? What is the justification for allowing an environment that is built and designed by architects, planners and qualified engineers deserving to be termed as 'Islamic'? This issue is the basis of this study in the search for answers to explore the true meaning of the term 'Islamic built environment in Malaysia.

Through literature reviews, this study justifies that ‘Islamic built environment’ is a “situation or setting that encompasses the combination of created elements (spaces, places and structures) with the implementation of Islamic ideology to serve human needs and values. The concept (Figure 1.2) considers the suitability of people's lifestyle (both Muslim and non-Muslim) by symbolizing spiritually and physically the essence of Islam” (Mousthapa, 1979; Khurshid, 1989; Spahic, 2002; Kamali, 2006; Sarkawi, 2011; Zen, 2011).

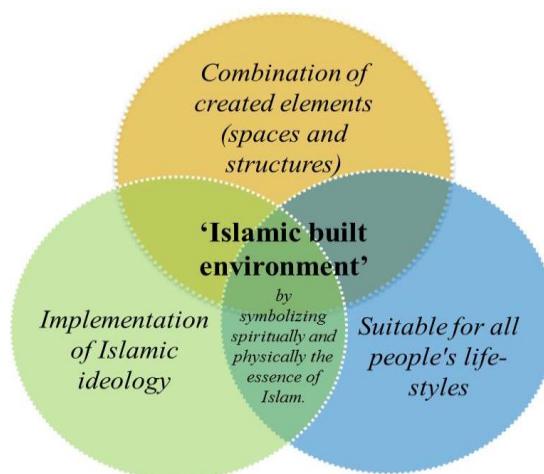


Figure 1.2 The three elements to define an appropriated ‘Islamic built environment’ in Malaysia  
Source: Researcher’s graphic illustration

Taking into consideration the nature of Islam as a religion that is termed universal and is always relevant without the boundaries of time and place; the fact that the name of Islam is indeed too overwhelming and grandeur to be associated with any element. As outlined by Khurshid (1989) in his work entitled "Islam: Basic Principles and Characteristics", Islam exists on five main features and those are (1) Simplicity, Rationality and Practicality, (2) Unity of Matter and Spirit, (3) Balance Between the Individual and Society, (4) Universality and Humanism dan (5) Permanence and Change.

The term Islamic is a holistic, non-religious exclusivity to whatever creature on earth which is not to be specific to a particular somewhat. Islam has an 'inclusive' nature that is holistically compatible to the needs of all living creatures including human as the caliph and the universe (Zen, 2013). In other words, Islam is a religion that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad S.A.W (peace be upon him) to be embraced by his followers. Nonetheless it is not exclusive or subjected to Muslims alone. Islam is also relevant to everyone on Earth. Therefore, this study considers the definition of 'Islamic built environment' as changeable in nature, flexible depending on the situation, time, and location.

'Islamic built environment' when interpreted in Malaysia actually brings much more unique complications. This is because Malaysia is a country where Islam is practised as the official religion, embraced by a large number of people in the society (61.3%) but also has a composition of heterogeneous community that practices religious freedom. Data collected from the Malaysia: Department of Statistics (2010) found that the Buddhist faith stood at 19.8% followed by Christianity at 9.2%, Hindus at 6.3%, and others 3.4%. The composition of population according to states is shown in Table 1.0.