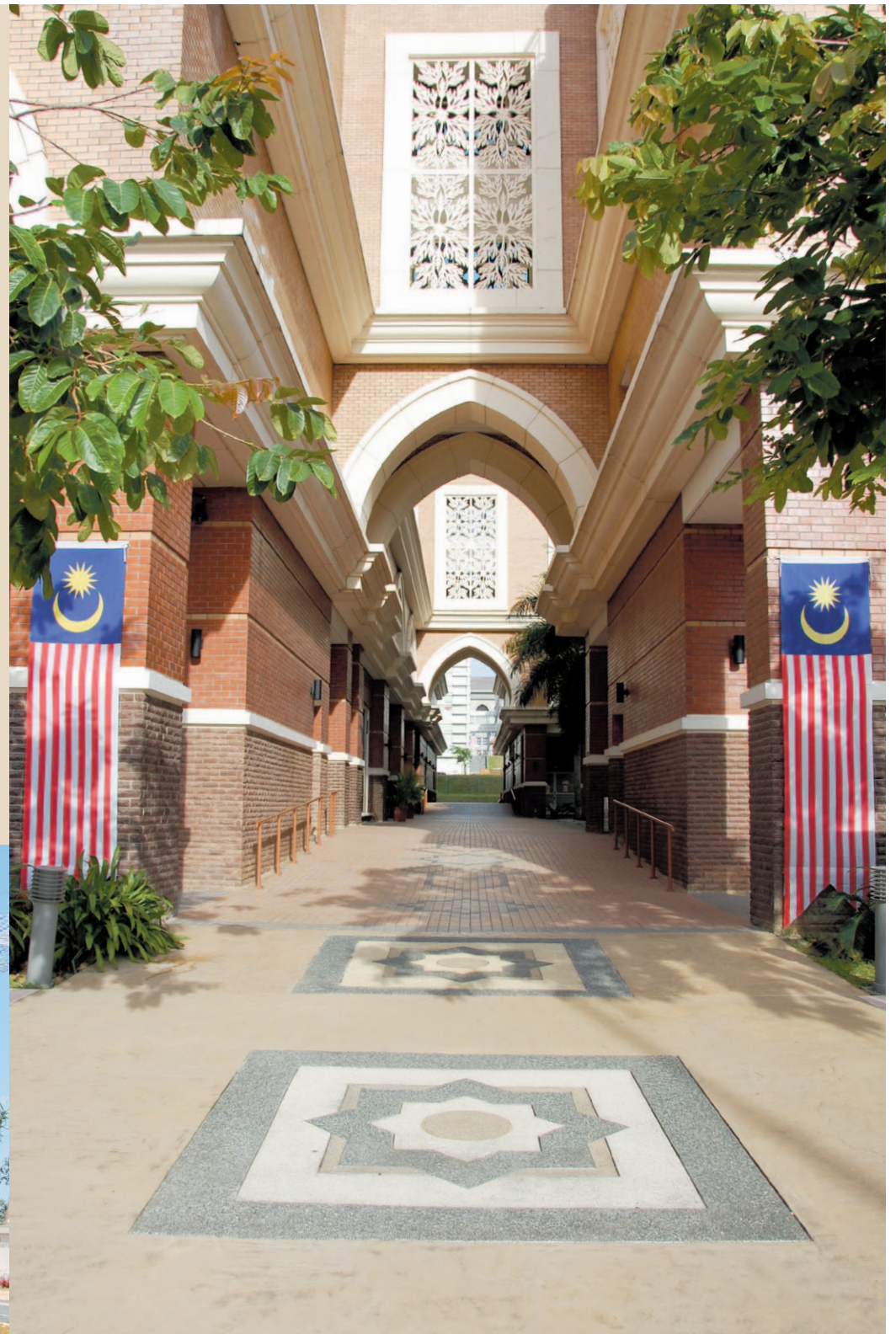


# Constructing cultural heritage

In the decade since the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis, many regions of Southeast Asia have experienced a building boom in which new suburbs, skyscrapers, 'creative' districts, high-tech zones, and even entire new cities have sprung up. While the recent construction boom has produced architecture and urbanism that can be characterised as 'global', 'modern' and 'placeless', a growing number of these projects have attempted to express a sense of cultural heritage through the integration of indigenous cultural motifs and elements of vernacular architectural forms. Several new cities under construction in Indonesia and Malaysia exemplify recent attempts to strategically revive interpretations of local cultural heritage in a distinctly post-modern, city-centric idiom.

Sarah Moser



## The socio-political context of cultural heritage revival

The emergence of cultural heritage revivalism in new cities is tied to broader processes and must be examined in the context of the dramatic changes that have occurred in much of urban Southeast Asia over the past several decades. Widespread industrialisation, rapidly growing economies, increasing global connections, and national agendas of modernization have propelled Southeast Asia from a predominantly agricultural to a highly urbanised region that is home to several of the world's megacities. As populations have urbanised, routines of everyday life have altered, patterns of settlement have changed, and social fabrics have been disrupted, all of which serves to contribute to a more fragmented, city-centred way of life.

Asian urban development and architecture from the 1970s to the 1990s has been described as the 'Manhattan transfer' (AD King 1996), a phenomenon in which many government officials and architects sought to replicate the skyline of New York City and other metropolises, believed to be the symbol of an economically successful and modern society. The urban artifacts from this period can be characterized as generic and placeless, dominated by steel, glass and concrete towers, resulting in one Asian metropolis looking much like any other.

This generic urban growth, combined with massive cultural, political and economic changes, has led many Southeast Asians to feel that an essence of indigenous culture has been neglected or even lost (Yeoh and Kong 1997; Kong and Tay 1998). The result is an emerging tendency to look to a more 'authentic' and 'unchanging' past as an anchor in a time of change. Television shows, marketing campaigns, and chain food outlets are tapping into this nostalgia for and romanticisation of a more simple, rural past. Food courts in new shopping malls are frequently adopting nostalgic décor intended to evoke a sense of pre-urban everyday life, with chain food stalls disguised as quaint 'Mom and Pop' businesses. Many television shows are set in a bucolic past, a 'simpler' time without the responsibilities and burdens of modern

city life. This is not to say that the consumption of modern, global goods such as American fast food and international brand names is abating; however, I suggest that in the energetic adoption of modern, urban-focused capitalism, many urban middle class Southeast Asians are increasingly nostalgic about aspects of their culture that have been lost during the recent decades of unceasing change.

Even at the state level, the focus on economic development and modernisation has, in recent years, begun to expand to include the revival of indigenous cultural forms. Official support for nurturing cultural heritage can be seen in the funding of indigenous dance and music programs, the creation of Sepak Takraw (takro) leagues (a Southeast Asian volleyball-like sport played with the feet), the use of interpretations of local or 'Islamic' clothing for government or national events, the adoption of a greater number of cultural heritage activities in school curricula, and increased support for indigenous arts (Moser 2010a).

The strategic adoption of 'cultural heritage' themes is also a key component of urban economic agendas. Strategies to increase tourism in the region have adapted to cater to the growing number of tourists who seek an 'authentic' cultural experience (Wang 1999). With the increasing awareness of 'global cities' and the growing perception that cities are in competition with one another, many of the urban spectacles being created have adopted an overt 'cultural heritage' theme (Moser 2011).

As state officials seek to distinguish their country and their cities from other cities in the region (Ho 2000), they employ cultural heritage as a theme in iconic architectural projects intended to establish a sense of place and to locate their cities on the cultural map (BSA Yeoh 2005). Even skyscrapers, which have long been powerful symbols of global corporate power, have paid homage to 'cultural heritage'. For example, the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, integrate many overtly Islamic design motifs, and Taipei 101 in Taiwan

Above left: Entrance gates to Taman Tamadun Islam (Islamic Civilizations Park), a self-proclaimed 'edutainment' park designed to promote global Muslim heritage and reposition Southeast Asia as central to the story of Islam. Source: Author.

Above right: Re-creation of imagined Arab Islamic urban heritage, Putrajaya. Source: Author.

integrates the profile of the Chinese brick pagoda, Chinese beliefs about numerology, feng shui and auspicious colours. Beyond the preservation of heritage buildings or districts, government officials in Southeast Asia are frequently seeking to create a sense of 'existential authenticity' (Wang 1999) in completely new urban environments.

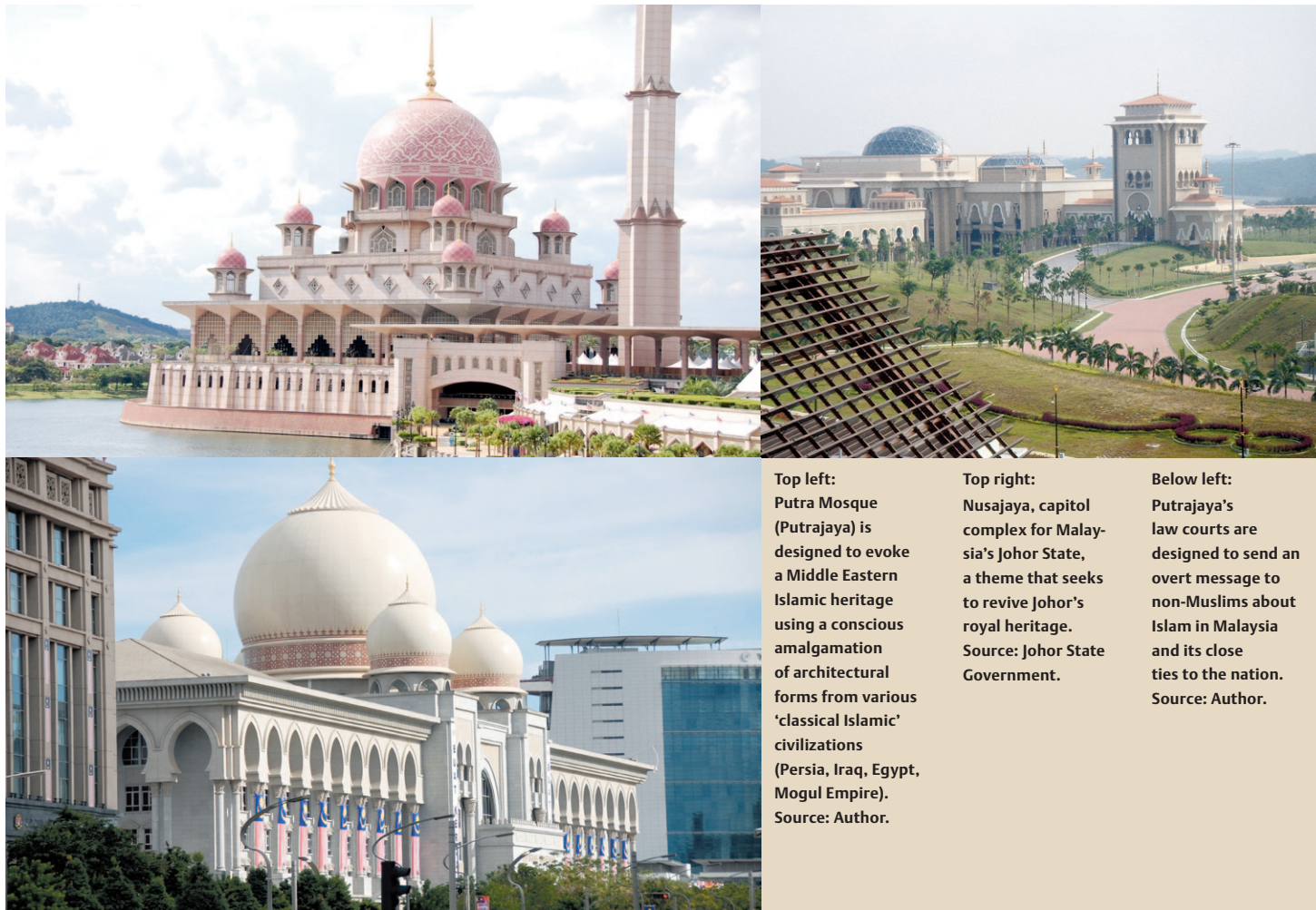
## The (re)creation of conflicting heritage themes

The (re)creation of cultural heritage in contemporary architecture and urbanism projects looks back to various –and often competing–versions of a glorious past. The variety of interpretations of cultural heritage reinforces two important aspects of culture. First is the notion that culture does not sit still but is constantly in flux. Second is that heritage is subject to multiple competing narratives and is part of a creative process that involves inventing tradition and recreating, reinterpreting, and re-contextualizing aspects of an often imagined past. In this way, interpretations of cultural heritage are neither 'right' nor 'wrong', but like culture itself, are constantly being reinterpreted over time in an endless series of hybrids.

What is important to emphasise is that reviving cultural heritage is not necessarily a neutral endeavour, but can prioritise certain groups while excluding others and has been adopted as a political strategy by the ruling elite as a source of legitimacy for their ideological agendas.

The power of the cultural politics embedded in notions of 'heritage' can be seen in various realms that seek to link 'traditional values' and 'cultural heritage' to government policies. The revival of a particular group's cultural heritage may be politically motivated in regions of racial or religious tension as a way of declaring ascendancy of one group over another. For example, Malay and indigenous Indonesian ruling elites frequently use notions of cultural heritage to make claims to resources; by emphasizing their indigenous identity and establishing connections to an ancient pre-colonial past, they justify their 'rightful' claim to the land of economically

## In new cities in Malaysia and Indonesia



**Top left:** Putra Mosque (Putrajaya) is designed to evoke a Middle Eastern Islamic heritage using a conscious amalgamation of architectural forms from various 'classical Islamic' civilizations (Persia, Iraq, Egypt, Mogul Empire). Source: Author.

**Top right:** Nusajaya, capitol complex for Malaysia's Johor State, a theme that seeks to revive Johor's royal heritage. Source: Johor State Government.

**Below left:** Putrajaya's law courts are designed to send an overt message to non-Muslims about Islam in Malaysia and its close ties to the nation. Source: Author.

powerful Chinese populations (King 2008). In other contexts, Muslim officials from secular, conservative political parties choose to emphasise their connection to Islam through the construction of overtly Islamic architecture for state buildings in order to claim ascendancy over local non-Muslim (mainly Chinese) populations, as well as to strategically attract supporters away from Islamic political parties.

Numerous heritage themes are being explored in current Southeast Asian urban development. One dimension of cultural heritage that was promoted in an urban waterfront revitalisation project in Tanjung Pinang, the capital of Indonesia's Riau Islands Province, was a maritime theme. Intending to promote the nautical heritage of the Riau Islands, this theme used anchor, rope and sailboat motifs along with depictions of fishing and sea life to decorate public spaces and government properties. This is among the most neutral of heritage themes, as it did not prioritise a particular ethnic or cultural group. The maritime theme has since been abandoned for the revival of a more specific cultural narrative. The waterfront has now been renovated with a royal theme, featuring cast concrete details and pavilions intended to evoke nearby pre-colonial royal buildings.

A variety of ethnic and cultural groups in Southeast Asia have looked to local pre-colonial royalty as a source of inspiration in attempts to revive a sense of cultural heritage. Aside from smaller projects such as Tanjung Pinang's waterfront, the royal revival theme has been expressed architecturally in recent years in a number of new mega-projects in Malaysia and Indonesia. Royal revivalism focuses on 'high' court culture to the exclusion of 'low', everyday cultures and traditions of 'regular' subjects. Similarly, but at a smaller scale, Riau Islands Province has adopted a royal theme for many new buildings, even going so far as to use deep yellow paint, the colour of Riau royalty, for many state buildings and buildings associated with the tourist industry.

Perhaps the most common and visible example of cultural heritage revival in Indonesia and Malaysia is demonstrated in the turn to great Islamic civilisations in history for inspiration. While Islam has been in Southeast Asia for half a millennia and Muslims constitute a quarter of a billion people, this heritage style looks not to indigenous expressions of Islam but to imported designs. The recent conflation of generic 'Islamic' symbols with indigenous identity is not without criticism. Some argue that the imported cultural and architectural forms adopted in Putrajaya, Nusajaya and Dompak amount to pastiche and fail to embody local values of community and humility (Mohamad Tajuddin 2005).

The move to assert Malayness has also inspired a revivalist movement that looks to indigenous architectural roots rather than to Middle Eastern sources. Architects in Malaysia experimented with this style as early as the post-independence period of the 1960s, when Muzium Nasional in Kuala Lumpur was constructed as a gigantic version of a traditional Malay house. This style fell out of favour for several decades until

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recently when numerous state mosques have drawn on vernacular styles of architecture. This can be read in the context of a broad government-led movement that seeks to revive interpretations of Malay tradition, including making mandatory new Malay-Islamic uniforms for civil servants.

### Urban strategies for reviving cultural heritage

A number of strategies have been adopted to create a sense of cultural heritage in new master planned cities, although almost none of the actual planning philosophies have their origins in indigenous culture. The designs of the master plans themselves do not aim to reproduce indigenous urban fabric but draw on a combination of ideas borrowed from New Urbanism, European colonial-era planning, the unique modernist planning of Singapore and other international styles.

One exception can be found in several new mega-developments in Malaysia including Nusajaya and *Taman Tamadun Islam* (Islamic Civilizations Park), which are designed around a central axis oriented towards Mecca in order to project a sense of Islamic authenticity, although no cities in the world outside of Malaysia are oriented towards Mecca. Despite this exception, it is not through urban layout or orientation that a sense of cultural heritage is usually expressed in new cities, but through architecture and decorative arts. Ultimately, this means that while new cities evoke some sense of cultural heritage, they do not facilitate traditional social interactions or recreate the unique morphology of vernacular Southeast Asian settlements.

Cultural heritage in new cities is commonly expressed through what I call the 'giant house' approach, which superizes a vernacular house type using concrete, steel and other modern materials rather than timber and other traditional materials. This can be seen in Nusajaya, the new capital of Malaysia's Johor State and opposite Singapore, which has been positioned as both a global city and competition for Singapore's economic dominance in the region. A key part of Nusajaya's narrative, however, is as a new site of cultural heritage, namely a site of Johor's royal revival. The design for Nusajaya has been guided by the ruling elite's desire to restore the Johor Sultanate to its former glory through the construction of a new royal-themed capital city. Intended to create a city with a strong Malay presence to counter the popular perception of Singapore as a Chinese city and an attempt to regain Johor's pre-colonial status as a major regional trade entrepôt, Nusajaya uses the 'giant house' strategy to express a sense of royal heritage. The architecture of the state capitol and government offices imitates the style of the Sultan of Johor's colonial-era residences, while grandiose plazas feature Islamic or traditional Malay motifs in the paving.

Evoking a recognisable 'essence' of cultural heritage through building materials is another common strategy, used primarily in government edifices. For example, in Putrajaya, Malaysia's new capital city, materials have been selected from around the Middle East in order to project an air of authenticity. Marble, sandstone and other materials used in 'classic' Islamic architecture have been worked by imported craftspeople from India.

More commonly, however, traditional materials are rejected in favour of concrete. Indonesia and Malaysia's rich wood carving heritage is nowhere to be seen in new master planned cities, except in simplified re-creation of local motifs using poured concrete, sandblasting or simply painted on buildings.

### Indigenous culture and neoliberal growth

The most common architectural strategy to evoke cultural heritage used in new cities, and in the region more widely, is simply placing a 'traditional' roof on top of a modern structure. This expression of heritage can be seen in many new state buildings including government offices, banks and ferry terminals. In Putrajaya, Arab domes dominate the skyline and arches, minarets and other overtly 'Islamic' features have been employed liberally throughout the city to advertise it as a Muslim capital (Moser 2010b). While at an earlier stage of construction, Dompak, the new capital city of Indonesia's Riau Islands Province, has also topped its key government buildings with a combination of Arab-style domes and vaguely vernacular-style roofs (Moser 2011), a move intended to demonstrate modernity and development without having lost touch with cultural heritage.

Another strategy for reviving cultural heritage through the built environment can be seen in *Taman Tamadun Islam* (Islamic Civilizations Park), a recent mega-project on Malaysia's east coast that has transformed a jungle-covered island into an Islamic 'edutainment' site. Featuring a convention centre, guest houses, an 'Islamic gardens of the world' area, an educational theme park, and an outdoor museum of scaled down replicas of architecture found in the Muslim world, the massive project aims to strengthen and showcase Malaysia's connection to world Islamic heritage.

The desire to create new cities is itself a form of cultural heritage revival. In the case of Indonesia's Riau Islands and Malaysia, new cities are a format used to symbolize a return to a glorious past before colonial powers diminished the economic and symbolic importance of indigenous sultanates and as a way to stake out indigenous preeminence vis-à-vis economically powerful Chinese populations. State officials conceptualise that the way to successfully revive the glory of former times is through a city-centric development strategy that adopts the language of 'global cities' (Sassen 2001) with a local twist (Moser 2011).

While the official rhetoric often makes grandiose claims that these ostentatious new cities are evidence that the country is developing while maintaining cultural heritage, in reality, the ruling elite behind new cities in Indonesia and Malaysia pay lip service to indigenous culture while prioritizing neoliberal growth and a corporate culture of golf courses, luxury housing and global consumerism.

**Sarah Moser**  
University of Massachusetts Lowell, USA  
sarah\_moser@uml.edu

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