THE CHANGING IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF KOTA BHARU, KELANTAN, MALAYSIA: FROM CULTURAL CITY TO ISLAMIC CITY

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ABSTRACT

An image of a city environment is a mental representation of external physical reality, while identity usually develops with the growth of a city through its inhabitants. The image and identity of a city can be valued in two ways of legibility: urban form and urban culture. In Malaysia, Kota Bharu, the capital city of Kelantan, known as a ‘cultural city’ (based on its vernacular Kelantanese Malay culture) is facing a dilemma of changing its identity into an Islamic city. This paper will discuss the past and current urban image of Kota Bharu as the capital and heart of the commercial centre in Kelantan. It will also analyse and conclude the issues and challenges of this historic town. One of the findings shows that the implementation of arch on new buildings which is inconsistent from the former identity creates conflict in sustaining its historical architectural values.

Keywords: Identity, image, culture, sustainable, heritage

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INTRODUCTION: FROM CULTURAL CITY TO ISLAMIC CITY

Kelantan is located at the East Coast of Malay Peninsula, Malaysia. As the capital of Kelantan, Kota Bharu is a symbol of the state and its people. It has very rich architectural and social cultural heritages from the past which are very unique identity of its people. The Kelantanese strongly hold to their culture and preserve their heritage identity which has been portrayed in their daily life. With the coming of Islam, the city gradually grew into a well known Islamic educational centre and was even called as the ‘Entrance Lobby of Mecca’. However, the traditional Malay culture and arts continue to flourish and being practised by the locals.

In 1991, Kota Bharu was declared as cultural city by its previous king, Sultan Ismail Petra. The formation of Kota Bharu as the cultural city was based on 2 main factors: Historical elements and Art and Cultural Heritage (Siti Norlizaiaha, 1995). Both of these elements have been assimilated and become central heart to the successful formation and development of the cultural city of Kota Bharu and the state of Kelantan in general. One of the fundamental aspects for conservation of this image is through preservation and revival of its traditional culture and buildings as well as monuments. Therefore the declaration of Kota Bharu as a cultural city was reflects its authenticity.

However in 2005, a daring paradigm shift after 15 years happened. The branding of Kota Bharu from the cultural city is changed to Kota Bharu Islamic City. This idea was to revive the early Islamic identity. This should be applied in the physical forms of the city such as architecture. The interpretation of Islamic city by the designers on their buildings will be discussed in this paper.

Historical Background

The spread of Islam in Kelantan was started since 7th century through maritime trading activities with the Middle East. The people of Kelantan accepted Islam as a way of life and they assimilated the Malay culture with Islamic principles. For example, mosque, a building for Muslim to perform Friday congregational prayer, becomes a main architectural element of existing Malay community settlements. This building was commonly built next to the ruler’s home. It was constructed using local design and materials such as timber and thatch. The architectural design of the early mosque was similar to that of a local house except that it had a larger space. The mosque was also decorated with flora and fauna ornaments, which were adapted from the royal or nobleman homes. The early mosque was usually built by the entire community and it reflected the architecture of the inhabitants, for example the old Kampung Laut Mosque (Mohammad Tajuddin, 2000).

In the context Kota Bharu city, the main mosque was also located next to the royal palaces. In conjunction with the teaching of Islam, the building