



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERIOR PRESERVED ATTRIBUTES OF MASJID AL-QADIM IN SIBU, SARAWAK, CONCERNING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONSERVATION PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

Religious heritage structures are essential to Malaysia's diverse cultural identity, embodying the great nation's diversity of religions. Preserving these structures needs a comprehensive evaluation to maintain their historical and artistic importance. In Sarawak, the lack of documentation for ancient buildings has impacted local identity and communal cohesion. This study examines Masjid Al-Qadim in Sibu, Sarawak, to assess its conserved elements in accordance with recognised conservation standards. The research revealed distinctive conclusions concerning aspects of the architecture and interior design of the timber mosque case study. The findings indicate that the mosque was well-preserved, employing retrofitting methods guided by concepts of authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability. The modifications, although intended to modernise the area, often deviate from fundamental conservation principles, eliciting apprehensions about the enduring preservation of its heritage significance. The research employed qualitative approaches, including site observation analysis, interviews with one of the conservation teams, and a literature review evaluating the preservation process against the principles of the Burra Charter. The studies benefit both the researcher and the institution, particularly in the context of Sarawak conservation, which is underrepresented in Malaysian literature. The findings indicate a need for further research on timber mosque building and conservation techniques in Malaysia.

Keywords: heritage building, documentation, conservation elements, architecture conservation, timber mosque

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INTRODUCTION

Masjid Al-Qadim falls under Category 1 of heritage buildings in Malaysia, as designated by the National Heritage Department (JWN) under the National Heritage Act 2005. The building was conserved through the Burra Charter conservation principle, whereby conservation work was done with minimal impact on the building, adhering to the concept of “*do as much as necessary and as little as possible*” (Abdul Gapor et al., 2023). Through the conservation of the mosque, any further renovation to the building must be non-permanent and reversible to keep the originality of the mosque.

The significance of the mosque that contributes to its nomination as a heritage building and has been gazetted as a heritage building based on the National Heritage Act 2005, under Section 67, is that the mosque is undoubtedly a building that has (a) the historical importance, association with or relationship to Malaysian history and (d) the social or cultural associations, especially in Sibü’s Malay-Melanau community. This significance has been proven through the mosque’s functionality as a centre of society and the Muslim community in Sibü since Brooke’s colonisation (Abdul Gapor et al., 2022).

As for the mosque, the interior planning was straightforward, tailored to the needs of users who came to the mosque to pray, and as an early institution of Islam. The function of the mosque is still maintained and filled with new contents that meet the needs of the Islamic community in Sibü, and it is also part of the tourism significance to the city, as the mosque was already gazetted under the Sarawak Heritage Ordinance (1993) (Abdul Gapor et al., 2023).

The conservation principles guided the carrying out of conservation works, ensuring that every single work was done while sustaining the heritage value of the site or building. This was achieved through a process of analysis and consideration aimed at preserving the heritage value of the mosque. The principles are crucial as the source of information and recommendations for the conservator and partitionist in instructing a conservation project, which defines their decisions (Downey et al., 2022). In this study, the conservation principles were identified and analyzed to determine whether they align with the conservation work undertaken by the conservator for Masjid Al-Qadim, which includes authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability.

Effective heritage building conservation is crucial for preserving the authenticity and historical significance of cultural landmarks, necessitating adherence to the building’s original form and condition. The interior design elements of Masjid Al-Qadim are crucial, as they embody traditional and influential details that significantly contribute to the building’s historical value. A thorough evaluation of these elements, spanning structure, interior schemes, and other significant aspects, before and after conservation efforts, is essential to prevent unauthorised alterations. Such changes necessitate approval from the

JWN (Harun et al., 2020). Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding the impact of conservation on the interior elements of heritage buildings and for developing strategies that preserve their historical and cultural integrity.

This study examines Masjid Al-Qadim in Sibul, Sarawak, to assess its conserved elements in accordance with recognised conservation standards. In doing so, the study identifies and documents the interior conservation approach used to analyse the conservation approach. The findings then led to the recognition of best practice in the conservation of the mosque.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vernacular architecture interior is seen as a setting that merges the surroundings and the cultural attributes of living circumstances. Practically, the interior was well-suited to the community's lifestyles, resulting in increased productivity. The types of vernacular architecture encompass not only residential buildings but also community spaces, such as mosques.

Vernacular Architecture in Nusantara

Vernacular architecture in Malaysia and Nusantara uses local materials (Ariffin & An, 2021) and techniques to meet local needs, influenced by climate, temperature, topology, and geography (Figure 1). Each region has its own unique characteristics, influenced by the country and its sociocultural context. It highlights the locals' creativity in carving skills and contributions to the development of spatial design (Aulia & Veronica, 2024).



Figure 1: Example of Vernacular Architecture of Mbaru Niang shows the uses of local materials and is designed to suit the local conditions

Source: Purwaningrum, 2019

The needs of the local population shaped the transformation of vernacular architecture styles. The absence of limitations in terms of spatial design and forms makes it outstanding and well-adapted (Zhang et al., 2023). It was also admired for its high efficiency in sustainability and energy conservation, which was convenient compared to typical architecture (Solikhah & Bere, 2021).

Typology of Traditional Mosque Architecture in Nusantara

Nusantara, comprising Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines, has a diverse range of cultural and historical influences on its mosque architecture. Designs are culturally adapted to local traditions, with Nusantara architecture being a philosophy formed by formal, tectonic, structural, representational, and aesthetic principles. Timber was the primary building material, especially for buildings built starting in the 1800s (Nabilunnuha et al., 2022). The Nusantara region mosque was not designed with domes and built without nail involvement in the construction, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia (Idham, 2018). Features of multi-tier roofs are seen as distinct characteristics that reflect the Malay Archipelago Mosque styles, which were influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. The adaptation of a raised floor and timber as the primary construction material in Nusantara mosques differs from the traditional design of mosques. During the introduction of Islam in Nusantara, the architecture of the mosque was not entirely influenced by religion. The locals believed that the value of the Islamic culture can also be seen in the fusion of cultural backgrounds into mosque architecture (Nasr & Abbas, 2020).



Figure 2: A multi-tier roof mosque that can be seen in the Malay Archipelago

Source: Author

Typology of Traditional Mosque Architecture in Malaysia

Malay architecture shifted towards Islamic guidance, influencing the development of a unique style that incorporates Islamic beliefs. Traditional mosques in Malaysia are closely tied to traditional Malay architecture, emphasising space and climate, and are connected to the Nusantara vernacular architecture. In addition to timber as the primary material, traditional mosques in Malaysia were also constructed using bamboo, rattan, and attap leaves (Mood & Ramli, 2022). During the 15th century, Malaysia's mosque architecture adapted the local traditional house style in terms of materials and construction (Mohd Nawayai et al., 2020).



Figure 3 Masjid Kampung Laut shows early typology of Malay mosque
Source: Skyline Heritage (2011)

Traditional ornament elements, such as *buah buton*, *tutup perabung*, *tumpu kasau*, wall, *tiang seri*, and *tunjuk langit*, were also part of the specially designed components of Malaysia mosque architecture. The mosques were rich in craftsmanship, featuring intricate carvings and ornamentation that reflected the lives of their surroundings (Mood & Ramli, 2022). It was an approach that reflected the conceptualisation of Islamic values and merged the cultural context.

The Interior of Timber Heritage Mosque in Malaysia

The interiors offer insights into Malaysia's rich cultural and religious heritage, blending local craftsmanship with Islamic art. The prayer hall is the largest space,

designed to accommodate worshippers with minimal furnishings. Timber columns with Islamic motifs and polished wooden floors contribute to a serene atmosphere. The mimbar and mihrab lead the direction of Mecca as the qibla for Muslims. It was carved heavily, which enhances local craftsmanship.

The interior of the Malaysian heritage mosque embodies the 'sense of place', a perception that fosters a sense of intimacy with God, created through the historical forms, culture, and function of the spaces (Bahauddin, 2021).

The Historical Interior Assessment and conservation work

According to Harun et al. (2020), the historical interior assessment of heritage buildings aims to determine the degree of renovation required for the interior floor plan and to evaluate whether it complies with preservation standards. This study looks. According to the interior historic building guidelines (Rocchi, 2016; Grimmer, 2017), all interior designs are recommended to adhere to the original scheme or, at a minimum, to incorporate elements of British colonial style through furniture and decorations. The prospective use of this ancient edifice must consider the quality, design, materials, and craftsmanship of the initial structure, alongside the modifications that have transpired over time. Renovations that align with the building's design may be preserved and repaired. This finding and guideline will reveal the true history of the structure, together with details regarding the architectural period, interior design, and conservation efforts.

According to Abdul Karim et al. (2022), interior conservation efforts can also preserve the buildings' authentic character in terms of architecture, craftsmanship, materials, finishes, interior features, and interior scheme, which would otherwise deteriorate and fade over time if care is not taken. Therefore, a good choice of material for conservation work, combined with a principled approach, can help sustain the heritage building.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, with site observations conducted using a single-case study design, chosen based on the research objective. The pictograph data on-site and conservation records were analysed, as the site observation was believed to provide firsthand experience and better visualisation (Nayan et al., 2022). An interview was conducted with one of the conservator members to gain deeper insight into the research. No specific data analysis system was included in the research. The study aims to determine the significance of the preserved attributes of Masjid Al-Qadim in Sibul, Sarawak, in relation to the implementation of conservation principles. The analysis of the study is expected to show that the implementation has successfully preserved the significance of Masjid Al-Qadim in Sibul, Sarawak, in accordance with the principles and safeguards put in place to maintain its importance. The data is also

expected to detail the interior and exterior components of the mosque that were preserved and conserved according to the principles used.

This paper includes an analysis of data, figures, comparison tables, and a descriptive study. Assessment on the condition of the Masjid Al-Qadim, Sibü, Sarawak, should be capable of reflecting the conservation results through the National Heritage Act 2005, under section 67. The mosque was conserved using the Burra Charter principles, a methodical procedure employed to enhance the cultural significance value of Masjid Al-Qadim, as analysed in the interior conservation approach. The Burra Charter method was a procedure that applied relevant disciplines to culturally significant heritage, requiring special professional skills (ICOMOS, 2021). The data should also highlight the application of conservation principles, which serve as guidelines for maintaining the mosque's significant values through a specific management style defined by the conservation aims, namely to sustain the mosque's values and its function for the Islamic community in Sibü.

However, the study had limitations, including the accessibility of the mosque, which was hindered by additional structures around the area, a language barrier with the community that speaks Sarawak native languages, and data accessibility issues that were not correlated with each other. Despite these limitations, the findings are expected to demonstrate the expected results of effective conservation through the application of these principles. The ethical integrity of the study was maintained throughout the research with prior notice of the interview, informed consent to ensure the interviewee understood the purpose of the study. Additionally, a formal request was made to the mosque management for on-site observation. The data collected was handled with strict confidentiality, and the research adhered to general professional ethical standards regarding honesty in reporting, accuracy of data, and respect for the cultural significance of the site.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

According to Historic England, the conservation principles, determined through an understanding of heritage assets and values, include analysing history, cultural relevance, emotions, and symbolic meanings (Brown et al., 2022). The principles were defined through an interview session with one of the conservation team members, which included authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability (ibid). The Burra Charter method, applied to the preservation of the mosque, is part of the conservator team's efforts to maintain the mosque's significant value, as outlined in the *Principles for the Preservation of Historic Timber Structures* under the general Burra Charter (ICOMOS, 2021). The studies conducted on Masjid Al-Qadim, the oldest mosque in Sarawak, hold significance for the Muslim community of Sibü.

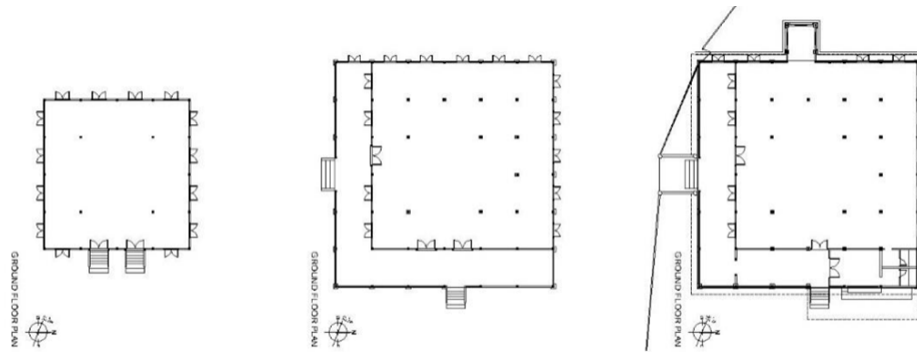


Figure 4: Development of Masjid Al-Qadim est 1861
Source : Abdul Gapor & A. Rahman, 2019

Figure 4 displays the extension made towards the mosque from its initial construction to its latest expansion during the conservation that concluded in 2022. The conservation project was conducted by the Borneo Regionalism and Conservation Society at the University of Technology Sarawak (UTS) (Abdul Gapor et al., 2023). The figure shows the extension development of the mosque over the years as the congregation increases. Hence, it demonstrates that the structure, added through conservation guidelines on sustainability, preserves authenticity by maintaining the main structures, such as timber, as the primary material. Figure 5 shows the photo transformation.



Figure 5: Transformation of Masjid Al-Qadim before renovation, after renovation and after conservation
Source: The Borneo Post (2022)
<https://www.theborneopost.com/tag/masjid-al-qadim/>

To further analyse whether the mosque was conserved in accordance with the guidelines, Table 2 below presents pictographic data comparing the condition of the mosque before and after conservation was made. According to the table below, the conservation standard employed was the Burra Charter, as the replacement of materials was the primary method of conservation for the

mosque. The replacement involved the interior and exterior spaces of the mosque. This data should be able to emphasise its conserved elements by replacing materials accordingly to its original to be guided by concepts of authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability as the principles.

Table 2: Comparison of Before and After Conservation for the Renovated Masjid Al-Qadim

Before Conservation	After Conservation	Description
		The material for the flooring replaced from floor tiles back to its original which is <i>Belian</i> wood. The wood came from various sources in the state just to fulfil the principles of the conservation. Areas with tiles removed and replaced with the material.
		The main hall of the mosque enhances substantial changes. The wall decorated with retrofitting features to keep its original timber wall. Carving details added with motifs based on the craftsmen knowledge. The ceiling also covered with webbing bamboo to protect the thrust structure.
		The exterior façade of the mosque transformed accordingly to balance the interior elements by using the same retrofitting and burra charter method. A minaret structure rebuilt to replace the old one as the structure affected with the road development of the city.
		The exterior railings demolished and replaced with same timber that cover the whole mosque. The railings are adorned with a carved floral motif that complements the mosque's design.

Source: Author

In addition to the analysis presented in Table 2, the table provides details of the retrofitting method applied to the mosque, which was based on the principles of community involvement. The artistry on the detailing imported by bringing over craftsmen from Sambas, Indonesia, as there was a historical relation of the mosque with the region. The conservator also proposed a method to avoid future damage to the original interior components and structures. The features were an added structure on the front and back part of the original. It protects from direct contact that can cause friction on the original surfaces, which can lead to damage.



Figure 6: Retrofitting detailing on the window of Masjid Al-Qadim
Source: Author

Figure 6 illustrates the retrofitting features integrated into the original structure and their implementation. The timber feature covered the original window in a white-painted colour, decorated with carvings carved by imported craftsmen from Kalimantan, Indonesia, and coloured glass detailing featuring a floral motif. This method prevents the loss of authenticity in the structure by protecting its elements. The study reveals the interior aspects of Masjid Al-Qadim that have changed through the adaptation of retrofitting features. Table 3 shows data for the elements recorded through on-site observation. The components are mostly incorporated into new materials, such as *kayu jati* and gold, and pleated metal finishes for the retrofitting finishes. The old structure was retained behind the retrofitting setup to maintain authenticity.

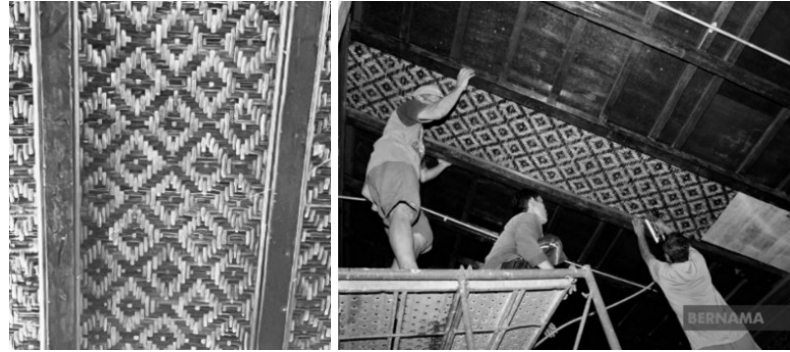


Figure 7 Roof finishes and installation on Masjid Al-Qadim

Source: Author (2024); Bernama News (2022) <https://bernama.com/bm/news.php?id=2068432>

Figure 7 shows the roof cover motif and its installation on the mosque structure. The installation is designed to shield the roof structure from sunlight exposure and preserve the mosque's aesthetic. The participation of the local community, as a principle of conservation, is evident here, as they are involved in the process of making the bamboo-woven cover. The person in charge said the woven bamboo, made locally by the native Sarawakians, enhances the local culture and motif. This helps promote the local culture seamlessly while keeping the heritage.

Those elements were temporary and can be removed for future conservation work on the mosque, which promotes conservation principles related to the sustainability concept. The initiative taken not just to protect but to fulfil the client requirements in promoting the mosque as part of the Islamic community centre in Sibu and a tourist attraction with its historic values.

Table 3: Interior Elements of Masjid Al-Qadim

Elements	Description	Motif pattern	
		Material	Pattern
Door 	The door detailing and shape are the same as the main door but without detailing on top of it. It was double leave door that detailed with gold petal. The doorknob was a round shape railing in gold colour that detailed with name of prophet Muhammad PBUH in the middle.	Jati timber with gold metal plate detailing on door leaves.	The pattern motif is combination of geometry and floral on the door leaves.
Window 	The window was a sliding door with patterned glass detailing and geometry pattern carving on its window leave. This window is double leave window.	Jati timber and patterned glass.	The pattern inspired by floral motif and coloured with blue, yellow, green, and red in colour. The geometry shaped which rectangular pater carved on the lower part of the window.
Wall 	The internal wall also covered with jati timber that detailed carved. The carving also has gold plate detailing.	The wall made from jati timber.	The motif that carved on the wall is floral pattern such as flower and geometry carving on the other parts of the wall.
Ceiling 	The ceiling covered with woven bamboo mat. The mat was to cover the ceiling and the truss structure of the mosque.	Bamboo	Geometric pattern.

Source: Author

As the concepts of the conservation principles in the study aim to preserve authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability, the elements of interior design in the mosque appear to promote Sako Guru, who is known as the main character in the mosque, with vernacular architecture. It was also part of the craftsmanship that was applied in promoting the cultural values.



Figure 8: Masjid Al-Qadim's Sako Guru

Source: Author

Figure 8 above shows the Sako Guru located in the main prayer hall area of Masjid Al-Qadim. The study finds that the elements carved with floral motifs consist of flowers and waving stems. The heavy carving emphasises these four main column structures, which hold the entire mosque structure together as its main pillars. The conservator primarily chose the motif to follow the craftsmen's expertise, and the floral motif also highlights Islamic visual art, which is predominantly based on floral patterns over human or animal motifs, as Islam is influenced by the belief in aniconism (Haidar et al., 2023). The pattern was decided upon to follow community recommendations as part of the community's involvement in the conservation of the mosque.

The study found that the mosque was fully utilising mechanical ventilation, which was part of an air-conditioned system, after the retrofitting renovations were introduced. The installation of the ventilation system is more practical, as the floor air conditioner unit is integrated with the decorative elements in the mosque, thereby preventing damage to the original structure of the mosque and preserving the authenticity of the materials used.



Figure 9: Installation of an air conditioner at the bottom of Soko Guru, and concealed and served as a bookshelf without compromising the traditional ambience

Source: Author

Figure 9 shows the approach to installing the air conditioner. It is installed and placed inside a cabinet proposed by the conservator to conceal its presence and is attached to the Sako Guru structure to make it more seamless. The cabinet also served as a bookshelf to store the Qurans and other religious books for visitors to use. The cabinets are detailed with carvings that are designed to align with the interior carvings created by the craftsmen.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the conserved attributes of Masjid Al-Qadim in accordance with the National Heritage Act 2005. The conserved elements were retained or restored to their original form, as the Burra Charter method was applied through the adaptation of conservation principles. The conservation was thoroughly done, involving both the interior and exterior spaces. The mosque's features and embellishments also reflect the local ability and historical significance of the mosque.

The conservation principles listed for this study, which are concepts of authenticity, community involvement, conservation, and sustainability, were concluded by the author through the pictographic data analysis on site. Hence, the conservation process of Masjid Al-Qadim is conducted in accordance with standard regulations, following guidelines throughout the entire conservation process.

The analysis also concludes that the modernisation of a heritage building is feasible while preserving its heritage significance through methods such as retrofitting, despite altering the entire structure. The principles help ensure that the conservation process is derived and prevent the loss of heritage features and values.

As modernisation progresses, the conservation of timber structures in Malaysia may face difficulties in securing resources due to a lack of natural resources and deforestation. Further research is needed to provide a feature reference and gather additional information to enhance conservation efforts and techniques for Malaysia's timber heritage buildings and structures. The challenges documented at Masjid Al-Qadim, which enhance the barriers to balancing community-driven modernisation, informed the current policy in Malaysia's debates on managing religious heritage sites. These findings present critical and transferable lessons on the conservation of historic timber architecture in the region to be more widely applied.

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