Applied Art and Design
Application and Appreciation of Islamic Heritage in Contemporary Context

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CHAPTER ONE

THE VERNACULAR MOSQUES OF THE MALAY WORLD: CULTURAL
INTERPRETATION OF ISLAMIC ASPIRATIONS

Harlina Md Sharif
Hazman Hazumi

ABSTRACT
This study looks into the spatial arrangements provided by vernacular mosques of the
Malay World and how they respond to the liturgical requirements of a mosque in Is-
lam. Through an analytical study done on the form and function of over forty selected
mosques across the Island Southeast Asia, this chapter summarises the findings which
demonstrate the originality and ingenuity of indigenous designs which efficiently ac-
commodate religious requirements using local architectural repertoire.

1. INTRODUCTION
The Island Southeast Asia – historically known as the Malay World – is the region
which spreads over 13,000 islands stretching around 3500 miles from the north-west
tip of Sumatra to Irian Jaya. Set in between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea with
mountains, jungles, rivers, sea and the humidity of the climate as part of the natural
environment. It produces a wide range of spectacular languages in vernacular archi-
tecture as a result of the harmony between human beings and the environment.

The vernacular architecture of the Malay World is characterized by extended
line of the roof, often with outward sloping gables supported by timber posts which
form the main structural components. This structural configuration generates a unique
archetypal form consisting of a rectangular or square structure raised on main wooden
posts with pitched roofs often culturally identifiable to the various ethnic groups of
the region. The constructional system which emphasizes the timber framing is charac-
terized by its sophisticated jointing techniques demonstrated in the absence of nails
and intelligent methods of distributing dead loads of the building. Variations are also
witnessed between regions which are prone to seismic activities such as Toraja and
Nias, and non-volcanic regions such as the Malay Peninsula – in which massive col-
umns and equally massive diagonal struts are used as stabilizers in the first, while ar-
chitecture of the later is distinguished for its slim and skeletal framing members (Fig-
ure 1 & 2).