

# **Regional Architecture and Identity**

**in the Age of Globalization**

**Volume I**



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**The Second International Conference of the  
Center for the Study of Architecture in the Arab Region  
(CSAAR 2007)**



Proceedings of CSAAR 2007 Conference  
Held at the National School of Architecture and Urbanism, Tunis, Tunisia,  
13-15, November, 2007

ISBN: 978-9957-8602-2-6

Published by CSAAR- The Center for the Study of Architecture in the Arab  
Region

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1. Architecture
2. Modern Architecture
3. Globalization

## A Study of Minangkabau Architecture in Two Regions: West Sumatra, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

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### Abstract

This research deals with a study of regional architecture in two (2) regions of two (2) countries: West Sumatra, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. Both regions are said to have very similar regional architecture as some of the people of Minangkabau, a tribe in Indonesia, migrated to Malaysia to look for a greener pasture. Recent visit in West Sumatra has shown that the once glorious regional architecture is slowly disappearing due to the growing interest in modern movement of architecture. Even worse, the fading interest on regional architecture among the people of Minangkabau in Negeri Sembilan is growing in a faster rate that it is very rare to see newly built building having the Minangkabau style. This research aims at evaluating the losing interest in regional architecture among the people of Minangkabau, and among architects in both countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. The discussion covers relevant literature of the origin of Minangkabau Architecture, aspects that contribute to its appreciation and factors that influence its decline. This literature review has the purpose of identifying the advantages and disadvantages of preserving and constructing buildings with Minangkabau style in current world of globalisation, thus, analysing whether promoting for the revival of Minangkabau style in both regions might be worthy or not.

**Keywords:** *Minangkabau architecture, regional architecture, endangered regionalism, regionalism, conservation.*

## 1 Introduction

*"Man is the architect of his own prosperity and success, as well as his decline and failure."*

- Abdul Rahman Al-Khaldun -

Minangkabau is a term known to describe a certain ethnic group that indigenously populates the districts of West Sumatra, which includes the cities of Bukit Tinggi and Padang, of the western part of the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. This group comprises 95% of the total population of the province of West Sumatra (Turner, Peter. et. al., 1995). Minangkabau people are known to have distinguished traditional shape of roof in their architecture, unique horn-like headgear customs for women, matrilineal family structure, and traditional governmental system (Gadjah Mada University, 2000). They are easily characterised by their tribal dialect.

The word Minangkabau literally means "Victory of the Caribou", describing a battle where a baby calf was sent to symbolically fight with a caribou belonged to an enemy, the Javanese ethnic group who came to the province in attempt to conquer the region. As the Minangkabau people had strategically tipped a hungry calf's tiny horns with razor sharp daggers, it torn the belly of the larger caribou and instantly killed the enemy's big caribou while trying to nip from its belly. Upon the defeat, the Javanese left in humiliation and the local people "retained their freedom" (Exploring Indonesia, 2007). Thus, the people of West Sumatra were then called Minangkabau.

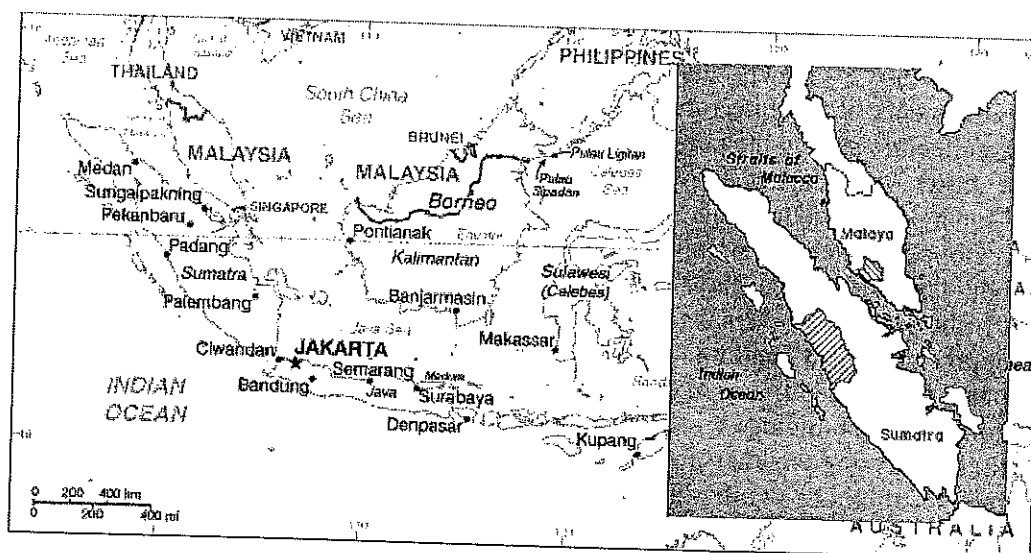


Figure 1: Geographical locality of Minangkabau regions



As permanent reminder of their victory, the Minangkabau people memorably build their houses with distinct features of “upturned roofs” (Exploring Indonesia, 2007), which gigantically represent two caribou's horns. Although slowly becomes less popular among the local, the Minangkabau style of architecture could still be found across the region of West Sumatra. This study specifically uses the big district of West Sumatra as the birthplace of Minangkabau Architecture.

The influence of Minangkabau Architecture has also permanently embedded in the neighbouring regions as the Minangkabau men often travel abroad, bringing with them their proud architectural characteristics. Historically, going abroad (*merantau*) was part of the requirement of being Minangkabau men. Minangkabau male youngsters, as young as (7) seven years old, were strongly encouraged to go abroad in the hope to “seek experience, wealth, and commercial success” (Indonesia, 2007). They were expected to bring back fortune and prosperity to their homeland. Nevertheless, due to socio-economic circumstances, many of Minangkabau people end up migrating to other regions. Negeri Sembilan, literally means “the Nine States,” was an area in Malaysia where the migration of Minangkabau group was enormous. Indeed, the special features of caribou's horns stand gigantically on the roof of houses in Negeri Sembilan are living proves that Minangkabau architecture has also migrated to this region.

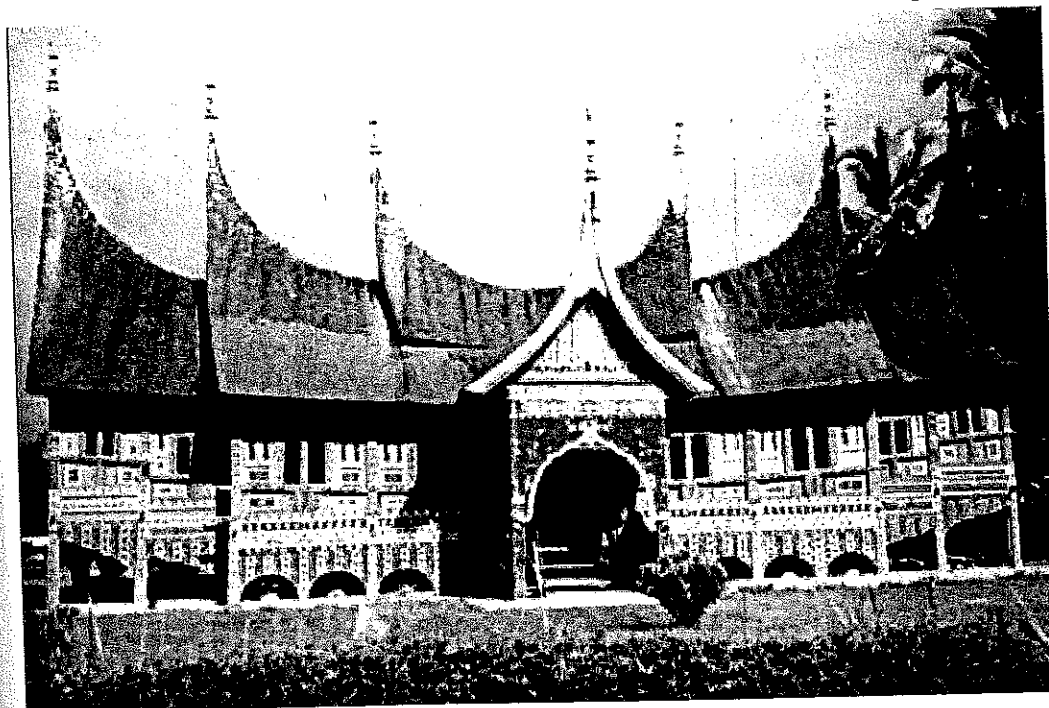
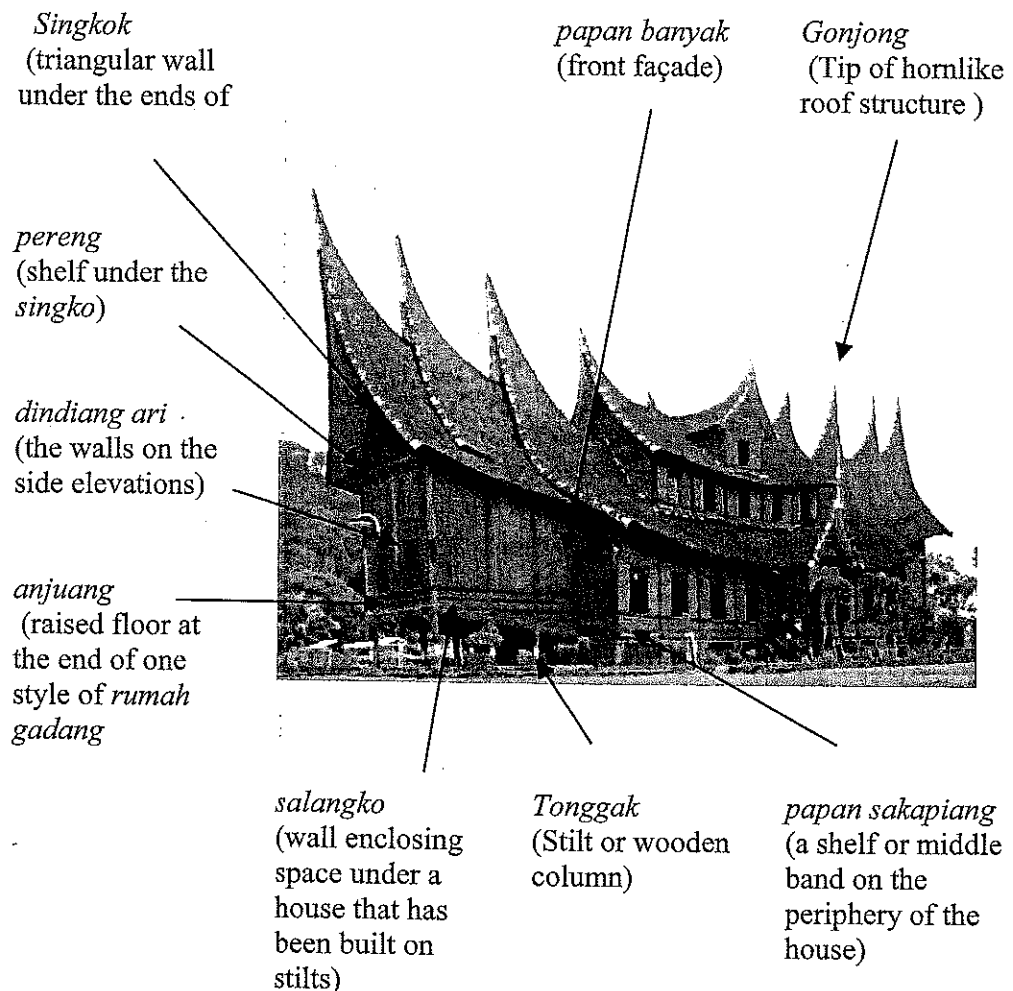


Figure 2: A building in West Sumatra, features Minangkabau Architecture

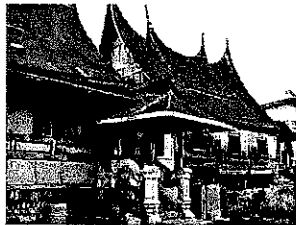
## 2 The Magnificent of Minangkabau Architecture

Although being super-shadowed by contemporary styles of Architecture, the remnants of Minangkabau Architectural legacy is still perceptible particularly in both regions of West Sumatra, Indonesia, and Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. It is well-known that distinctively unique to Minangkabau Architecture is its “buffalo horn-shaped roof peaks” (Negeri Sembilan, 2007). Nevertheless, beside the roof shape, there are other typical elements of Minangkabau buildings that appeared different as compared to other regional architecture in Southeast Asia. The features are shown in Figure 3.

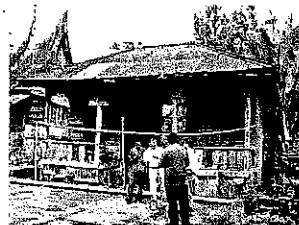
**Figure 3: Typical Building Elements in Minangkabau Architecture**



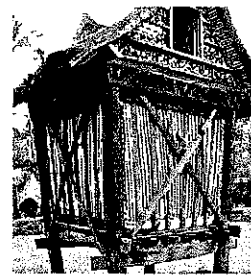
Generally, building typologies of Minangkabau Architecture are limited to the construction of Minangkabau houses (*rumah gadang*), places of worship (*surau*), and rice barns (*rangkiang*). The word *rumah gadang* means “big house”, and it is the place where most activities of the occupants are centred. Being the biggest structure among all building typologies of Minangkabau architecture, the house “serves as a residence, a hall for family meetings, and for ceremonial activities” (Rumah Gadang, 2007). Ownership of houses is passed from mother to daughter of the family who live there, for reason that Minangkabau society practices matrilineal family structure. As such, men on the other hand, do not stay in houses, instead, they are supposed to spend their time either studying in *surau* or being abroad looking for trading opportunities. Meanwhile, the numbers of rice barns belong to a certain family represent the socio-economic status of the family.



*Rumah Gadang* (house)

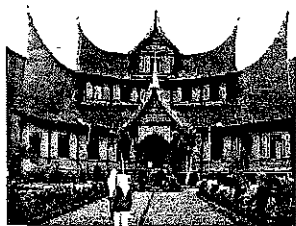


*Surau* (place of worship)



*Rangkiang* (rice barn)

**Cluster of Buildings belongs to a common Minangkabau family**



*Istana* (Palace)



*Surau* (place of worship)



*Rangkiang* (rice barn)

**Istana Pagaruyung used to belong to Royal Minangkabau family**

Figure 4: Building Typologies of Minangkabau Architecture.

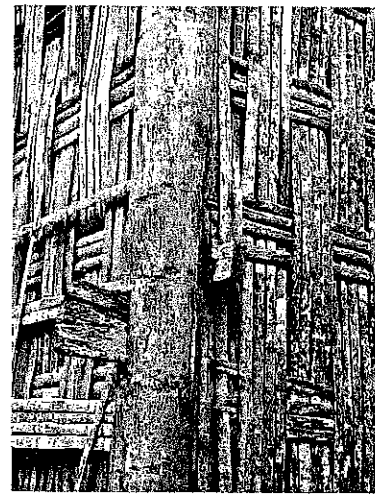


In West Sumatra, it is very typical to find buildings belonged to a big extended family are built in a cluster. Several houses belongs to the same family are clustered together to surround a central yard, functions as a multi-purposes outdoor areas. Closed proximity to the houses is *surau* and *rangkiang*. Although rarely found, there are cases where houses are arranged in a linear configuration. Several families' building clusters are located adjacent to each other, often belongs to the same sub-group of Minangkabau ethnic that is called *suku*. Those clusters then form a village.

Unlike in West Sumatra, houses in Negeri Sembilan often stand by their own, without clustered of houses, *surau* and *rangkiang*. The reason for the absence of clustered houses relies on the changing social structure of Minangkabau people. Men of Minangkabau ethnic came from West Sumatra to Negeri Sembilan without their families. As they permanently resided in Negeri Sembilan, they formed new families and built independent houses without strict referral to Minangkabau social system. In fact, building typology of the traditional Minangkabau Architecture in Negeri Sembilan is limited to houses. Communal mosques in villages replace the function of *surau* as places for worship, while there is no demand to build rice barns for reason that in Negeri Sembilan, the Minangkabau ethnic do not rely on growing rice for their livelihoods.



Wood carving with floral motifs on Pagaruyung internal wall.



A typical plain lattice woven in a chequered pattern from split bamboo, used in house for the common

Figure 5: Wooden decoration of Minangkabau Architecture.

On the other hand, the carved and painted decorations of Minangkabau houses and palaces in Negeri Sembilan are not as vigour and delicate as in West Sumatra. This factor is influenced by the decreasing consciousness of the social and hierarchical status among the Minangkabau people. In some part of Negeri Sembilan, even the proudly signified horn-shaped roofs are diminished to adopt with "Malay-style roof construction, with continuous ridge piece thatched with lengths of palm-leaf attached to battens" (Rumah Gadang, 2007). Sri Menanti Palace is one of the prominent buildings that represent the adoption of typical Malay Architecture within Minangkabau Architecture. The Malay is the largest indigenous group in Malaysia.



Figure 6: Sri Menanti Place in Negeri Sembilan (adopted from Negeri Sembilan, 1997)

Time and circumstances have caused Minangkabau Architecture to slowly lose its special elements and characteristics, including the curved roof shape, the main element that supposedly retain the aesthetic values of regional Minangkabau Architecture. Recent buildings in both regions of West Sumatra and Negeri Sembilan are usually constructed in modern architectural style. It is obvious that the preference of having buildings of regional Minangkabau Architecture is declining. In fact, many buildings of Minangkabau characteristics are retained merely for tourism purposes, but not to be lived in. As such, there are big questions posted by many regionalists of why do people of Minangkabau lose interest in this regional traditional heritage, and how revitalizing the architectural style might be possible.

### 3 Endangered Regionalism

Recent built buildings in both regions of West Sumatra and Negeri Sembilan rarely feature the emblem of Minangkabau styles. As the people of both regions are modernising themselves, the Minangkabau architecture are declining. There are many factors influencing this scenario; ranging from architectural, social-economic, to natural aspects.

The traditional Minangkabau Architecture loses its appeal to Minangkabau people generally because it is considered not answering the demands of the current alternative modern lifestyles of its people. Modern living requires building of high complexity, and many of the precedent examples of Minangkabau Architecture merely feature small scale building constructions. These buildings usually are made of timber; thus, timber construction limits the size of building that having buildings of high complexity like shopping complex and high-rise office tower are considered impossible. History shows that buildings of timber construction could only stand the height of 3 storeys. The limited scale of building offers by the regional construction methods using Minangkabau architecture does not cater the needs for other than housing or residential functions. Thus, rather than adapting, the Minangkabau people seems to resolve the problem by leaving the architectural style altogether.

Secondly, Minangkabau Architecture is known to require high maintenance in order to be long-lasting. It is predominantly materialised by using merely timber construction that are subjected to destruction by insects and fungus attack, and easily deteriorated by the influence of harsh tropical weather. In addition, this building material is also highly priced, besides being highly combustible (Allen & Iano, 1999). In February 27, 2007, the main building of the Pagaruyung Palace complex was engulfed in fire and totally destroyed. This tragedy strengthens the factors of timber as high maintenance material contributes to the lack of appeal to revitalise the magnificent of the past Minangkabau architecture.

Thirdly, regional Minangkabau architecture is endangered by the influence of modern movement in architecture, that bring along various typologies of architectural styles that pretty much symbolises the globalisation of the world. Many architects in developing countries, specifically in Malaysia and Indonesia, are following the steps of contemporary architects as they are educated using the same systems of conventional educational architectural approach that is rooted from the Beaux Arts and the Bauhaus movements. As such, regional architecture of Minangkabau is regarded as merely part of heritage studies in the Malay archipelago of south-east Asia that architects-to-be learn in school of architecture in both countries, yet most of them would not consider reviving it's magnificent past.

Urbanisation is another factor that makes Minangkabau Architecture losses its appeal among the general public, and specifically among the Minangkabau ethnic group. Evers (2005) states that in Indonesia, the numbers of country folks migrating to urban areas is accelerating. In Jakarta, there are 264,639 registered

people of Minangkabau ethnic group who live in the city, comprising 3.18% of the total Jakarta's population (Evers, 2005). The phenomenon is not peculiar to Indonesia alone as population of the Kuala Lumpur, capital city of Malaysia, has doubled within the last (5) five years. Hence, urbanisation makes it almost impossible to build a Minangkabau regional building type in urban area as the land prices are very expensive. Furthermore, this style of architecture usually requires big vacant land for setting of clustered arrangement of regional buildings, with natural context of surrounded greeneries. As such, there is no choice of living in regional building type, therefore; Minangkabau people resolve by adapting to living in modern compacted design houses. As people moves, the traditional social pattern of Minangkabau communities in their hometowns in both regions of Negeri Sembilan and West Sumatra are eroding. Moreover, the urban setting does not allow such social pattern to be re-established.

Efforts to induce the sense of belonging towards Minangkabau Architecture to the general public are made in both countries, but thus far the efficiency is not really apparent. There is no conservation guideline available in West Sumatra to protect and manage the valuable cultural and architectural environment of Minangkabau (Gadjah Mada University, 2000). Generally in Sumatra, "heritage conservation is still a new issue and is still a low priority of (our) development as a whole" (Tarekat, 1999). On the other hand, Malaysia particularly has designated buildings of long-established quality or special attribute for preservation. It is specified that only "significant architectural buildings of more than one hundred (100) years old are being considered worthy of preservation" (Harun, 2007). Unfortunately, most of regional buildings of Minangkabau Architecture are made of timber, a material that could not stand the test of time. In comparison, many colonial buildings are safely preserved and designated as national heritage because they are made of durable materials such as masonry, bricks or concrete. Indeed, the clause that requires a building to be old enough to be granted the title of having significant heritage values in the National Heritage Act (2005) is a subject to be mocked at, rather than appreciated.

The ultimate threat to the magnificent Minangkabau Architecture in Indonesia is the fact that the buildings of its kind are generally located at areas where natural disaster may occur at any time. Geographically, West Sumatra is situated on the "ring of fire," where earth quake, volcanic eruption and tsunami may instantly occur without warning. Recent earthquake disaster occurred on March 7, 2007, had destroyed numerous structures beyond repairs. This is considered a major threat to the survival of Regional Minangkabau Architecture. However, this is not a point to regret, yet architectural scholars could take the challenge to study the conflict of declining regionalism in architecture.

#### 4 Revitalising the Past

In order to retain the magnificent past of regional Minangkabau Architecture, something needs to be done before the style is bygone. Appropriate measures of improvement should be carefully strategised in melding each of the challenges faced and problems encountered. Table 1 shows proposed strategies that might be used to solve the problems of declining popularity of Minangkabau Architecture among its people and the general public.

Table 1: Proposed strategies to revitalise Minangkabau Architecture

| No. | Problems   | Proposed Strategy   |
|-----|--|---|
| 1   | Changing life style requires building of high complexity and monumental scale                        | To use science and technology to enable Minangkabau style to adopt to modern lifestyle requirement  |
| 2   | Timber is not durable enough, highly combustible and expensive                                       | To use alternative materials for Minangkabau building, that is more durable, non-combustible and cheaper, while maintaining aesthetic value   |
| 3   | The lure of modern movement in architecture diminish the appeal of regional Minangkabau Architecture | To educate the general public regardless of educational background, on the importance of retaining regional Minangkabau Architecture  |
| 4   | Urbanisation draw the ethnic group to move out of their villages                                     | To persuade the authority to create more job opportunities outside city areas, so that people of Minangkabau origin could choose to live in their homeland while having monetary security |
| 5   | Efforts to induce the sense of belonging towards Minangkabau Architecture is still limited           | To convince government agencies to play more important roles and to revise the existing regulation.   |
| 6   | Threat of natural disaster towards the Minangkabau Architecture                                      | To ensure proper documentation of Minangkabau building construction is available, when needed for reconstruction.   |

It is foreseen that there are many constraints faced in order to realise the proposed strategies. Having complete revival of Minangkabau Architecture might be something in vain, yet letting the Minangkabau architecture to evolve with respect to modern lifestyle requirement of the Minangkabau people might



be a good potential to regain appreciation towards this magnificent regional architecture.

Evolution to Minangkabau architecture may involve innovation of architectural design that adopts the regional and traditional principles. In accepting evolution of Minangkabau architecture, numerous methods could be designed in order to maintain the traditional characteristic and identity of Minangkabau Architecture. One good example of adaptation is by introducing alternative materials, or having combination of materials usage, especially for the structural system of Minangkabau buildings to ensure the buildings conform to the requirement of modern lifestyle. There is no question of losing cultural and architectural identity in the innovation, as the tradition of craftsmanship could still be retained in this manner of combining the past and the present technological advancement.

Some scholars may argue that originality of Minangkabau Architecture should be retained in order to preserve its identity, but total imitation of the past architecture may not be an excellent solution to serve the people of Minangkabau, for reason that as human's needs change, their requirement towards their physical environment also changes. What was defined as Minangkabau cultural and architectural identity has been continuously challenged, as scholars and architects currently accept identity as something dynamic that change over time and circumstances. Hence, the proposed solution of evolution of Minangkabau architecture redefined architectural identity as not limited to retaining the physical characteristic of Minangkabau Architecture alone, but also complying with current human needs, especially targeting to the people of Minangkabau whose culture has evolved as well.

## 5 Conclusion Remarks

This research concludes that adapting to architectural modernisation while maintaining regional characteristic may serve as a solution to revitalise the magnificent of Minangkabau Architecture. By recommending new ways of compromising between architectural modernisation and regionalism in both regions with modern context, several modifications to Minangkabau Architecture could be made to suit contemporary needs and demands. This is not a short term battle, but large scale initiatives are required to ensure success. It is hoped that this study could benefit the general public, architectural students, architectural academicians and architectural practice not only in Malaysia and Indonesia, but also through out the world.

Generally, the most important aspects of conservation of regional architecture style is not merely held on preserving the existing buildings, rather to engender the sense of belonging among the public towards architectural regionalism. Sense of belonging could encourage the development of knowledge and wisdom of the magnificent past to a great extent. It is unbelievably satisfying, when one is contented of having re-established one's own architectural identity through the evolution of regional architecture.

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