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SIMPORA XV: 2024

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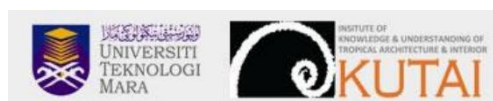
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EXPLORING THE RUMAH KUTAI: ADAPTATION OF THE MALAYSIAN GARDEN CONCEPT CRITERIA

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Abstract: Standard global design criteria for public parks include sustainability, user comfort, aesthetic value, safety, and cultural relevance. The National Landscape Department (NLD) has identified eight design criteria for developing the Malaysian Garden Concept (MGC). The MGC sets out to integrate essential garden features for both aesthetic and environmental harmony, but the spatial limitations of Rumah Kutai compounds and established living norms present difficulties in integrating these criteria. This study aims to analyse the existing landscape design of Rumah Kutai's external space using the MGC criteria and the observation method as a research instrument. The selected Kutai houses are in the Perak Tengah District. The results show that while the architecture and culture of a Rumah Kutai compound underlies concern for traditional Malay life-ways and environmental adaptation strategies, an inflexible application of MGC criteria without regard to customary practices differs from those at ecosystems level with general consideration to natural system complexity. Takeaways suggest that it is not design constraints but residents adhering to preexisting norms that challenge the MGC, implicating culture over codification. The research also finds that although the MGC provides a good measure of garden aesthetics and sustainability, it may not apply directly to Rumah Kutai due to its socio-cultural context.

Keywords: Rumah Kutai, Malaysian Garden, Garden Concept Criteria, Identity, Sense of Place

INTRODUCTION

The design and function of the Rumah Kutai compound reflect the broader Malay cultural values of sustainability, community, and religious observance. The setting of agriculture,

communal spaces, and spiritual elements are meticulously assembled into the compound to show how these spheres are composed in Malay life. Indeed, the concern with living harmoniously in sync with nature shows how rooted our Malay ancestors were in environmental care. The compounds provide a landscape and act as places for extended family members and neighbours to gather. This social function is reinforced by using these spaces for ceremonial and religious events, such as weddings, *kenduri* (communal feasts) and prayer gatherings. Thus, the lay of the land is both in Malay culture and customs.



Figure 1 & 2: External space harmony with the natural environment

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Perak, among the various traditional houses in Malaysia is Rumah Kutai. These classic houses signify a lot more than just mere abodes; they are embodiments of the conventional culture and historical lineage that exists in our location. Referring to Rashid et al. (2019), “kutai” means old/ancient in Perak. Based on the architectural perspective, Rumah Kutai is manifested as a traditional Perak Malay house, which is determined by the existence of *rumah ibu* (main house) with *Bumbung Panjang* (long roof), or can also be known as *Bumbung Melayu*.

Landscape design is an activity that integrates the attitude of landscape as a spatial practice and is considered part of place-making, contributing to social, environmental, and ecological aspects (Clouston, 1990). An outstanding landscape means potential economic income for residents/locals and is part of the tourism product. Several barriers of implementation include a need for more awareness among stakeholders, inadequate training for landscape architects, and the complex nature of integrating various cultural aspects (Abu Bakar, 2012). According to Turner (2005), the garden theory has been contextualised as a system of explanatory ideas for understanding gardens, and in particular, focusing on general principles would be inheritance within some or all forms that might include them.

In short, the Malay Garden Concept is about beautifying a space or yard while harvesting for beauty, food to cure and social meditation through architecture (Zakaria et al., 2022). The principle underlines the need to adopt philosophy, taboos and traditions for administration by the Malay community today. These softscapes are for food, medicine, utilities, ritual and aesthetics. Hardscape is used for security, socializing and daily operations.

The initial momentum for developing a garden concept, 'Malaysian Garden', officially began in 1997. The idea was discussed for some time, and in 2009, a basic MGC guideline by the NLD was published. According to Zakaria et al. (2019), the establishment of this concept resulted from organizing a seminar and conference and joining the specified exhibitions to introduce the design concept.

he NLD outlines eight (8) MGC design imperatives for including public gardens in this guidebook. The design criteria are as follows:

1. Genius Loci - Has an inimitable spirit and cultural atmosphere that defines the stylistic, semantic, and historical quality, synthesizing them into architectural beginnings.
2. Local Plants - Ensures the plant community selected is representative of native flora in the region.
3. Architectural Structure and Local Elements - Using traditional Malaysian architectural elements in garden designs brightens cultural continuity, allowing gardening with local craft.
4. Cultural and Heritage - The garden design should also consider Malaysia's rich culture and history to make people feel proud that they are Malaysians.
5. High Intrinsic Value - This garden also provides a high aesthetic appeal and ecological value and is of recreational utility.
6. Adaptability to Local Weather - Garden design must be able to adapt or suit local climatic conditions so that the plants and materials match your regional weather conditions naturally, in this way having compatibility between garden elements and their natural context.
7. Elements of Security - Provision of the garden layout and lighting with a promised grand view, thereby assuring visitors an excellent, comfortable stay.
8. Manageable and Comfortable - Make areas comfortable for visitors with enough seating, shade, and accessibility features, as well as manageable in terms of maintenance.

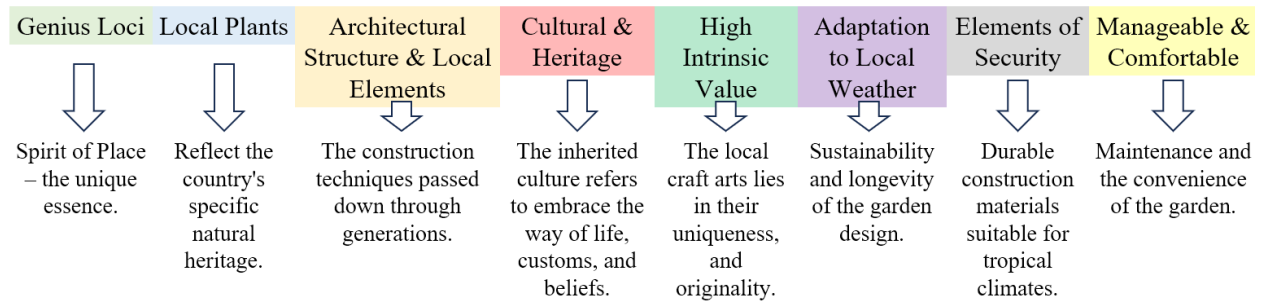


Figure 3: The Malaysian Garden Concept Criteria (NLD, 2009)

In the study of tangible and intangible heritage, the researchers' study something relatively dominant in the environment and less focused aspects, such as house compounds, gardens, and landscapes, which also help make the study legitimate. According to Mohd Hussain et al. (2022), Rumah Kutai is among the cultural landscapes characterized by large trees (overstorey) as shelters and barriers for resources and nutrition that provide food and timber. The cultural landscape will show us how to conserve a heritage object. The cultural landscape has been at the forefront of much research for a long time because it makes a nation and its civilization unique; hence, researchers always have "sustainable development" in mind (Zakaria, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to obtain data by observing the space and garden design of the Rumah Kutai exterior compound. The objective of this study is to evaluate the current landscape design from Rumah Kutai's outdoor spaces which conform to MGC, emphasizing architectural spatial organization and cultural value. Samples were taken through a random selection of Rumah Kutai compounds within Perak Tengah District, and data was collected to determine the availability of landscape features and whether residents comply with MGC standards. The compound of Rumah Kutai is more than just a functional landscape; it shapes the cultural space the Malay people maintain in relation to the environment. The property layout is unsurprisingly one of sustainability and communal living in harmony with nature. Nevertheless, modernization and urbanization create significant problems in upholding these lands. However, as more Malays move to the cities, traditional knowledge ~~of~~ and practices associated with Rumah Kutai compounds may be lost forever.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The typical Malay traditional house compound is divided into four areas, according to the placement and activities carried out. Softscape is the main element in every part of the compound. The yard on Malay houses has fewer hardscape elements. Rumah Kutai, Perak, is an important cultural heritage that helps to give more depth to traditional Malay architecture and lifestyle. Its external compound and landscaping are essential in its operation, but they play a big part in the daily lives of all occupiers and their families. These conservation attempts are also needed to keep up with and pass on Rumah Kutai's cultural legacy.

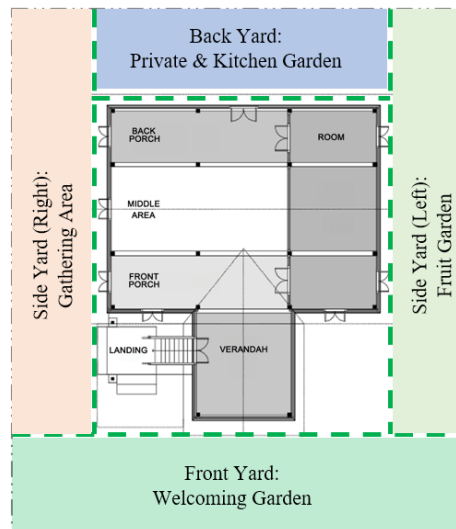






Figure 4: Typical Garden Layout of the traditional Malay house compound

Site visit to Kutai houses around Perak Tengah district to document the method of observing the exterior spaces of traditional Malay houses. Table 1 shows examples of the division of the house's outdoor space and its use by the residents of the house.

- i. **Traditional Layout**
The enlarged compound at the exterior of a Rumah Kutai enables diverse domestic functions and good airflow around the house. This open space is the essence of a rural Malay lifestyle.
- ii. **Landscaping Elements**
The plantation typically hosts native flora like coconut trees, bananas and other fruit-expiring plants. They produce food and shade and are a part of the ecological sustainability of one's household.
- iii. **Functional Features**
Some vital functional components include the water supply well and a kitchen garden for fresh herbs and veggies. These elements align directly with the autonomous lives that had been a tradition for those who had inhabited it.
- iv. **Aesthetic and Decorative**
Colourful flowering, ornamental plants, and other plant materials augment the landscape.
- v. **Cultural and Community Significance**
More than just a house, the Rumah Kutai and its compound are also central to community life practices on all aspects of sociality and culture. Traditionally, events and family gatherings occur within the compound, strengthening social ties and cultural continuity.

Table 1: The division of garden space and its use

No.	Image	Characteristics
1	 <p>Back Yard</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most are unkempt looking cause of lack of maintenance. 2. Growing edible plants and often some medicinal plants. 3. The original location of the outdoor toilet for traditional houses.
2	 <p>Side Yard (Left)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The yard is heavily planted with local fruit plants. 2. Lawn area and for passive activities. 3. Lack of maintenance and safety elements
3	 <p>Side Yard (Right)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There are shady and aesthetic plants. 2. Areas for meeting with neighbours and community activities. 3. There are more hardscape elements than other compounds.
4	 <p>Front Yard</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The most spacious area in the yard of a Malay house. 2. Car parking area and family activities. 3. Lawn area and the most maintained. 4. Less planted with large-sized plants.

The backyard of the house is the least attractive space. Many areas are characterized by a wild, unkempt appearance, mainly resulting from insufficient maintenance. Among the overgrown foliage, there are variety of edible plants thriving alongside with some valued for their medicinal properties. This setting also marks the original site of the outdoor toilet commonly used in traditional houses, hinting at these communities' historical daily life practices.

The yard on the left side of the house is also a less exciting space because of a lack of activity. It has a variety of local fruit plants, giving it quite an abundant experience. Amid this verdurous beauty lies a huge lawn perfect for recreation and relaxation. Unfortunately, the potential of this space is marred by its lack of maintenance and accessibility when it can be used to provide safer experience for everyone.

The yard on the right side of the house is also a stimulating space because of various activities. The landscape is adorned with lush, shady plants that provide a welcoming atmosphere while showcasing striking aesthetic appeal. Welcoming areas are thoughtfully designed for neighbours to gather, fostering a sense of community and encouraging for social engaging activities. Unlike other compounds, this space boasts a higher concentration of hardscape elements, creating visually exciting architecture that complements the natural surroundings.

The house's front yard is the largest space compared to others but has a minimalist layout. The most expansive area in the yard of a traditional Malay house serves as a multifunctional space for parking and family gatherings. This section boasts a lush, well-maintained lawn, perfect for outdoor activities and relaxation. The landscaping is intentionally designed with fewer large plants, allowing for open space and a sense of airiness, making it ideal for various family events and enjoying the outdoors.

CONCLUSIONS

The MGC criteria seem improbable to implement in traditional Malay house compounds, hence a difficulty in many aspects. Lack of interest by homeowners in designing or maintaining their external spaces prevents them from installing such safety features. The resultant lack of care has the potential to sew environments that are dangerous or hostile. At present, many Rumah Kutai are left empty and deteriorated, with their lively architecture fading off the map. This erosion is a problem for the compounds' appearance and practical use. Paths and other hardscapes are kept to a minimum. However, the ornamental part of landscape design needs to be more noticed. Where the focus is mostly on showing only buildings without any surrounding landscapes, it provide viewers a relatively dull and unimaginative area of land. The art of landscape design is frequently skipped. The focus is generally on the buildings rather than much else, making the context of these structures seem lifeless. Nevertheless, the MGC criteria based on garden space size only applies in traditional house compounds because these gardens are typically tiny and too delicate for a broader meaning of beauty/harmony as viewed from a more extensive area outside. This mismatch causes a need for more adaptive criteria for traditional Malay settings. Future research should focus on the contribution of Rumah Kutai compounds to the living practice of contemporary Malay society and how those traditional areas can be translated into present urban planning mechanisms for sustainability. However, more than preserving the past, maintaining these landscapes is also how we learn from the past to build a better future.





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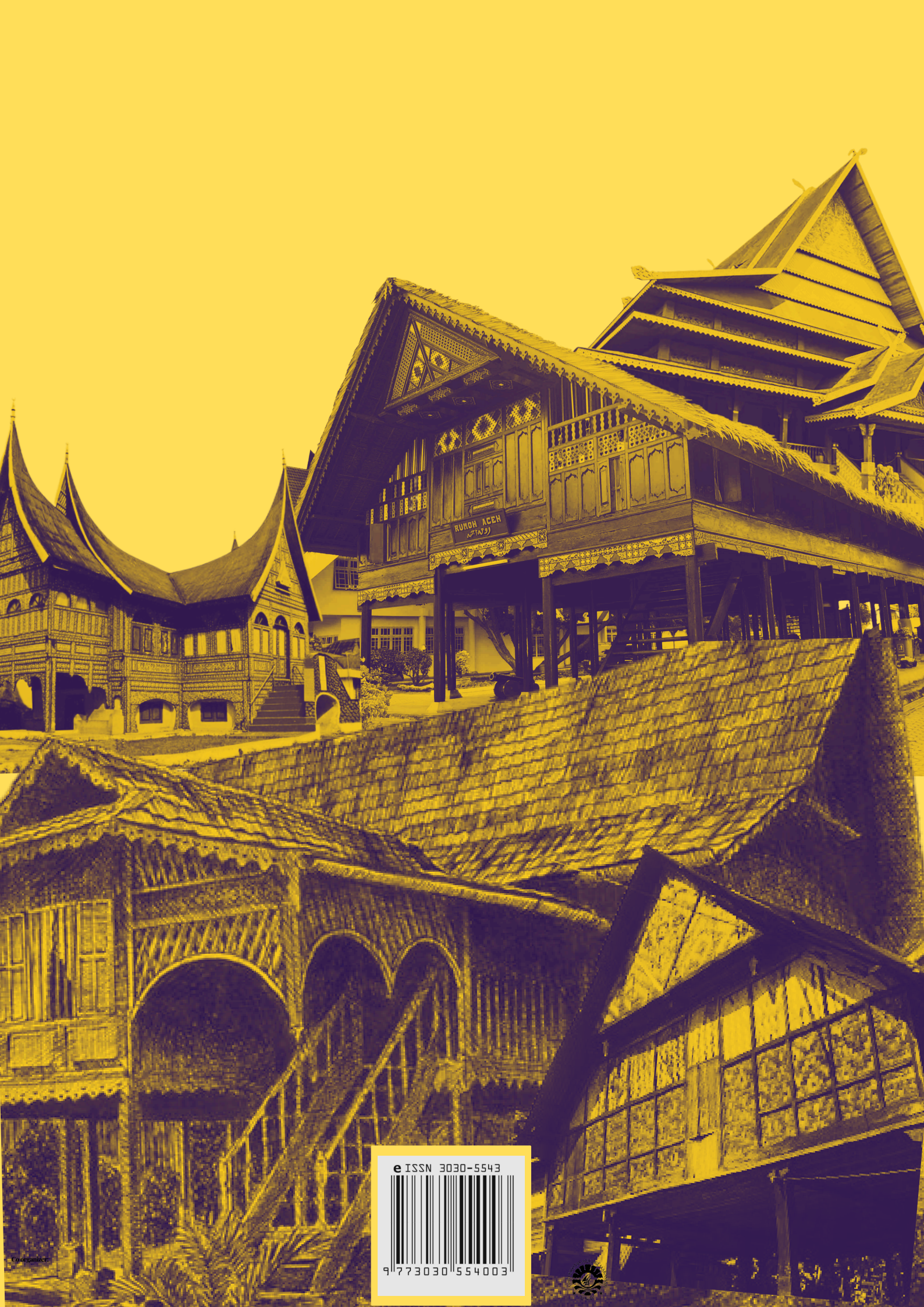
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